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Marie-Therese Mäder and Sofia Sjö (eds.)

**Death, Loss and Mourning
in Film and Media**

SCHÜREN

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JRFM is a peer-reviewed, open-access, online publication. It offers a platform for scholarly research in the broad field of religion and media, with a particular interest in audiovisual and interactive forms of communication. It engages with the challenges arising from the dynamic development of media technologies and their interaction with religion.

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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.

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 religion⁴ 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 Sumiala⁷ 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-faceted.⁸ This intricacy becomes evident in several of the contributions to the thematic section. As highlighted in Akif Tahiev's article on Shi'i 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 death²³ 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. Tahiev makes this point in his exploration of Shi'i 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 mediated 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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Motherhood Rewritten

Post-feminist Representations of Grief in RABBIT HOLE (John Cameron Mitchell, US 2010) and PIECES OF A WOMAN (Kornél Mundruczó, HU/CA 2020)

Abstract

Using a post-feminist lens, this article explores the cinematic depiction of maternal grief in RABBIT HOLE (John Cameron Mitchell, US 2010) and PIECES OF A WOMAN (Kornél Mundruczó, HU/CA 2020). The study focuses on the visual and narrative techniques used in these films, conducting a thematic analysis centered on three key post-feminist themes: female agency in owning grief, autonomy and ethics in emotional recovery, and redefining motherhood beyond biological ties. Through detailed analysis of mise-en-scène, cinematography, silence, and embodied performance, the article examines how these films challenge traditional representations of maternal suffering and instead highlight complex, private, and nonlinear paths to healing. The analysis also engages with the spiritual and ethical dimensions of mourning, illustrating how both films transform loss into a quiet form of endurance, forgiveness, and inner renewal. Grounded in post-feminist thought, the study argues that contemporary cinema enables new expressions of maternal subjectivity that resist spectacle and closure, instead reimagining grief, memory, and identity as intertwined acts of resilience and transcendence.

Keywords

Post-feminism, Maternal Grief, Female Agency, Cinematic Mourning, Feminist Film Theory, Narrative Healing, Embodied Performance, RABBIT HOLE (John Cameron Mitchell, US 2010), PIECES OF A WOMAN (Kornél Mundruczó, HU/CA 2020)

Biographies

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Introduction

With the rise of television since the 1950s and 1960s, death and dead bodies have been remediated and returned to the private sphere, to our everyday lives. As Geoffrey Gorer observed in his influential essay “The Pornography of Death,” the spectacle of death has become a dominant theme in mass-media genres such as thrillers, war stories, science fiction, and horror, turning the demise of strangers or fictional characters into fleeting, flickering images on our screens.¹ While death is highly visible in these representations, the portrayal of personal grief, especially maternal grief, often remains emotionally flattened or sidelined.²

This article addresses that gap by examining through a post-feminist lens how two contemporary films – *RABBIT HOLE* (John Cameron Mitchell, US 2010) and *PIECES OF A WOMAN* (Kornél Mundruczó, HU/CA 2020) – reimagine the emotional, ethical, and spiritual dimensions of maternal grief. Both films delve into the intimate spaces of loss, portraying mothers who navigate mourning as an act of moral and emotional self-determination. Within these narratives, grief unfolds as a deeply human and spiritual journey that transcends institutional religion and instead locates meaning in endurance, empathy, and the quiet persistence of love.

This study explores how contemporary cinema translates maternal loss into ethical and emotional language through a post-feminist lens.

1 Gorer 1955.

2 Åström 2017.

The Cinematic and Cultural Context of Grief

Across religious and cultural tradition, suffering has long been associated with transformation. In Christianity, pain carries potential for redemption;³ in Buddhism, the truth of *dukkha* situates suffering as the first step towards enlightenment;⁴ and in Islam, *sabr*⁵ (patience) is praised as an act of faith and strength.⁶ These religious ideas frame loss as a process through which individuals cultivate resilience and insight. The notion of suffering as a moral and transformative experience resonates with contemporary portrayals of womanhood and maternal endurance in film. *RABBIT HOLE* and *PIECES OF A WOMAN* explore the profound impact of child loss on bereaved parents, especially mothers. In *RABBIT HOLE*, a middle-class couple, Becca (Nicole Kidman) and Howie (Aaron Eckhart), navigate the aftermath of the death of their young son, Danny, in a car accident. The film traces the couple's deviating coping mechanisms in the months following the tragedy. Becca becomes emotionally withdrawn and seeks solace not in traditional support groups or family but through a quiet, unusual friendship with Jason (Miles Teller), the teenage boy who accidentally killed Danny. Their conversations are tender and philosophical, centring around guilt, forgiveness, and metaphysical questions about alternate universes, a motif that mirrors Becca's internal attempt to find meaning or parallel realities where her son might still be alive. In contrast, Howie clings to routines and memories,⁷ including watching old home videos, and becomes emotionally frustrated with Becca's detachment. Through these intimate domestic scenes, the film charts the couple's gradual emotional estrangement and fragile attempts at reconnection, allowing viewers to witness how grief reshapes love, faith in continuity, and everyday life.

The film resists any grand reconciliation. Instead, it explores how grief alters personal identities and relationships, and how silence and solitude

- 3 Lewis 2001, 90–92; Rahner 1967. Lewis argues that human suffering is not meaningless but serves as a divine instrument for moral purification and redemption, reflecting the Christian belief that pain draws individuals closer to God's will.
- 4 Rahula 1959.
- 5 *Sabr* is an Islamic ethical concept denoting patient endurance in the face of suffering and is regarded as both a moral virtue and a spiritual act of faith that transforms hardship into inner strength.
- 6 Nasr 2002.
- 7 Blocksidge/Wittkowski/Heazell/Smith 2025.

become tools of endurance. Becca's journey is one of emotional minimalism, where healing depends not on expressive catharsis but rather on the quiet reclaiming of life on her own terms, a distinctly post-feminist narrative of female resilience. The narrative concludes with a subdued reconciliation: Becca and Howie sit together in their backyard, quietly imagining an ordinary future in which pain remains but coexistence becomes possible. This understated ending replaces overt redemption with emotional endurance, showing that healing lies not in forgetting but in learning to live alongside loss.

Similarly, *PIECES OF A WOMAN* presents an interiorized, post-feminist vision of maternal grief, but with a more visceral opening act. Martha (Vanessa Kirby) and her partner Sean (Shia LaBeouf) prepare for a home birth, but the labour goes tragically wrong under the supervision of a midwife (Molly Parker). The baby is born but dies minutes later, leading to a profound rupture in Martha's life. The film's first thirty minutes – shot in a single take – capture the traumatic birth in harrowing real-time detail, immersing the viewer in the corporeality of labour and loss.⁸ What follows is a slow unravelling of Martha's relationship with Sean, her estrangement from her dominant mother (Ellen Burstyn), and her refusal to participate in the public or legal performance of grief. As her family pressures her to testify in court against the midwife, Martha increasingly distances herself from any socially sanctioned narrative of justice or closure.

Martha's grief is embodied through silence, physical stillness, and visual detachment.⁹ Rather than vocalizing her pain, the film portrays Martha's separation from Sean through quiet acts of detachment, as she gradually withdraws from the shared domestic space and the aspirations it once symbolized. In the closing scene, a girl who is about six years old is shown climbing an apple tree before Martha appears and gently takes her inside. Because the film provides no temporal marker or transition to indicate the passage of several years, this moment remains ambiguous. It may function as a literal flashforward that gestures towards Martha's future renewal or as a symbolic, imagined vision that expresses her internal longing for continuity and healing. Notably, this film is inspired by a true story of the script writer, Kata Wéber, and her husband, Kornél Mundruczó, lending the narrative an autobiographical depth that complicates its representation of grief.¹⁰

8 Landsberg 2004, 1–15.

9 Castillo 2020.

10 Kiliç 2023.

Both films position the maternal subject not as a victim of fate but as an emotionally self-regulating individual who resists the cultural imperative to either narrate suffering or resolve it publicly. This aligns with broader post-feminist tropes in media where female characters assert agency through self-discipline.

The cultural and political contexts in which these films were released inform their thematic concerns and cinematic strategies. *RABBIT HOLE* premiered during a decade marked by growing public attention to trauma and loss in post-9/11 American society, when cinema increasingly began to reflect nuanced psychological portrayals of domestic instability and emotional resilience.

By contrast, *PIECES OF A WOMAN* emerged in the wake of global events that shaped its cultural and political contexts. The #MeToo movement, which began in 2017, transformed global conversations about women's bodily autonomy, consent, and institutional accountability.¹¹ While the movement primarily exposed sexual harassment, its broader impact extended to how women's physical experiences, including childbirth, reproductive health, and loss are shaped by systems of control and silence. Both sexual harassment and reproductive trauma reveal how women's bodies are regulated and often denied agency within patriarchal structures.¹² As scholars of contemporary feminism note, these dynamics reflect broader post-feminist and neoliberal structures that regulate women's embodied experiences.¹³ Within this context, *PIECES OF A WOMAN* can be read as a post #MeToo narrative that translates these concerns into the intimate space of childbirth. Although the film never states Martha's reasons for choosing a homebirth, her decision can be interpreted as an assertion of bodily autonomy and a quiet resistance to institutional obstetric authority. This struggle over bodily autonomy continues after childbirth, as shown when Sean attempts sexual intimacy with Martha despite her emotional and physical trauma, a moment that mirrors the broader #MeToo critique of consent being overlooked even within intimate relationships. The traumatic outcome of her labour and the subsequent public scrutiny further expose how women's pain is medicalized, judged, and politicized, a form of what feminist scholars describe as obstetric violence.¹⁴ Set in a multicultural North American city,

11 Molyneux/Dey/Gatto/Rowden 2021.

12 Andersen 2018.

13 Banet-Weiser/Gill/Rottenberg 2020.

14 Sadler/Santos/Ruiz-Berdun/Leiva Rojas/Skoko/Gillen/Clausen 2016, 47–55.

the film implicitly critiques the failures of healthcare through its depiction of Martha's traumatic childbirth, the ensuing legal proceedings, and the public scrutiny of her private grief. These narrative choices echo real-world conversations about accountability, consent, and the right to grieve on one's own terms.

This article investigates the complex visualization of maternal mourning in a contemporary context, highlighting the intersections of female agency, autonomy in grieving, and the redefinition of motherhood within a post-feminist framework. In contrast to traditional narratives that depict female grief as either silent suffering or part of a collective ritual, these films foreground a woman's solitary and self-determined emotional process. Both films critique traditional family norms and present a poignant, introspective portrayal of loss that resonates with post-feminist ideals of emotional resilience, individualism, and moral complexity.

Theoretical Framework: Post-feminism, Emotion, and Post-Secular Spirituality

Over the past three decades, the concept of post-feminism has emerged as a complex and contested concept within feminist media and cultural theory. Building upon these theoretical positions, this study adopts post-feminism not as a historical shift but as a cultural sensibility that privileges emotion, autonomy, and self-reflexivity. As Rosalind Gill argues, post-feminism is characterized by a paradoxical fusion of feminist and anti-feminist values, where empowerment is closely tied to self-regulation and personal responsibility. Within this discourse, emotion becomes a site of agency as well as control. Women are invited to manage pain, reframe vulnerability as strength, and locate self-worth through their capacity for endurance and reflection.¹⁵

This sensibility extends beyond psychological resilience to encompass a moral and even spiritual dimension. The expectation to overcome loss, to reconstruct meaning through empathy and patience, echoes long-standing ethical and spiritual traditions that link suffering with transformation. In the context of post-feminist cinema, such narratives of grief and recovery

15 Brooks 1998; Coppock/Haydon/Richter 1995; Gamble 2004; Tasker/Negra 2007; Gill 2016; McRobbie 2008.

reconfigure faith as an inward process; a trust in one's own capacity to endure loss and reconstruct meaning, grounded in emotional intelligence and ethical consciousness rather than religious devotion.¹⁶

Post-feminist subjectivity thus becomes a space of quiet transcendence, where healing arises through affective strength, moral courage, and the redemptive power of love. Building on these conceptual understandings of post-feminist emotion and resilience, previous scholars have explored how cinema represents motherhood and grief as deeply affective and transformative experiences. According to Sarah Wright, in media the grieving mother is a powerful figure and often depicted as a “victim-hero” whose grief is both personal and public and whose suffering is leveraged for social change.¹⁷ This portrayal expands motherhood beyond biology into a symbolic and moral exertion, reinforcing ideals of maternal selflessness and perseverance. Drawing on this framework, the present analysis examines how *RABBIT HOLE* and *PIECES OF A WOMAN* translate maternal loss into visual and emotional language. Both films portray mothers who carry the burden of grief in isolation, revealing how post-feminist culture redefines agency not through rebellion but through emotional resilience. Wright's notion of “extended motherhood,” in which the pursuit of justice and meaning becomes a continued act of care, provides a critical lens for understanding how these cinematic mothers negotiate vulnerability and strength within a post-feminist context.¹⁸

Martin Zelly highlights how news media often idealize or commercialize pregnancy loss through the “grieving mother” trope, restricting space for complex emotions like ambivalence or anger.¹⁹ This pattern of idealizing maternal grief while suppressing emotional complexity is reflected in *PIECES OF A WOMAN*, where Martha's refusal to perform socially acceptable grief isolates her but asserts her autonomy. The systematic review conducted by Sophie Mary et al. found that media representation continues to privilege the “good mother” archetypes, marginalizing portrayals of mothers who grieve in unconventional or emotionally restrained ways.²⁰ *RABBIT HOLE* complicates this narrative through Becca's emotional distance, marital disconnec-

16 Johnston 2006.

17 Wright 2016.

18 Wright 2016, 11–13.

19 Zelly 2022.

20 Mary/Duschinsky/Davis/Dunnett/Coughlan 2024, 169–186.

tion, and refusal to idealize her lost child, subtle acts of resistance against cultural expectations that equate maternal love with visible suffering.

As discussed earlier, post-feminist discourse positions the female body as both expressive and disciplined, revealing the tension between emotional authenticity and self-control. Both *RABBIT HOLE* and *PIECES OF A WOMAN* translate this paradox into visual form, depicting grief that must remain visible yet contained. The sleek, restrained bodies of Becca and Martha function not merely as aesthetic ideals but also as emotionally coded surfaces, sites where restraint and composure become visual languages of endurance.²¹ Their grief is communicated through minimal gestures, silence, stillness, and controlled movement, allowing emotion to register on the surface of the body without overt expression. This visual grammar aligns with post-feminist ideals of self-mastery and emotional autonomy, suggesting that strength resides not in catharsis but in the disciplined containment of pain.

In this article, spirituality is used in a broad post-secular sense, referring to moral reflection, endurance, and empathy that are not rooted in any specific religious tradition. This aligns with Linda Woodhead's distinction between contemporary spirituality and institutional religion,²² and with Yusef Ogretici's account of spirituality as an ethical and experiential orientation rather than a latter doctrinal system.²³

Methodology

Building on these aesthetic readings, these theoretical perspectives collectively inform the present analysis, which explores how *RABBIT HOLE* and *PIECES OF A WOMAN* visualize the emotional and spiritual dimensions of post-feminist grief through cinematic form. Both films are treated as cultural texts that materialize post-feminist ideals of endurance, empathy, and moral agency within the lived experiences of motherhood and loss. This analysis focuses on three core post-feminist themes that emerge through visual and thematic interpretation: (1) female agency and the ownership of grief, (2) autonomy and ethics in emotional recovery, and (3) redefinition of motherhood beyond biological reproduction.

21. Negra/Tasker 2007.

22. Woodhead 2013.

23. Ogretici 2018.

Using a qualitative interpretivist approach, the analysis combines thematic and visual methods to explore how composition, colour, silence, and gesture construct meaning around loss, endurance, and recovery. Following Virginia Braun and Victoria Clark's model of thematic analysis,²⁴ this study identifies recurring motifs such as domestic space, moral resilience, and affective strength that are examined through a post-feminist lens that views emotion as a site of self-discipline, reflection, and empowerment. Rather than seeking generalization, this study aims for contextual depth, showing how each of the selected films employs post-feminist aesthetics to frame mourning as a moral and spiritual process of self-reconstruction within its specific narrative context.

Analysis and Discussion

Both *RABBIT HOLE* and *PIECES OF A WOMAN* depict maternal grief as an emotional and moral journey, transforming loss into a process of endurance and renewal. Becca in *RABBIT HOLE* and Martha in *PIECES OF A WOMAN* embody the post-feminist tension between vulnerability and self-mastery, revealing grief as both suffering and strength. Their restrained performances and intimate domestic settings reframe motherhood within the affective space of the home, where emotional recovery replaces religious consolation.

Building on the analytical framework outlined in the methodology, the following discussion applies this interpretive lens to examine how these emotional and moral dynamics unfold across the three interrelated post-feminist themes introduced earlier.

Female Agency and the Ownership of Grief

According to Beth Rodgers and Kathleen Cowles, suffering is profoundly personal and complex and is experienced uniquely by each individual, much like life itself.²⁵ This uniqueness is shaped by individual perspectives, making each person's experience of suffering and coping with death distinct. Similarly, Sheila Clark and Robert Goldney's study on grieving couples who lost children found that each parent's mourning process was unique, even

24 Braun/Clarke 2008, 77–101.

25 Rodgers/Cowles 1997.

though they faced the same loss.²⁶ This difference in grief experiences often led to challenges in communication and connection, as one partner might be intensely grieving while the other was trying to move forward with daily life. The loss of a newborn can have far-reaching consequences, extending beyond physical effects to impact social, emotional, spiritual, and psychosocial well-being.²⁷

Agency in cinematic grief narratives often arises through the disruption of conventional visual tropes. According to Joanna Bourke, women in mourning are typically depicted in mainstream cinema as passive victims of suffering, their emotional turmoil regulated or pathologized.²⁸ *RABBIT HOLE* and *PIECES OF A WOMAN* centre on female agency and the ownership of grief, and they portray mourning as an active, embodied process rather than a condition of helplessness. From a post-feminist perspective, the protagonists reject traditional expectations of maternal grief, instead actively shaping their own unique and non-linear emotional journeys. *PIECES OF A WOMAN* employs a distinctive narrative approach to convey the protagonist's grief, beginning with an approximately 24-minute-long take that captures the traumatic experience of childbirth and newborn loss (fig. 1). Filmed with a gimbal-stabilized camera, the sequence maintains fluid, uninterrupted movement while creating the perceptual intimacy of handheld cinematography. As cinematographer Benjamin Loeb explained, the scene was conceived from the “eyes of the baby,”²⁹ a viewpoint that heightens the sensory and emotional intensity of the sequence by situating the audience within the intimate space of birth and loss. This hybrid visual technique transforms the physical act of childbirth into a visceral metaphor for trauma, endurance, and the fragile balance between control and surrender. As the narrative progresses, Martha's grief is portrayed through interior, often isolated, silent acts of resistance, which serve to underscore her increasing detachment from others, resonating with Janet Staiger's idea that mise-en-scène (setting, lighting, camera angles and movement, costumes and props, actor placement and movement) can serve as a “terrain of resistance.”³⁰ This

26 Clark/Goldney 2000, 467–484.

27 Cholette 2012.

28 Bourke 2014.

29 Go Creative Show 2021.

30 Staiger 2000; *Terrain of resistance* refers to a subtle space or mode where individuals, especially women, resist dominant social expectations not through open rebellion but through quiet everyday acts such as silence, withdrawal, or emotional control.

Fig. 1: From the unbroken 23 minute and 55 seconds delivery sequence (00:07:42–00:31:37), Martha holds her newborn for the first and only time, moments before the child's death. Film still, *PIECES OF A WOMAN* (Kornél Mundruczó, HU/CA 2020), 00:29:53.



feeling of isolation is reinforced by scenes showing Martha alone in stark environments or navigating barren cityscapes. A pivotal moment of agency is evident in Martha's silence during the courtroom testimony, where she resists the expectation of seeking justice and instead repositions herself as a subject of grief. This narrative choice reflects post-feminist sensibilities, as Martha prioritizes emotional sovereignty over institutional definitions of healing and closure.³¹

Similarly, *RABBIT HOLE* employs symbolic spatial contrasts between the cold, structured interiors of Becca's home and the warm, more disorderly spaces around her to underscore her emotional distance and growing detachment. The film's cinematography highlights her psychological withdrawal, often framing her through doorways or mirrors, symbolizing her disconnection from the surroundings (fig. 2). Counter to traditional mourning practices, Becca seeks a personal connection with the teenager responsible for her son's death, driven by a desire for empathetic understanding rather than justice or forgiveness, echoing Stella Bruzzi's concept of "performative mourning."³² This act exemplifies a post-feminist form of spiritual endurance: strength expressed through compassion rather than vengeance. Her rejection of support groups and communal grieving also resonates with Susannah Radstone's concept of melancholic agency,³³ where quiet refusal becomes a form of resistance.³⁴

31 Gill 2007.

32 Bruzzi 2013. *Performative mourning* is an active, self-defining practice, unlike passive suffering, where emotion is shaped through performance.

33 According to Radstone 1995, *melancholic agency* is the capacity to live with unresolved grief, where loss becomes an ongoing form of ethical self-awareness and emotional endurance.

34 Radstone 1995.



Fig. 2: Becca sees Jason for the first time. Her face is reflected in a mirror and framed, visually expressing her inner rupture and emotional uncertainty. Film still, *RABBIT HOLE* (John Cameron Mitchell, US 2010), 00:20:59.

Both films reject sentimental or religiously codified consolations, yet they evoke a post-secular spirituality,³⁵ a faith in human endurance and ethical consciousness that transcends institutional religion. Becca's quiet forgiveness and Martha's restrained defiance embody an inward moral transcendence that mirrors the theological ideals of *sabr* (patience)³⁶ and redemption reimagined in secular form.

In this way, their agency becomes both post-feminist and post-secularly spiritual: grounded in emotional self-mastery, yet illuminated by a silent ethics of empathy. The films' conclusions are notable for their subtlety, as neither protagonist achieves a traditional sense of triumph or healing. Instead, the endings suggest a quiet acceptance and coexistence with pain. Martha's final scene implies a possibility of renewal, while Becca's with her husband indicates a learning to live with grief, rather than resolving it. Both endings prioritize nuanced emotional complexity over dramatic resolution, constructing a post-feminist ethics of grief that embodies transcendence through restraint, empathy, and moral clarity.

Autonomy and Ethics in Emotional Recovery

Cinematic autonomy in grief is conveyed through silence, stillness, and visual simplicity.³⁷ According to Laura Mulvey, the "paused woman" in film – static, contemplative, and visually centred – can signify a departure from

35 Cauchi 2024.

36 Salleh/AB Rahman/Mohd Noor/Kashi/Long/Hasan/Ridzuan/Ismail/Hamjah/Abdul Kadir/Saari/Farid 2020.

37 Doane 2007.

narrative convention and linear emotional progressions.³⁸ In post-feminist cinema, the theme of autonomy and ethics in emotional recovery highlights women's internal, non-linear journey to reclaim control over their emotions after experiencing profound loss. This perspective is not concerned with reintegration into social norms or rituals. Instead, it prioritizes individual experience, emphasizing emotional healing as a personal act of agency that defies societal expectations around femininity, grief, and recovery. This autonomy also requires negotiating the ethical expectations placed on grieving women, norms that dictate what forms of grief are considered appropriate, acceptable, or legitimate.

In *PIECES OF A WOMAN*, Martha's emotional autonomy is constructed through silence, spatial isolation, and a muted visual palette. Following the trauma of childbirth loss, her movements are deliberate, her expressions minimal. The long, unbroken takes, particularly the bridge-crossing sequence, evoke a liminal passage from despair to endurance. Here, the bridge operates as a visual metaphor for moral transition, suggesting the passage between trauma and self-acceptance. By refusing to conform to legal or familial expectations of justice, Martha asserts her right to grieve on her own terms. Her silence becomes a form of moral eloquence, an embodiment of what Emma Wilson calls "affective opacity," where emotions resist legibility yet acquire spiritual resonance. In this way, Martha's recovery is not redemption through reconciliation, but self-reclamation through ethical stillness.³⁹

Similarly, *RABBIT HOLE* presents a unique yet powerful exploration of emotional self-reclamation. Becca's grief is visually represented through the domestic setting, often using tight framing and static shots. In subway scenes, her image is reflected in multiple windows, symbolizing her emotional disconnection and resistance to societal expectations of mourning. Her grief is mainly internalized, with occasional brief verbal expressions. The film focuses on Becca's deliberate choices to navigate her pain privately, rather than depicting dramatic outbursts or sentimental reconciliations. A notable example is her decision to connect with Jason, the teenager involved in her son's death, not to assign blame or seek resolution but to

38 Mulvey 2006, 113–118.

39 Wilson 2012. *Affective opacity* refers to the way emotion, especially grief, resists full expression or legibility on screen; its meaning emerges through silence, restraint, and texture rather than verbal articulation.

simply acknowledge him. These moments, captured in a detached style, portray a woman determined to find her own meaning, independent of conventional narratives of justice, blame, or forgiveness.

Together, *RABBIT HOLE* and *PIECES OF A WOMAN* depict emotional recovery as a process of quiet resistance. The characters push back against external forces, whether familial, institutional, or societal, and create a path of healing defined by ambiguity and self-analysis. This rejection of externalized pain or conformity to traditional grief frameworks embodies a distinctly post-feminist reclamation of emotional agency. These women are not redeemed by motherhood, justice, or closure; instead, they assert their right to feel, to remain unresolved, and to survive without explanation.

This thematic structure aligns with other post-feminist films that portray women coping with loss outside traditional communal or moral frameworks. In *A GHOST STORY* (David Lowery, US 2017), the female protagonist's wordless grief manifests as temporal suspension rather than catharsis. Like Martha and Becca, she inhabits the duration and extended temporality of pain that becomes ethically productive. This refusal to "move on" articulates an alternative temporality of healing, suggesting that recovery is not about closure but about coexistence with loss. The parallel highlights how contemporary post-feminist cinema redefines autonomy as the ability to live with pain consciously and morally, without demanding narrative redemption.

Ultimately, *RABBIT HOLE* and *PIECES OF A WOMAN* transform emotional recovery into an inward moral practice. In the absence of collective rituals or religious frameworks, the protagonists construct meaning through self-discipline, patience, and moral introspection. Their silences are not voids but vessels of strength, quiet affirmations of moral courage that align with spiritual endurance. In this light, autonomy and ethics in emotional recovery emerge as both a post-feminist and a spiritual act: an assertion of inner faith in one's capacity to endure, to feel, and to rebuild the self from within.

Redefinition of Motherhood beyond Biological Reproduction

Mainstream cultural stories often idealize motherhood, portraying it as a universal, instinct-driven experience marked by profound emotions and unconditional love, a narrative reinforced by mediated cultural discourses.⁴⁰

40 Johnston/Swanson 2006.

This portrayal suggests that motherhood is a natural state, triggered by biology and childbirth, and that mothers experience a depth of feeling that transcends limits, as captured in the phrase “a mother’s love knows no bounds.”⁴¹ According to E. Ann Kaplan, the loss of a child in film often thrusts the mother into a liminal space where conventional identities are redefined.⁴²

Using subtle cinematic elements, such as muted color palettes, reflective framing, and restrained gestures, these films show how motherhood can persist and evolve in unexpected forms, transcending traditional boundaries. Wright’s “concept of extended motherhood” highlights how cinematic representations of bereaved mothers continue to depict maternal care as extending beyond physical loss, expressed through symbolic acts, memory, and emotional labor within filmic narratives. This idea aligns with post-feminist ideas of identity reinvention, where motherhood transcends biological ties. As Wright notes, mothers may channel their grief into seeking justice, transforming their mothering role into a prolonged and expanded form of care and advocacy.⁴³

In *PIECES OF A WOMAN*, Martha’s decision to donate her baby’s body to medical research and her gesture of planting an apple seed signify a non-reproductive continuity, motherhood reimagined as nurturing, memory, and legacy. Her experience of motherhood is disrupted not only by the traumatic loss of her infant daughter during birth but also by the way others try to define her grief, including the gradual deterioration of her relationship with Sean, a secondary loss she is forced to bear in parallel. The camera often captures her in wide, desaturated shots, portraying her as physically present but emotionally adrift. In one moment, after her husband’s departure she walks alone through a vast, snow-covered landscape, her back turned to the camera. The framing and muted palette externalize her inner detachment, evoking a quiet visual metaphor for grief’s isolating aftermath (see fig. 3). Yet the following sequence, in which Martha runs through a dense wintry forest, introduces a subtle shift: the stillness that once immobilized her gives way to movement. Her breathless forward motion, cutting through branches and uneven terrain, gestures towards a fragile but emerging continuity, a visual articulation of grief that does not resolve but propels her toward a tentative sense of becoming.

41 Wright 2016.

42 Kaplan 1992.

43 Wright 2016.



Fig 3: The wide desaturated composition and rear-facing shot convey Martha's emotional detachment and isolation, while metaphorically suggesting a transition towards continuity and the quiet endurance of ongoing life. Film still, *PIECES OF A WOMAN* (Kornél Mundruczó, HU/CA 2020), 01:35:59.

The recurring image of an apple seed sprouting in the fridge serves as a potent metaphor for life's potential, even in interruption. This symbolic thread continues in the film's final scene, where a girl aged about six climbs an apple tree, extending the religious symbolism traditionally associated with the apple and rebirth into a broader metaphor of renewal and continuity. By transforming these traditional symbols into expressions of human endurance and ethical regeneration, the scene evokes a post-secular transcendence that conveys spiritual awareness and healing without evoking institutional religion or ritual.

The cinematic style, particularly in the childbirth scene, emphasizes Martha's bodily autonomy and agency. Rather than being defined solely by her loss, Martha's identity is reconstituted through her decision not to pursue legal action against the midwife. This moment signifies a quiet moral awakening rooted in empathy and restraint, evoking a spiritual sensibility of grace⁴⁴ and forgiveness.⁴⁵ Through this act, the film transforms suffering

44 *Grace* is used here not in a strictly theological sense but as a moral and emotional virtue associated with compassion, forgiveness, and self-restraint.

45 De Clercq/Martani/Vullemoz/Elger/Wangmo 2023.



Fig 4: Martha stands alone on the bridge, releasing her baby's ashes. Film still, *PIECES OF A WOMAN* (Kornél Mundruczó, HU/CA 2020), 01:56:02.

into an expression of ethical and emotional renewal, suggesting that healing may arise not from retribution but from empathy and human compassion.

Within a post-feminist context, Martha's refusal to conform to traditional maternal narratives challenges societal expectations of mothers as perpetual victims and also the need for closure (fig. 4). Her journey extends the earlier discussion of post-feminist identity formation, showing how individual agency, personal growth, and moral decision-making continue to shape her process of renewal beyond collective structures of support. By choosing emotional openness over bitterness, Martha emerges as a self-determined, autonomous maternal figure whose identity persists despite loss.

Becca's grief over her son's death creates a profound disconnection not only from her loved ones but also from social expectations of maternal mourning. The film visually captures her emotional isolation through reflective frames and distanced shots, highlighting the gap between her inner world and external reality. A poignant moment arises when Becca connects with Jason through a quiet exchange about his comic depicting an alternate universe. This interaction, tender yet restrained, allows Becca to extend empathy towards the source of her pain, transforming confrontation into care (see fig. 5). The act of listening, understanding, and acknowledging Jason's



Fig 5: Becca sits beside Jason on a park bench, listening empathetically as he confesses his guilt while discussing his comic about parallel universes. Film still, RABBIT HOLE (John Cameron Mitchell, US 2010), 00:53:47.

guilt becomes a form of symbolic mothering, a gesture of emotional labor that transcends biological ties. Through this affective exchange, the film reimagines motherhood as a moral practice grounded in compassion rather than possession. From a post-feminist perspective, Becca's agency lies in her refusal to perform grief according to prescribed maternal norms; instead, she reclaims emotional authorship, forging connection on her own terms.

Both films exemplify what Angela McRobbie identifies as the post-feminist paradox: the fusion of autonomy with traditional morality.⁴⁶ While Becca and Martha resist the normative expectations of maternal self-sacrifice, they embody an ethics of responsibility that bridges secular and spiritual registers. Their grief transforms motherhood into a post-secular vocation,⁴⁷ grounded in empathy and moral responsibility, a way of living ethically within loss.

In contrast to sentimental or religious depictions of maternal mourning, RABBIT HOLE and PIECES OF A WOMAN present motherhood as an ethical continuum, a space where moral action, emotional awareness, and spiritual endurance intertwine. In this final theme, the moral and spiritual dimensions of post-feminist grief become more visible, revealing motherhood as moral continuity beyond loss.

By redefining motherhood beyond biology, both films construct a post-feminist ethics rooted in empathy, patience, and moral resilience. Their protagonists' capacity to forgive, nurture, and endure transforms grief into

46 McRobbie 2008.

47 Habermas 2008, 17–29. *Post-secular vocation* is a moral calling that endures beyond institutional religion, with ethical action and compassion replacing formal faith as sources of transcendence.

an act of moral creation, suggesting that motherhood, even in its absence, is an ethical practice of resilience rather than an idealized state.

Conclusion

The depiction of maternal grief in *PIECES OF A WOMAN* and *RABBIT HOLE* challenges traditional cinematic conventions and reorients the viewer's understanding of motherhood, loss, and emotional recovery. Both films resist the narrative economy that privileges closure, redemption, and socially sanctioned performances of mourning. Instead, they foreground silence, fragmentation, and emotional opacity as legitimate and radical forms of grieving. This aesthetic strategy reconfigures grief from a passive state of suffering into a dynamic process of negotiation, memory, and refusal, reclaiming female subjectivity and agency.

Drawing on a three-themed interpretive process that bridges visual analysis and thematic reading, this study has traced how cinematic form, *mise-en-scène*, colour, and embodied stillness materialize post-feminist ideals of emotional self-regulation and moral resilience. Across the three inter-related concerns of female agency, autonomy in recovery, and the redefinition of motherhood, both Becca and Martha exemplify how contemporary post-feminist cinema reimagines grief as a transformative force that unites moral consciousness with affective strength.

The emphasis on silence as an expressive register in both films aligns with Saidiya Hartman's theory of "narrative restraint" and the refusal to sensationalize suffering.⁴⁸ Silence becomes a political gesture that withholds grief from the gaze of a voyeuristic audience. Mulvey's work on visual pleasure and narrative cinema also resonates with this approach, as films that disrupt traditional expectations offer a counter-cinematic practice that privileges subjectivity over spectacle.⁴⁹

In *RABBIT HOLE*, Becca's long silences and elliptical conversations with Jason dismantle the notion of grief as something to be explained or overcome. Her avoidance of typical support structures (group therapy, religious faith, familiar consolation) serves as a refusal to conform to cultural prescriptions of the "good grieving mother." Both films employ metaphoric and

48 Hartman 1997.

49 Mulvey 2006; 2016.

spatial coding to reconstruct motherhood as a nonlinear, affective identity rather than a biological function.

The films' refusal to locate reconciliation or replacement at the narrative center further complicates the redefinition of motherhood. Both protagonists of the films engage in what Judith Butler calls "grievability," the process through which life and loss are rendered publicly recognizable.⁵⁰ By resisting traditional maternal scripts, Martha and Becca insist on a form of motherhood that is legitimate in its unresolved, fragmented, and evolving. However, the films also reveal the limitations of the post-feminist ethos, highlighting the importance of intersectional analysis in understanding how race, class, and sexuality shape the experience of grief.⁵¹

At the broader spiritual level, the narratives evoke ethical and moral ideas commonly associated with religious traditions, where suffering becomes a means of confronting contingency and cultivating endurance. Rather than citing specific doctrines, both films engage with moral sensibility found across faith systems, the idea that pain and loss can lead to reflection, empathy, and renewal. In this sense, grief emerges as a post-secular spirituality rooted not in divine intervention but in the human capacity to feel, forgive, and endure.

Ultimately, these films challenge viewers to sit with discomfort, to accept ambiguity, and to acknowledge the quiet power of women who refuse to perform mourning as expected. They reveal how contemporary film, through the aesthetic of silence and moral clarity, creates a space for ethical reflection, a cinematic sanctuary where motherhood, loss, and faith in one's capacity to endure and find meaning intersect in quiet transcendence. Future research may build on this framework by exploring how post-feminist spirituality manifests in non-Western or intersectional narratives, expanding our understanding of how cinema visualizes moral endurance across diverse cultural and religious contexts.

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50 Butler 2004.

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Deliverance at the Table

Culinary Symbolism and Estherian Transcendence over Death in Contemporary Horror Film

Abstract

Horror film has traditionally disregarded the possibility that heroines can bring a permanent end to evil. HALLOWEEN ENDS (David Gordon Green, US 2022) is therefore a landmark, and its depiction of a woman victorious against evil also conveys a symbolic victory in theological terms. With the use of domestic tools as weapons for communal survival, the utilitarian power of Laurie Strode's fight against her tormenter, Michael Myers, breaks the convention of horror lacking symbolic quality on the behalf of women. Through brave craftiness and rich symbolism of heroine leadership, the film is a dignifying, biblical-like story of deliverance by a heroine that has parallels with the story of Esther's victory over Haman, who also had his murderous intentions thwarted.

Keywords

Horror, Bible, Esther, Heroine, HALLOWEEN ENDS (David Gordon Green, US 2022)

Biography

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Introduction

The biblical story of Esther contains unprecedented heroine bravery, ability, and responsiveness to plotting representative of malicious hypermasculinity. Esther is forced to hide her Jewish identity, navigate the plans of her enemy, Haman, and risk her life by entering the king's court in an effort to

save her people. Succeeding through all of these challenges, she delivers her community, a role that is not usually bestowed upon women in the biblical text. In the film HALLOWEEN ENDS (David Gordon Green, US 2022), reverberations of Estherian deliverance are present in the victory of Laurie Strode (Jamie Lee Curtis) over her enemy, Michael Myers (James Jude Courtney), who has stalked her for forty years. Both Esther's success and Laurie's transcendence are responses to masculine aggression. Laurie's story mirrors the cultural significance of Esther's victory and deliverance of the Jews amid murderous plots.¹ In HALLOWEEN ENDS, Laurie performs a priest-like eradication of evil as she kills Michael on a proverbial sacrificial altar: the kitchen island. I identify Laurie here as a specifically *religious* hero in two ways that are intertwined: as an Estherian deliverer who saves her community, and as a priestly figure who kills evil on an altar that permanently subsumes her enemy. This study explores the domineering threats in a cumulative setting – the climactic battle scene, where the villain is defeated – with Michael functioning as an evil figure reflective of Haman.

With a hermeneutic approach that utilizes the biblical story of Esther, I argue that Laurie Strode becomes a communal deliverer from death in response to hypermasculine aggression. Laurie and Esther face the same question: how can we deliver our communities from death? The concept of sacrifice is used in this study in light of the biblical practice of priests killing animals in a performance of repentance – a symbolic demonstration of leaving evil behind to draw closer to God. This hermeneutic analysis examines the parallels between Esther and Laurie in terms of heroine empowerment, the parallels between the threatening villains in the film and in the biblical story, culinary craft as deliverer from evil, the kitchen as a site for deliverance, and women's dignity in victory. While David Gordon Green's trilogy² works as a single story of Laurie's battle against Michael, the analysis in this article is dedicated to the metaphoric capacity of the last part of the trilogy, HALLOWEEN ENDS, which takes up biblical and religious imagery and themes.

1 De Beer 2021, 1.

2 David Gordon Green's trilogy comprises HALLOWEEN (US 2018), HALLOWEEN KILLS (US 2021), and HALLOWEEN ENDS (US 2022); it was preceded by John Carpenter's HALLOWEEN (US 1978).

The Estherian Hero and Empowerment

Invading perpetrators are manifest in settings where theological belief is a common theme in response to villainy. The heroine engages in a (fist) fight that has a theologically symbolic end. Deliverance, which also informs our current condition to evade death, comes after the masquerades of predators, both Haman, in his biblical performance as an ally to the king, and Michael, who wears a mask as he torments women in the movie. The cinematic portrayal of deliverance through heroism on behalf of a community that removes the power of hypermasculine dominance is an echo of the story of Esther. Heroines act even in their most vulnerable circumstances, specifically in Laurie's entrapment with a serial killer and Esther's risking her life in the political setting.

Important to note is the presentation of historical frustration from scholarly evaluation of horror cinema where heroines prevail, but the driving force behind narrative is not depiction of struggle but blood-ridden plots that glorify the killers in cinema.³ Carol Clover's treatment on the history of horror captures this sadistic victimization of women.⁴ HALLOWEEN ENDS contains a violent physical battle, but its heroine's victory is novel and richly symbolic. While in horror female victims and escapees typically suffer in the lair of their enemies, in HALLOWEEN ENDS the heroine selects and controls the setting for the final confrontation. The scene's religious and biblical imagery of priestly sacrifice situates a woman as an authority who controls and carefully kills evil on her own terms. The film does have a plot-centered fixation on glorifying violence, especially in the final sequences, when Michael's protégé engages in a city-wide killing spree that includes explicit and disturbing extended displays of murder. The "horror-pleasure"⁵ of such depictions explains the audience's enjoyment of slasher-heavy films, which usually have thin plot development.

HALLOWEEN ENDS also contains, however, a physical and metaphoric treatment of hypermasculine aggression and murderous intention being thwarted by Estherian strategy and an Estherian voice, both of which resonate with feminist ideas. The unsavory aesthetics of the film place it firmly within the horror genre,⁶ yet its depiction of a woman in control is a power-

3 Schneiderman 2022.

4 Clover 2015.

5 Schneider 2004, 133.

6 Hunter 2014.

ful display of heroine transcendence, in a triumph that has taken decades to achieve. Flashbacks to earlier films in which Michael prevailed over Laurie invite the audience to reflect upon the nature of Laurie's achievement against her longstanding tormenter. As I shall show here, this new approach within horror embraces the abilities and dignity of the heroine.

The representation of evil in horror film can often be understood in theological terms.⁷ In this reading, the greater the presence, intimidation, and illusiveness of evil, the more religious faith can assist in evil's defeat.⁸ Although both history and Jewish and Christian scriptures have depicted women as disempowered, the novel depiction of a woman as heroic in this movie offers parallels with the Esther story in the Hebrew bible.⁹ In her heroic actions, Laurie's long-awaited victory over her tormenter operates as the Estherian "healing" of a community amid contemporary aggression toward women.¹⁰ The women are in life-threatening circumstances in both instances – Laurie locked in her home with Michael; Esther revealing that she is Jewish. "Esther is depicted as an underdog," writes Sanrie De Beer, "an 'every (wo)man' who is summoned on a journey presenting exceptional challenges and conclusively steps out as the redeemer of her people."¹¹ That description applies equally to Laurie. The scene in which she locks Michael into her home and fights him in her kitchen can be compared to the strategic planning of Esther, who invites Haman to eat with her and the king. Thus, Laurie liberates her community from the terror of Michael just as Esther exposes Haman's plot.

HALLOWEEN ENDS adopts the survivalist form of human storytelling,¹² with the fight back against the intruder accomplished with the very tools that sustain life through food preparation and consumption. When engaging in a cultural effort to defeat masculine monsters, religious and horror narratologies share "intertextual functions" with "the spatial-temporal aspects of gender roles."¹³ Hence, Laurie's heroic actions are a response to the human survival instinct but are performed with the means that this female liberator has to hand and in a location she inhabits easily.

7 Beal 2018

8 Plate 2017.

9 Reyes 2022, 96.

10 De Beer 2021, 2.

11 De Beer 2021, 9.

12 Yergensen 2024a.

13 Reyes 2022, 96.

Deliverance in HALLOWEEN ENDS falls to an older, wise, combative-ready grandmother,¹⁴ rather than to, for example, a sexually objectified teenage girl. Laurie's decision to lock herself inside with Michael is the Estherian action of a woman who "has thus a form of her own liberation" and transcends "the fear" of masculine dominance.¹⁵ Her decision mirrors the proverbial response from Esther, who has "Haman come this day unto the banquet that I have prepared for him" (Esther 5:4, KJV used throughout). While Laurie's domestic life and culinary arts are not typical components of the hero narrative, they compose "the mundane domain in which the hero resides".¹⁶

Horror, Facades, and the Heroine Fight

The heroic response by a woman in this horror movie from 2022 came at the same time as populist religious groups were working (as they continue to work) to reinforce a culture of masculine authoritarianism.¹⁷ The HALLOWEEN series builds to this moment of delivery by a heroine. Michael at first, in John Carpenter's HALLOWEEN (US, 1978), eludes justice for murdering or wounding his victims by escaping. In David Gordon Green's HALLOWEEN (2018), he is assumed to have died, but then in Green's HALLOWEEN KILLS (2021) he emerges alive and more furious and violent than ever. Michael's brutality could be stopped only in HALLOWEEN ENDS (2022), by which point it is possible for Laurie, the heroine deliverer, to exert a new authority that concludes her journey against evil.

In refusing to bow to aggression toward women, HALLOWEEN ENDS echoes a contemporary need to move beyond historically masculine-dominated deliverance, narrative and theological. Both religion and horror address evil as narrative tropes,¹⁸ and thus they form a narratological pair.¹⁹ With kitchen weaponry that allows her to out-craft her enemy, Laurie becomes an Estherian hero who "displays an intellect of stunning proportions," with

14 Lahdenpera/Tanskanen/Danielsbacka 2018.

15 Hatzaw 2021, 29.

16 De Beer 2021, 2.

17 Marzouki/McDonnell/Roy 2016.

18 Vaishnav 2021.

19 Cowan 2016.

“traits that go beyond the normal and are beyond typical expectations”.²⁰ As sites of negotiation between good and evil, horror and religion intertwine, their battles played out with objects that are symbolic, such as crosses and knives.²¹

Foreshadowing in the film establishes the possibility of a female deliverer of her community. Laurie is writing her memoirs, a book she titles *Stalkers, Saviors, and Samhain*. Here we find potential religious symbolism, with the idea of Laurie as “savior”. As Laurie writes about her two previous battles with Michael, whose whereabouts are unknown, her voice talks of evil with a description of Michael’s dominating influence. She describes how “the people of Haddonfield descended into a plague of grief, a plague of paranoia. The suffering Michael caused became an infection, passing onto people who never even crossed his path.”²² At the end of the film, we hear her describe the burden of deciding how to act: “It’s up to each of us whether we lock the door, find the resolve, or let him inside.”²³ Laurie says the phrase repeatedly, changing the final words to be more specific and settling on “or let *evil* inside”. The “him” that is Michael is interchangeable with “evil”.²⁴

Laurie’s prophecy that evil might be “let inside” is fulfilled when she subsequently locks Michael within her home, which he has repeatedly penetrated, this time securing the door to prevent him from leaving. Now he can no longer harm the community that needs a “savior”. Voiceovers containing her intentions and, later, reflections form a “cadence”,²⁵ with the seriousness of her tone demonstrating her determination. Her rhetorical voice²⁶ thus predicts the resolve she will need in the final battle. Armed with the tools of cooking, Laurie places her enemy in a crucifixion position before killing him.²⁷

Like Esther, Laurie uses her traditional role to perform her task as deliverer of her community. Neither woman needs to abandon “her feminine corporeality”.²⁸ Each woman takes on a “double identity” – Esther as Jew and

20 McGeough 2008, 53.

21 Bush 2013.

22 HALLOWEEN ENDS, 00:13:05–00:13:21.

23 HALLOWEEN ENDS, 00:14:16–00:14:24.

24 HALLOWEEN ENDS, 00:14:44–00:14:46.

25 Cutting 2016.

26 Yergensen 2024c.

27 Forasteros 2022.

28 De Beer 2021, 4.

queen, Laurie as deliverer and cook for the family.²⁹ Natalie Hayton has noted the “religious connotations” given to one story (Little Red Riding Hood) when “the hero of the oral tale becomes the archetypal fallen woman”, noting the parallels with Mary Magdalene.³⁰ That traditional process is ruptured by the plot, and hence themes, of HALLOWEEN ENDS. Laurie exhibits the Estherian break from the masculine norm of religious heroism, for “gradually her actions supersede or contradict expectations of behavior established in wisdom literature”.³¹ That physical capacity of her persona allows her to deploy her culinary craft, with cooking tools becoming religiously symbolic weapons as kitchen knives are used to control evil, a microwave is used to distract the enemy, and a fridge keeps the villain from escaping.

Culinary Craft as Symbolic Power

Laurie’s self-deliverance from her attacker can be understood in terms of both her “traditional” grandmother role – she is a homemaker caring for her granddaughter – and her opportunity to act heroically when evil enters her domain. Laurie’s return from her exile in the previous two films has enabled her to reenter normal life. Writing of the “monomyth” behind all stories and myths, De Beer records, “the hero must endure to go back to the ordinary world, but still maintain the acquired self-assurance and learn to accept the ordinariness of daily life again.”³² That “ordinariness” is Laurie’s embrace of her role as a nurturing grandmother. With evil bound to the table and being destroyed, she participates metaphorically in an act of food preparation and ends the threats to her community once and for all.

The actions around Laurie’s eradication of evil through the killing of Michael mirror food preparation even as the plot moves toward increasingly religious imagery. Laurie uses a kitchen knife to slowly slice Michael, who dies on the sacrificial altar that is the kitchen island. The placement and use of kitchen props is coupled with the dense symbolism of food preparation as a survival strategy, thus participating in “discourse of cinema”³³

29 Hatzaw 2021, 25.

30 Hayton 2013, 66.

31 McGeough 2008, 44.

32 De Beer 2021, 3.

33 Schubert 2020, 183

that situates setting, symbolism, and plot culmination in a single setting. The kitchen battle takes place in the dark, locating their fight in the same dark, nighttime lighting as in Carpenter's 1978 movie. Now, however, Laurie's mastery of her destructive tools is exercised precisely in the setting in which she sustains the life of her family. Within the domestic setting of her kitchen, she frees those oppressed by Michael. Her bravery ends their fear of death, replicating the "solace given by religion".³⁴ Similarly, God's grace allows Esther to overcome the unprincipled masculine aggression of the Haman plot.

Michael's aggression as he moves toward and into Laurie's home causes an impulsive reaction by the heroine deliverer. The historic order of masculine dominance and abuse is challenged and defeated in the domain of the traditional homemaker.³⁵ In an Estherian rising to the moment, with both Laurie and Michael locked into her home and one of them about to die, Laurie "breaks free from the inscriptions intended for the female body," as Ciin Sian Siam Hatzaw describes Esther's self-liberation from prescribed female roles.³⁶ Laurie thus mirrors Esther's empowerment in the Bible.

The Kitchen as Context

Forty years after Laurie was first tormented by Michael, she utilizes her own territory as the setting to kill her enemy. Michael starts the fight; Haman, the king orders, is to "make haste" (Esther 5:5) to the banquet. After Laurie locks Michael in her home, their battle transitions from trading blows to potentially lethal attacks with homemaking tools – knitting needle, garbage disposal, fridge, frying pan. Laurie finally seizes a weapon that can "evoke important narrative meaning"³⁷ and that was used against her and other victims in previous movies: a kitchen knife. After fastening her enemy to the kitchen island with multiple knives in a cruciform position, she taunts him.

Laurie first stabs Michael in the side – her knife is like the Spear of Destiny³⁸ that pierced Jesus as he was crucified– then steadily and carefully

34 Vaishnav 2021, 82.

35 Kelly 2017.

36 Hatzaw 2021, 29.

37 Schubert 2020, 183.

38 Hone 1926.

slices Michael's neck and wrist. Her actions are like those of a sacrifice upon a priestly altar. When she cuts Michael's carotid artery, the aerial shot of the bloody table triggers "specific cinematic implicatures"³⁹ related to horror imagery. Laurie duplicates the culinary craft of delicately preparing a fish ("cuts should sweep from head to tail in an unbroken motion"). She grips Michael's hand ("Holding the pectoral fin firmly") and cuts his wrist ("make a slash"), allowing the blood to rush out – her action also references Jesus's wrist being used as an anchor in his crucifixion. Her slow and careful slicing ("comfortably insert the point of the knife ... making downward slashes") ensures her enemy dies as blood gushes from both wounds, satisfying the decades-long wait for his death.⁴⁰ Laurie controls the liberation of herself and her community from the carnality of violent aggression, with the Haman-type figure representative of "chaos, that is, the absence of order and control".⁴¹

Laurie "prays every night that he [Michael] will escape ... so I can kill him,"⁴² her pleading to God foreshadowing her anointed role as deliverer. Providence controls the outcome for Laurie, just as it does for Esther. Laurie becomes the priestly figure who ends the reign of evil. In doing so, she changes the "symbolic environment" of women needing male heroics that has been a central feature of horror.⁴³ She performs a theological-like representation of the defeat of evil – in this instance, masculine aggression and its weaponization of fear⁴⁴ – on a biblical altar⁴⁵.

Laurie's crucifixion of her enemy is central to the new feminist presence within the horror genre. The character has evolved from the original 1978 HALLOWEEN movie, where it followed the standard trope in which, as Chad Brewer has demonstrated, "the female victims run, hide, or scream, but they do not fight back".⁴⁶ In the final movie, by contrast, the Esther-like Laurie "performs her gender to maximum effect" in her moment of victory.⁴⁷ She does not abandon the traditional female roles of a homemaker but

39 Schubert 2020, 188.

40 Filletting instructions from T. Marzetti Company 2023.

41 Jurgens/Hackett 2017, 38.

42 HALLOWEEN (2018), 1:01:32–1:01:42.

43 McGee 1984, 1.

44 Wojinika/Mellström/de Boise 2022.

45 Moffitt 2020.

46 Brewer 2009, 26.

47 Hatzaw 2021, 25.

instead deploys them to new ends, which moves women in horror away from what Faithful has described for science fiction and action films as well as horror movies as “implausibility and irrelevance.”⁴⁸ Instead, as I demonstrate here with the example of Laurie, woman can be an active participant in the discourse against evil.

Victory

The final battle scene is rife with religious iconography. The stakes could not have been higher for Laurie, as was also the case for Esther as she sought to expose Haman. Esther knew that her husband, the king, might decide to execute his wife, and yet she declared, “if I perish, I perish” (Esther 4:16). Michael had entered Laurie’s home in order to kill her, believing himself capable of finishing what he had started decades earlier, and so too “went Haman forth than day joyful and with a glad heart” (Esther 5:9). Haman was “full of indignation” (Esther 5:9) against his enemy, as was Michael, but both are caught in a snare laid by a brave and skilled heroine. The “evil” that has been “let inside”,⁴⁹ to Laurie’s home and Esther’s banquet, is trapped.

In *Little Red Riding Hood*, the death (and consumption of the flesh) of the grandmother is, according to Richard Chase Jr. and David Teasley a “mockery of the mass”, but in *HALLOWEEN ENDS*, that travesty is avoided by the survival of the grandmother, aka Laurie.⁵⁰ Laurie’s long journey, during which she has been damaged and tormented, concludes, like Esther’s journey and in line with the heroic pattern, with “a trip to the Underworld, from which [the hero] re-appears, conveying a new consciousness of himself or herself, his or her limits and his or her relationship with the powers of the universe.”⁵¹ When Esther reveals the wickedness of Haman, then “Haman was afraid before the king and queen” (Esther 7:6). Michael’s quivering body comes with a camera shot of his wounds, which provides “full visual access” to his certain death.⁵² Like Haman, Michael enters a setting determined by his prey in which evil in the outward form of hypermasculinity is outwitted.

48 Faithful 2016, 362.

49 HALLOWEEN ENDS, 00:14:44–00:14:46.

50 Chase Jr./Teasley 1995, 775.

51 De Beer 2021, 6.

52 Schubert 2020, 186.

As a communal group, the long-tormented inhabitants of Haddonfield form the congregation at a midnight funeral at the landfill and watch as Laurie drops Michael's lifeless body into the trash compactor. Laurie has appropriated from her enemy the control that is enabled by fear of death.⁵³ This scene is the formal conclusion to the rescue of the community and encapsulates the long-awaited (for four decades) deliverance. The timeliness of this moment is redemptively encouraging for the community of observers. The scene captures the human pursuit of order that is shared across members of a shared community.⁵⁴

Laurie's victory over Michael engages with the cultural narrative of death through crucifixion. Where Jesus's body is resurrected, Michael's body is destroyed in a garbage compactor. The fight to the death with her kitchen utensils and equipment draws on "religious sensibilities" that "intersect with the gendering of food preparation."⁵⁵ Both women enter a confined space associated with food, its preparation or its consumption, in order to overthrow masculine power. Within these places masculine abuse is apparent, but women save both themselves and their communities.

Conclusion

With Laurie's kitchen a metaphoric "banquet" in line with Esther's victory over Haman, Laurie, like Esther, displays her determination to act even while afraid.⁵⁶ Esther feared what it might mean to enter the court and speak up before the king. Laurie hid in fear in a pantry until Michael found her. The courage of each woman comes out of fear, but they must be brave if they are to save their people. As heroic deliverers both women play a role in the course of cosmic events governed by cosmic powers.⁵⁷ Laurie breaks the mold that determines the depiction of women in horror, who historically, in horror movies and in scripture, have been vulnerable victims.⁵⁸ She is a domestic warrior, which conjures parallels with other stories of women

53 Jurgens/Hackett 2017, 38.

54 Hepp 2022.

55 Sered 2021, 647.

56 De Beer 2021, 6.

57 De Beer 2021, 6.

58 Hayton 2013, 56.

narrated through the kitchen.⁵⁹ To defeat evil is to transcend death – for both Esther and Laurie and for both the Jewish people and the people of Haddonfield. Laurie has Michael’s mask on her desk in the last shot of the film – a symbol of his “beheading”. Communities are preserved and protected by female grit.

Early in the movie, Laurie records a need to let evil into her home to contain and end its hypermasculine reign; Esther similarly plans a banquet to entrap Haman. Both women respond to possible death by ensuring it is the threatener not the threatened who dies. Importantly, they do so by outwitting their hypermasculine murderous enemies. Death, ever present and ever at work in the psychology of the human,⁶⁰ is overcome by the heroines of these tales. Defiance of death is heroism, both in the movie HALLOWEEN ENDS and in the biblical narrative of Esther, which provides a hermeneutic lens through which to examine the film.

Neither Haman and Michael could be trapped or defeated by masculine enemies, but Laurie, like Esther, upends the male-only heroism ideology with what Hayton terms the “unmistakable and distinctly feminist edge.”⁶¹ In a realm that is symbolic of her being and contains vision and hope, Laurie is victorious over her assailant, just as Esther is victorious over the enemy of her people. Laurie’s weapons – her knife, frying pan, knitting needle – sustain the lives of her family, the lives of her community, and ultimately her own life too.

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59 See, for example, the Chinese American novels discussed in Arfaoui 2006.

60 Yergensen 2024b.

61 Hayton 2013, 173.

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Disneyfying Demise

Taming Death with Enchantment in Disney Animation Films

Abstract

Despite the prevalence of violent and exaggerated deaths in Disney animations, they have a reputation for being magical and wholesome. This disparity is largely due to the various ways of enchantment that are used to Disneyfy death, which is to say make it marketable, controlled and entertaining. Disneyfied death can hence be simultaneously thrilling, threatening and full of life-affirming wonder. Research has already shown that Disney deaths are frequently supernatural and sensational, but the exact ways in which death becomes enchanted has remained largely unexamined. Drawing on recent theoretical discussions about the dynamics of enchantment and reflecting on cultural discourses surrounding mortality, this article identifies three models of re-enchanting death – and the aesthetics associated with them – in the selected films. The first makes death reversible, for instance through resurrections or otherwise postponed inevitably, which can be understood as a form of death denial. The second suggests that death is not the annihilation of life, for existence continues in the afterlife and supernatural encounters are possible. The third proposes that death has a finality that holds a special power to enhance the meaning of life. While these approaches vary in their messaging about how to understand and approach death, each contains its own variation of the re-enchantment narrative.

Keywords

Disney, Enchantment, Disneyfied Mortality, Supernatural, Death, Film, Animation, SOUL (Pete Docter / Kemp Powers, US 2020), VAIANA (MOANA, Ron Clements / John Musker / Don Hall, US 2016), RAYA AND THE LAST DRAGON (Don Hall / Carlos López Estrada / Paul Briggs, US 2021)

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Introduction

Walt Disney (1901–1966), the visionary behind one of the most influential entertainment companies, persistently feared untimely death.¹ This preoccupation with mortality had a significant impact on Disney productions, as is evident even in the first feature-length film, *SNOW WHITE AND THE SEVEN DWARFS* (William Cottrell / David Hand / Wilfred Jackson / Larry Morey / Perce Pearce / Ben Sharpsteen, US 1937), where the titular character escapes her murderous stepmother only to be poisoned by her. When the film premiered, audiences cried over the protagonist’s apparent death and stood up cheering when she was magically resurrected in the end.² The spectacular and violent tale of demise had been “Disneyfied” to produce a fairytale ending, changed into something controlled, safe and marketable.

The use of death to add suspense as well as sentimentality and wonder to a story became quintessential for Disney animations – and remains so to this day. This study will analyse three contemporary Disney animations to illustrate how the Disneyfication of death can be achieved through enchantment. Disney has successfully branded itself as synonymous with magic and enchantment – or, as Gary Laderman states, “in the Disney imaginative universe, death can be overcome and serve as a source of regeneration because there are wondrous, supernatural forces in the universe that help us face our darkest fears: abandonment, disintegration, chaos.”³

Supernatural beliefs in the afterlife and magic abound in contemporary popular culture despite the often-heard claim that the Western world has become “disenchanted”, that is, devoid of wonder and magic as a result of rationalisation and secularisation.⁴ Furthermore, sociological and psychological research shows that even many non-religious people in Western societies hold supernatural beliefs.⁵ Disney animations approach death by richly elaborating on extraordinary and supernatural beliefs and experiences, ranging from communicating with the dead and scenes of resurrection to depictions of different forms of afterlife. Additionally, the

1 Laderman 2000.

2 Watts 2001, 66.

3 Laderman 2000, 43–44.

4 Partridge 2013.

5 See Herbert/Bullock 2020.

animations often portray how exposure to themes of mortality can become a life-affirming source of wonder. Such storylines draw on the cultural imagination and on the idea of the disenchantment of the (Western) world and how it might be reversed, resulting in re-enchantment. These stories are appealing because contemporary audiences may have a nostalgic longing that moves from perceived rationalisation toward something more extraordinary.

The prevalence of sensational and supernatural deaths in Disney and Pixar animations has been noted by several previous studies. For example, Alan Ackerman⁶ explored how Pixar films centre on themes of resurrection, and Meredith Cox, Erin Garrett and James Graham⁷ have identified Disney animations' tendency to portray death ambiguously. Kelly Tenzek and Bonnie Nickels⁸ expanded on Cox, Garrett and Graham's study, noting the prevalence of supernatural moments, transformations and spiritual connections. More recently Marissa Lammon⁹ has pointed out that the critical public responses to the themes of mortality in *SOUL* (Pete Docter / Kemp Powers, US 2020) could hinder the development of purposeful death depictions. She has also examined death rituals in Disney animation,¹⁰ highlighting their ties to supernatural beliefs about mortality.

In this study we expand upon existing research by delving in greater depth into the role that enchantment plays in taming death, focusing especially on the aesthetic means by which this is achieved. By analysing three contemporary Disney and Disney-Pixar animations, we can discern three basic forms of enchantment that reflect trends in current Western understandings of and approaches to mortality. We argue that drawing on the dynamics of enchantment, narrative Disney animations construct what we call a *Disneyfied death*: a death that is either (1) denied and postponed, (2) encountered by re-affirming the concept of, and making contact with, an afterlife, or (3) made into a life-enhancing experience.

6 Ackerman 2005.

7 Cox/Garrett/Graham 2005.

8 Tenzek/Nickels 2017.

9 Lammon 2022a.

10 Lammon 2022b.

Theory and Key Concepts: Dynamics of Disenchantment and Re-enchantment

The concept of disenchantment derives from the work of sociologist Max Weber.¹¹ He used it to describe secularisation, demystification and ultimately modernisation and rationalisation as a Reformation-led process of weeding out magic and the supernatural, which were central sources of power in the pre-Christian world and especially in popular Catholicism. It has increasingly been claimed, however, that disenchantment is a heavily ideological narrative that constructs and legitimates the imagination and self-image of Western modernity as an age of progress, rationality and secularity. The concept of disenchantment is thus an important part of the history of colonisation and othering.¹²

Several scholars have argued that lately we have been witnessing a process of re-enchantment that aims at restoring magic, spells and wonder to everyday private and public life, and that this kind of re-enchantment can be readily identified in the interest in new spirituality and perhaps in popular and material culture and media in particular.¹³ It may also be that enchantment has never been absent from human life and society, and that it assumes different forms in different contexts.¹⁴ The contemporary world may find significant utility in the conditions that accompany such trends of re-enchantment, such as the weakening grip of institutional religions, the advance of globalised commercial trends, and the diversification of epistemic and affective cultures. In the context of this article, it is also important to note the special historical and sociological role of films and the film industry as creators and utilisers of enchantment,¹⁵ on which the Walt Disney Company has notably capitalised.

Especially in the new materialist thinking, for example in philosopher Jane Bennett's work,¹⁶ enchantment is understood as an invigorating force inevitable for human life. In this line of thought, enchantment can never be completely erased from culture and imagination: even if we attempt

11 Weber 1946.

12 See Cuthbertson 2024; Saler 2006.

13 See Elkins/Morgan 2011.

14 Bennett 2001.

15 Benjamin 1991.

16 Bennett 2001.

its elimination, it will return and haunt us as something suppressed. Enchantment can be acknowledged, embraced and used in several ways. It can happen spontaneously (one can be charmed or spellbound by something unexpected), or it can be actively sought out through means such as art and rituals. Bennett sees enchantment as rooted in affect and embodiment and vital for human beings. She writes that enchantment “entails a state of wonder” and that to be enchanted is to be transfixed and spellbound.¹⁷

For Bennett the most powerful contemporary forms and outlets of enchantment are not religious, for it is increasingly produced and expressed through, for instance, art, new media and other technologies.¹⁸ However, as art and media frequently maintain traditional, religious and magical forms of enchantment in their expressive repertoire, it is important and necessary to acknowledge the complex place and role of religion (and spirituality or magic) in contemporary tangles of enchantment.¹⁹ Enchantment and disenchantment can be seen not only as diametrically opposing forces but also as dynamically interacting in modernity, and they can also be found even within science and technology, modernity’s strongest fortresses.²⁰ It is this kind of understanding that guides our search for features and moments that produce enchantment in Disney films.

Re-Enchantment of Death and Disneyfied Mortality

The understanding of enchantment described above, and the narrative of disenchantment and re-enchantment have a powerful impact on how death can be imagined and approached. If the mundane and immanent world is devoid of wonder and mystery as a result of secularisation, rationalisation and science, death can no longer be conceived as a gateway between dimensions. With the narrative of disenchantment, death becomes the ultimate limit and end of life; there can be no communication between the dead and the living, an exchange that was part of practices and rituals in the still-enchanted world. One of the costs of secularisation and rationalisation would be that death (whether one’s own or that of others) cannot be cancelled or

17 Bennett 2001, 5.

18 See Elkins/Morgan 2011.

19 See Cuthbertson 2024; Utriainen 2020.

20 Cuthbertson 2024; Saler 2006.

reversed. Today, understandings of death as the ultimate end are applied not just to human deaths but also to, for example, the death of other species and civilisations. We are also seeing, however, emerging discussion of the re-enchantment of death in various cultural spheres.²¹

Here, we explore three methods used by Disney animations to enchant death. These ways are also found more widely in contemporary culture. (1) Death avoidance or denial are increasingly enabled by science and technological advances that push death further away or aim to restore the presence of the dead, for example through digital technologies.²² (2) Religious and spiritual means, some more traditional than others, enable contact with the afterlife and with those who have already died, who may be fellow humans or other-than-human. One contemporary example is the notion that when beloved pets die, they go to the Rainbow Bridge to wait for their human companions.²³ (3) Finally, proximity to death can expose the value and meaning of ordinary life. An extreme example is provided by near-death experiences, which suggest that existence can continue even after clinically defined death and that intimacy with death can fill life with significance. Additionally, narratives found abundantly in media as well as art-of-life guides and self-help describe how serious illness or accident can highlight the value of ordinary life – making each day filled with wonder and delight.²⁴ We find such themes, features and moments within our cinematic material.

Material and Methods: Discovering Wonderment in Disney

With so many Disney animations candidates for inclusion in this study, it was necessary to narrow the selection to allow space for in-depth analysis. We began by selecting Disney animations from the 21st century – excluding sequels – that name death as a central theme in the description of their plots. In a preliminary viewing, we noted that many of these films use death and its various supernatural interpretations as a central source of enchantment. The selection was then refined down to three recent films that use distinctly different approaches to create an enchanting image of death.

21 See Lee 2007; Walter 2016.

22 Nowaczyk-Basińska/Kiel 2024.

23 Magliocco 2018.

24 See Byock 2002.

We thus arrived at (1) *VAIANA (MOANA)* (Ron Clements / John Musker / Don Hall, US 2016), (2) *SOUL* (2020), and (3) *RAYA AND THE LAST DRAGON* (Don Hall / Carlos López Estrada / Paul Briggs, US 2021). Our analysis illustrates how these three films establish distinct ways in which death, and its proximity, creates a sense of wonder. We begin with *RAYA AND THE LAST DRAGON*, which tells the story of a young woman who goes on an adventure to defeat a supernatural plague. The film exemplifies how death can be enchanted so that it is overturned and postponed. Then we analyse *VAIANA*, which is about a Polynesian girl who is encouraged by her deceased grandmother's spirit to restore a magical heart to prevent the death of her island. The film illustrates enchantment through its mysterious and magical portrayal of a lasting afterlife. And finally, we analyse *SOUL*, in which the jazz-enthusiast Joe is in an accident in which his soul detaches from his body. Here, accepting the finality of death is a life-affirming source of wonder that eventually enchants life.

The qualitative content analysis focuses on all scenes and elements where death can be understood as enchanted, that is, depicted as extraordinary or more than a commonplace or even as transcending the natural world. We created a coding frame with various categories and examined all aspects of the source material that were relevant to the research question.²⁵ To ensure our approach was comprehensive, we focused on aspects such as supernatural symbols, spirits and spaces as well as on aesthetics, including sound and visual effects. Although soundscapes, music, visual effects, lights and colour make a crucial contribution to the sense of wonder, they have received little attention in earlier studies. Rooted in older aesthetic traditions such as painting or poetry, these elements have persisted into the aesthetics of digital media.²⁶ Additionally, in order to refine the interpretations of earlier research, our analysis considers how each of these films creates its own variation of the re-enchantment narrative on the basis of the theme of mortality.

Overturning Death

The search for immortality is hardly a new endeavour. Throughout history, religious and spiritual movements have promised eternal existence, and

25 Schreier 2014.

26 Mitchell 2013, 23.

recent inventions have echoed promises of an extended life – a theme that has also received plenty of attention in fiction. Medical advancements aim to prolong the patient’s life, and technological inventions guarantee digital immortality as death bots imitate the deceased.²⁷

This section examines *RAYA AND THE LAST DRAGON*, which tells of a once-thriving civilisation that falls into disarray and faces extinction but ultimately survives, with wonder restored by a magical glowing symbol. The film begins with the titular character recounting how the world had been a paradise sustained by magical dragons until a supernatural plague turned people into stone. The plague is banished through dragon magic, but all that is left of the dragons is a magical gem, which shatters as people fight over it. The plague resurfaces, and most people turn to stone, including Raya’s father.

Years later Raya has grown up witnessing the abundant paradise turn into a wasteland. To reverse the damage, she revives a dragon called Sisu to restore the gem, and they join forces with others who have the same goal. To the detriment of the mission, the involvement of an antagonistic character accidentally leads to Sisu’s death, causing the water to disappear and allowing the plague to wreak complete destruction. As a last resort, Raya and her companions restore the gem, and for a moment everyone turns to stone, until the gem banishes the plague, and water returns to revive the paradise and resurrect everyone. Even Sisu is resurrected with the magic of the dragons.

This film reflects contemporary Western death denial as well as the desire for immortality, with mortality to be reversed and postponed indefinitely. Unlike in the other two films that we will discuss, death itself is not a source of wonderment. It is precisely the *overcoming of mortality* that is synonymous with re-enchantment. Conversely, disenchantment is depicted as the magic fading away, with death thus becoming an ever-present threat. Although disenchantment is a highly complex topic and has both positive and negative connotations,²⁸ in these fictional stories it is seen as invoking threat of death as well as less delight, wonder and meaning. And instead of death being an inevitable end to one’s life, death is a violent, unnatural hurdle that can be overcome and controlled with wonder and magic.

Life and death are then framed as opposing forces. Disconnection from magic and barren wastelands are linked with death, whereas nature,

27 Hurtado 2024; Nowaczyk-Basińska/Kiel 2024.

28 Cuthbertson 2024, 5.

wonderment and engagement with magic are intertwined with life. This contrast is reflected in mesmerising aesthetic choices, which are especially evident in the end scenes where death is banished and paradise revived. These aesthetic choices include ethereal music, twinkling sound effects, glowing lights and uncanny fog, and the supernatural restoration of the environment. In the final scenes of *RAYA AND THE LAST DRAGON*, the reassembled crystal blasts blue light and fog to destroy the plague as twinkling sounds and hopeful music play. The fog turns to clouds, and rainfall resurrects everyone and revives nature. The song grows triumphant as dragons fly in and form a water spiral to resurrect Sisú, creating a victorious mood for the celebration of the defeat of mortality.

In the film, nature, especially water, which is both a material and symbolic source of life, is associated with overcoming death. Nature can inspire enchantment and wonder: Ian Cuthbertson has noted, for example, that it offers a way to access sacred supernatural sites, which inspire feelings of awe and wonder.²⁹ In the other films discussed in this article, nature is similarly intertwined with death and the afterlife or used as a source of wonder that helps make the inevitability of death more tolerable. Here, however, flourishing nature is associated with the absence of death, with which nature is incompatible.

In traditional Disney fashion, the story offers audiences a comforting and cheerful conclusion with the return to a paradise where one does not have to accept a painful loss. Despite the abundance of death depictions, nobody stays dead. A remarkably similar narrative is present in *ATLANTIS: THE LOST EMPIRE* (Gary Trousdale / Kirk Wise, US 2001), which ends with the return to a paradise where the heroic ensemble is granted extended life. Re-enchantment is achieved, as the characters have seemingly gained control over death. Yet although the survival of the main characters eases the audience's death anxiety, these feelings are only postponed and left unaddressed.³⁰ Death has not been "tamed", to use Philippe Ariès's term, for that would require it to be familiar and accepted.³¹

29 Cuthbertson 2024, 4; 84.

30 Rieger/Hofer, 2017.

31 Ariès 1974, 13–14.

Enchantment from Departed Guides and Companions

Another way to enchant death is to draw on religious and spiritual traditions that present death not as an annihilation of consciousness but rather as a transition. In this section we examine *VAIANA*, in which the titular character gets encouragement from ancestral spirits, especially her beloved grandmother, who transforms into a magical ray after death. The glimpses into the spirit realm give Vaiana an awe-inspiring, holistic view of the world, illustrating how magical depictions of the afterlife can be a source of wonderment. More specifically, the film draws inspiration from Indigenous spirituality – and in the process also commodifies it. Earlier research has criticised Disney on this count: Mārata Tamaira and Dionne Fonoti suggest, for example, that the depiction of the grandmother’s spirit turning into a ray could reinforce the idea of Indigenous spirituality as the mystical, primitive and exotic “other”. They also note, however, that such depictions can raise awareness of important beliefs in Pacific culture, such as the connection between the living and the deceased.³² And in the film, it is such ongoing connections that enable death to become enchanted. Nevertheless, it must be noted that the film prioritises marketability in its depictions of Indigenous spirituality, which largely cater to Western consumers.

VAIANA is also not the only Disney animation to utilise Indigenous spirituality in this way. For example, in *BROTHER BEAR* (Aaron Blaise / Robert Walker, US 2003) the spirit realm is a crucial part of the world of the living, as the Inuit protagonist witnesses when his deceased brother’s spirit transforms into an eagle. Additionally, in both films spirit animals can transform into human spirit form when necessary. Bennett discusses such fictional cross-species encounters that combine two species into one, suggesting that crossings of species (such as a catwoman) hold enchanting power.³³ The concept “species jump”,³⁴ which describes the ability to transform from one species to another, is also relevant here. This ability echoes religious ideas of rebirth and spiritual notions that death is a kind of return to nature, beliefs that can comfort the dying and the bereaved.

Thus, death is framed as a natural transition. The grandmother can therefore be serene as she lies on her deathbed, comforting Vaiana by saying,

32 Tamaira/Fonoti 2018, 307.

33 Bennett 2001, 16–17.

34 See Bergesen 2016.

“There is nowhere you could go that I won’t be with you.” This sentiment turns literal: Vaiana sails off as her grandmother dies and transforms into the magical glowing ray that swims alongside her. This consoling notion of continued bonds is reaffirmed in the closing scene, where the grandmother’s spirit is seen in her animal form, still guarding the protagonist. The same idea is present in *BROTHER BEAR*, where the deceased continue to play a vital role in the world. As Lammon has noted, death in Disney tends to be depicted as another form of existence.³⁵ Here this allows the deceased to play the role of spirit guide. Such encounters are filled with a sense of wonder and therefore help the protagonist view the world differently.

The aesthetic choices for these enchanting encounters, with their ethereal soundscapes and blue glowing lights, are comparable to the aesthetics mentioned in the previous section. Importantly however, the messages differ: instead of marking a moment of resurrection or revival, here it signals the lifting of the veil between the living and the dead. An example of such a scene takes place when Vaiana is feeling defeated. Her grandmother’s spirit, first as the blue glowing ray, swims up to her as a mystical song with twinkling sounds starts to play. Amazed, Vaiana witnesses her grandmother appear in her human spirit form – still glowing in blue – to give her encouragement. Disney often depicts the soul as blue in colour, possibly due to the Western context, where blue has an association with the spiritual realm, Lammon notes.³⁶

Captivated and emboldened, Vaiana starts to sing as more ancestral spirits appear in their blue glowing boats and join the uplifting song as they sail past her. The music helps significantly in creating the wondrous atmosphere, and although each of these three films addressed here has a distinct soundscape, they share elements like choir music and twinkling sound effects. The sound track in *VAIANA* is influenced by Polynesian composer Opetiaia Foa’i, with drumbeats, male chorus chanting and singing in a Polynesian language – however these sounds are framed by Western musical characteristics, possibly once again highlighting Disney’s commitment to marketability.³⁷ Disney utilises Indigenous spirituality and tradition as well as mesmerising aesthetics to portray death less as a tragedy and more as a mysterious transition into the ancestral realm.

35 Lammon 2022b, 111.

36 Lammon 2022b, 114.

37 Armstrong 2018, 106.

Re-enchanting Life by Accepting the Inevitable

Death awareness is constantly used to remind us of the value of life, from self-help books that guide us to live each day as if it is our last, to bucket lists, and all the way to aphorisms such as *carpe diem* that remind us that “we only live once”. And although death anxiety can prompt people to live life to the fullest, studies have suggested that a near-death experience might simultaneously cure death anxiety and generate a deeper understanding of how our limited time should be spent.³⁸ *SOUL*, which draws inspiration from the cultural phenomenon of near-death experiences and also from New Age spirituality, posits that facing death can be a life-affirming source of wonder. It also insinuates that there is an eventual finality to death, with a depiction of a conveyor belt filled with souls disappearing into a glowing white light. Acknowledging the inevitability of the end of life is framed as making life more precious. Although grappling with that finality can be difficult, the film suggests that it can be accepted once one becomes familiar with mortality.

The film’s protagonist, Joe, who is consumed by the idea of becoming a successful jazz-musician, is in an accident that leads to his soul being separated from his body. Joe’s soul, along with others, all depicted as simplistic and rounded shapes glowing in hues of mostly blue, is on a conveyor belt heading towards what is called the Great Beyond. Leaving behind the darkness the other souls calmly enter the white glowing light. This scene is evidently influenced by core elements of near-death experiences: peacefulness, body separation, entering a darkness, seeing and entering a bright light.³⁹ However, a shocked Joe falls into a liminal space where souls prepare for life, and he embarks on a venture to try and find a way to return to his body. Through his journey he becomes enamoured with the wonders of ordinary life but also, eventually, accepts his death. As he is about to dissipate into the Great Beyond, he is granted another chance to finish his life. Studies on near-death experiences suggest that the event can increase mindfulness and appreciation of life,⁴⁰ a sentiment echoed in the closing scene, where visibly grateful and present, Joe notes that he is going to live every minute of his life. Joe’s new mindset reflects Bennett’s notion

38 Pehlivanova/Carroll/Greyson 2022; Tassell-Matamua/Lindsay 2016.

39 Ring 1980.

40 Zaleski 1989.

about the importance of cultivating wonder in everyday life.⁴¹ Joe has also seemingly gained an increased sense of spirituality from his experience, another common feature of near-death experiences.⁴²

This is not the only Disney animation from the 21st century to share this perspective on death. For example, both *COCO* (Lee Unkrich / Adrian Molina, US 2017) and *ONWARD* (Dan Scalton, US 2020) explore the topic of mortality through various liminal spaces and insinuate that there is an eventual finality to existence. All three films include some kind of buffer or mysterious liminal space before the final death, illustrating how enchantment can function as a way of facing mortality even if it can be interpreted to be the ultimate end. These liminal spaces also exemplify how the enchanting aesthetics of death across the film selection share similarities, with souls softly glowing and ethereal music setting the scene. With *SOUL*, however, it is important to note that Joe is mostly enchanted by ordinary things as he reflects, for example, on his life and its simple pleasures.

The film also posits that by becoming familiar with and accepting death, magic and wonder return to one's life. In other words, the proximity of death inspires and calls for enchantment, not because death is reversible or a transformation, but because mortality crystallises the value of life. Conversely, it could be argued that death is indeed overcome in the film, as the protagonist returns to his life. However, Joe does not fully die, as he is seen in the hospital unconscious whilst his soul is in the liminal space. The ending of *SOUL* – as well as of *ONWARD* and *COCO* – emphasises that we must learn to let go eventually and that while it is not possible to escape the inevitability of death, we can accept its finality. Interestingly, the film suggests that the world can be supernatural, magical and filled with wonder, and simultaneously mortality can be understood to be final and inevitable. Death becomes familiar and accepted and therefore tamed – this is what enchants life.

Conclusion

In this article we analysed depictions of death in terms of enchantment in three 21st century Disney and Disney-Pixar films. Previous studies have noted the depictions of resurrection, afterlife and the spirit world in Disney

41 Bennett 2001, 160.

42 Tassell-Matamua/Steadman 2017.

films and have often focused on the frequently violent portrayal of death in such films and its possible impact on young audiences. This article has looked instead at the narrative and aesthetic means used to tame the threat and thrill of death, and in particular at how the dynamics of enchantment can transform (violent) death such that it becomes controlled, safe and marketable.

Our qualitative content analysis showed three ways of enchanting death. First, death can be overcome magically, thus postponed or even reversed. The overcoming of death is especially clear in *RAYA AND THE LAST DRAGON*, where death is framed as an opposite force to life, which is reflected in aesthetics signifying resurrection and revival. Ethereal soundscapes, glowing lights, nature and water are repeatedly present in scenes where death is overcome. Such dramatisations can be understood as a form of death denial, adding to Western discourse in which death is not accepted as a natural, inevitable part of life, but instead turned into a taboo spectacle that must be postponed and avoided as much as possible.

The second way of enchanting death is to depict end-of-life as a transition into a spirit realm but with ongoing bonds to the living. In *VAIANA* the connections to the spirit world make death more magical and more tolerable. Proximity to mortality provides a more holistic view on life, for example by re-connecting with cultural traditions and ancestral spirits. The films draw inspiration from Indigenous spirituality and use various aesthetic markers in depicting death and the spirit realm as an indivisible part of the natural world. Ongoing bonds, spirit visits, transformations and species jumps are utilised to make death into something mystical and magical.

Lastly, in *SOUL* the finality of death reveals the wonderment and value of life. Like near-death experiences, the films suggest that awareness of one's mortality can inspire one to make the most of life. Various liminal spaces between life and death are used to explore mortality and its finality. Here too, the film uses specific aesthetic markers and supernatural incidents, but the most important feature is the restoration of wonder within everyday life. Disney films' engagement with the dynamics of enchantment is in line with Disney's branding as a magical, nostalgic feel-good storyteller, which appeals to contemporary audiences' longing for ways to tame death and supposedly (re)discover wonderment in everyday life.

The films analysed in this article approach enchantment in a way that closely resembles new materialist thinking: enchantment revitalises life, and even if it is suppressed at times, it will resurface. As the analysis shows,

however, the films clearly draw from the broader Western narrative of enchantment, in which disenchantment can be returned to re-enchantment. In these movies, encounters with mortality are central in inspiring and calling for re-enchantment. Thus, death or the threat of death works as a powerful plot device that varies from tragic, violent and sensational to mysterious, wondrous, flexible and supernatural. It is fitting that the films approach death through the supernatural, as contemporary audiences playfully engage with and half-believe in various enchantments.⁴³ The films present audiences with ways to explore mortality and related topics, such as death anxiety, grief and loss, that lead to comforting and life-affirming conclusions – even if they simultaneously give ample space to violence and fear of death.

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43 Cuthbertson 2024.

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Filmography

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“Like flies on the windscreen?”

Reflexions on Death and Dying in Video Games

Abstract

This article examines the meanings of death and dying in digital games and how they are conveyed through rules, narrative, aesthetics, and interface. It focuses on the key difference between the typologies of “mechanical death” and “reflexive death”, linked to ludic mechanics (e.g. respawn, permadeath), narrative functions and ethical implications. A genesis of screen death is traced historically from arcade games to the present day and illustrated with selected indie and AAA titles. The selective sample aims to reveal the breadth of death semantics for research and practice. It becomes clear that death in the game can be simply an obstacle but also a moment of insight.

Keywords

Video Games, Death, Dying, Mortality, Moral, Religion

Biography

Prof. Dr. Dr. habil. Stefan Piasecki is a social and media scientist whose work brings together political science, media studies, and religious education in a distinctly interdisciplinary profile. He first earned his doctorate in political science at the University of Duisburg-Essen, followed by a second doctorate in media studies at the University of Leipzig. He later completed his habilitation in religious education at the University of Kassel, further deepening his engagement with questions of culture, belief, and communication. He serves as Professor of Sociology and Political Science at the University of Applied Sciences for Public Administration in North Rhine-Westphalia. In addition to his academic responsibilities, he acts as a youth media protection advisor at the FSK in Wiesbaden, contributing his expertise to questions of media regulation and public responsibility. His research focuses on the dynamic interplay between media, religion, and society, particularly on how media environments shape cultural meaning and social transformation. Alongside his scholarly publications, he is also the author of novels and contributes regularly to major German news magazines, bridging academic analysis and public discourse.

Introduction

All living beings experience death, and thus all conscious life forms must face death.¹ This article examines meanings that death and dying can have in digital games and how these meanings are (re-)produced and mediated by rules, narrative, aesthetics, and interface. Starting from a game-historical perspective (from the arcade era to the present) and a theoretical distinction between mechanical death and reflective death, the essay links ludic mechanics (respawn, permadeath, economic sanctions) with narrative functions (a conflict-based plot impetus – the element that drives the causal chain; a mourning motif/figure – the character(s) in whom patterns of social and individual mourning are condensed; a dilemma – a decision-making situation between incompatible options that may not provide an ideal-typical resolution), as well as with ethical implications (desensitisation, ascriptions of responsibility, pedagogical potential). After outlining a conceptual framework of mortality in games, the text traces the history and typology of screen life and death, from simple representations of life / resurrection as “1-Up” and death as “Game Over” to today’s complex narratives. Case studies of indie and AAA titles show how technological and creative advances foster differentiated storytelling that can embrace or avoid complexity. While triple-A titles benefit from higher production budgets and tight schedules, independent games can be developed with a higher degree of freedom, but often lack stable funding.

Methodologically, a sample of games was chosen to illustrate a range of death semantics and allow comparisons across ludic, narrative, aesthetic, and ethical levels. While not comprehensive, the examples provide core insights. Relevant games were identified through personal experience (40+ years) as a player and former game producer, references in literature, and online reviews. Limitations (non-representativeness, selection bias) are addressed through transparent criteria and theoretical grounding. A basic typology of digital death – mechanical vs. reflexive – frames the findings and the conclusions for research and practice: deaths that do not require further attention from the player are referred to as “mechanical”, and those that are relevant to the further course of the plot are referred to as “reflexive”.

1 The title of this article was inspired by the song “Fly on the Windscreen”, which deals with the many forms and occasions of death, on Depeche Mode’s 1985 album *Black Celebration*.

This distinction also makes hybrid forms recognisable. Enemies that must be eliminated on the way to victory in a level (whether zombies or spaceships) do not require further engagement with their demise. If the death of a character results in a change in the plot or an ethical dilemma for the player, there is a need for reflexive engagement.

What ideas, motifs, and constructions about death and dying do games produce or reproduce? Opponents must be eliminated and obstacles overcome – often en masse, faceless and without victim status. Killing, destroying, and eliminating often take place without remorse. For decades, there has been a concern that young people in particular² – who may not yet have a firmly established worldview – play games in which killing is central. The potential impact is becoming more significant as religious education – at least in many Western countries³ – declines while questions about origin, meaning, and the end of life remain. Games indirectly address such questions, as they always touch on existential interpretations with the beginning and end of their narrative. In the age of “liquid modernity”, in which lives are constantly changing with the help of technology,⁴ religion is also becoming digital.

However, much of what has been reported about the target groups for games is no longer valid. Thus, in Germany, the average age of gamers today is 39.5, and over 36 per cent are older than 50. Gamers and developers are more diverse and multicultural than ever before.⁵ The same applies to games and their content. This text addresses the phenomenon of “screen death” from a contemporary perspective and supplements existing studies, including those by Jens Palkowitsch-Kühl,⁶ Frank Bosman,⁷ Matthew Pulis,⁸ and Frank Furtwängler.⁹ Like films, games are learning spaces. Just as nuclear-war films¹⁰ convey hypothetical knowledge about nuclear scenarios, games provide insights into mortality. The difference is that games require

2 Böhm 2015.

3 See Pew Research Center 2018.

4 Price Grieve 2013, 105; after Zygmunt Bauman.

5 Numbers for Germany: <https://www.game.de/marktdaten/games-verbinden-genera-tionen/> [accessed 29 August 2025].

6 Palkowitsch-Kühl 2016, 75–96; he takes an educational approach.

7 Bosman 2018.

8 Pulis 2021; he formulated a Catholic position on Bosman.

9 Furtwängler 2010, here 210–213; he takes a philosophical approach.

10 For such movies, see Nanz/Pause 2013, 9.

active participation in virtual roles, as characters that may seem alien but serve as vehicles for existential reflection.

Selection of Games and Research Method

This study on computer games in which death and dying play a major role is based on a selective sample. Three practical research-based reasons justify this selective approach:

(1) Lack of formal category systems. There is no consolidated category scheme for “games involving death”, which means that a complete survey cannot be carried out using established taxonomies. The identification of relevant cases is therefore a methodological necessity, in order to make the phenomenon accessible. This approach corresponds to the paradigm of theoretically based case selection in qualitative research.¹¹

(2) Variation across cases. The aim is breadth rather than representativeness: the sample combines indie productions and AAA titles, different genres (shooter, adventure, role-playing, strategy) and various death logics (respawn, permadeath, narrative death, “game over” as feedback). The contrasts to be worked out between mechanical (quantifiable) and reflexive (narratively framed) dying serve as a guiding difference for a contrasting case selection that covers typical and extreme cases.

(3) Content overview, not statistical representation. This study examines ways of interpreting and designing death (ludic, narrative, aesthetic, ethical) as a phenomenon (e. g. death as game feedback or as a marker of meaning). The use of the chosen examples is appropriate because death in games is both a structural principle (trial and error) and a space for experience (grief, dilemma, responsibility).

The criteria for inclusion were therefore: (a) explicit death events or mortality regimes, (b) recognisable narrative or ethical framing, (c) relevance to the “mechanical vs. reflexive” typology, (d) historical and media-cultural significance (e. g. arcade heritage). Titles in which death occurs only marginally and without systemic or narrative effect were excluded.

The explanations below utilize the following ludonarrative observations in a qualitative comparison: rule regimes (respawn, permadeath, economic

11 See Flick 2012, 304–320. The limits described there for film, photography, etc. are extended in the case of games, as player reaction must be taken into account.

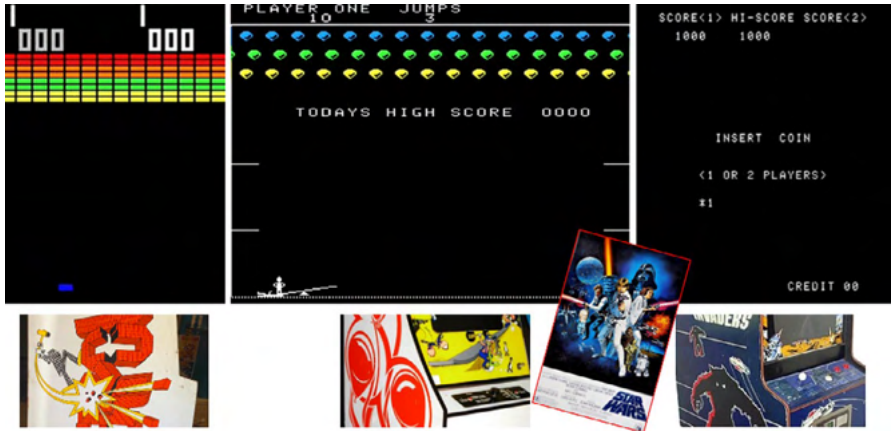


Fig. 1: Slot machines BREAKOUT (1976), CIRCUS (1978), SPACE INVADERS (1978), film poster STAR WARS (US 1977). Collage made of screenshots by the author.

sanctions), audiovisual staging (camera work, sound), interface signals (timer, “You Died”, fade to black), and narrative functions (catalyst, catharsis, dilemma, mercy/punishment).

Genesis of Screen Death

The manner in which death is depicted on screen – how it is portrayed, and how it is justified – has changed over the decades as the medium has developed. Screen death follows the binary logic of on/off and functions “not as morally problematic or dangerous to audiences, but as an unnecessary narrative disruption due to the typical game structure of trial-and-error, die-and-retry”.¹² It is experienced as an interruption that forces a restart, is quantifiable, and enables success monitoring – a circumstance that can seem cynical in the real world. Developers have been using this mechanic since the early games of SPACEWAR! (MIT/Tech Model Railroad Club, US 1962) to HALO 3 (Bungie Studios, US 2007) and all the way to FORTNITE (Epic Games, US 2017). In an early game like SPACE INVADERS (Taito, JP 1978) the disappearing objects were only recognisable as “aliens” thanks to the accompanying artwork (fig. 1).

With increasing graphical complexity, the existence of the game character had to be justified narratively: obstacles were interpreted as “danger”,

¹² Tocci 2008, 187.

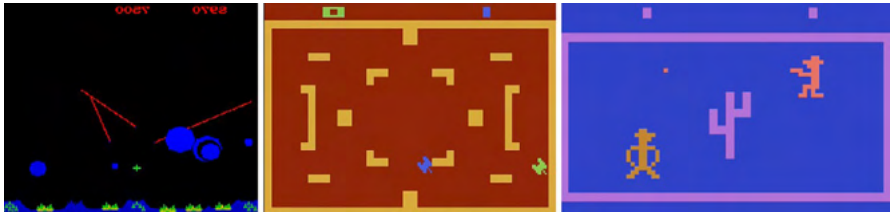


Fig. 2: MISSILE COMMAND (1980) and COMBAT (1977) as well as OUTLAW (1976), from left to right. Screenshots by the author.

their disappearance as “death”. While early games featured abstract blocks or balloons (BREAKOUT [1976], CIRCUS [1978]), film successes such as STAR WARS increasingly created a social framework for interpretation, such that opponents were interpreted as spaceships or aliens. The simple mechanics thus took on additional meaning in light of narrative contexts: threats had to be warded off, worlds had to be saved.

Technically, the meaning remained limited to eliminating objects before they reached the edge of the screen, but the moral framing (“killing”) gave this process weight. The survival of a character determined points, duration, and costs (through coin insertion). Thus, screen death became game mechanics, economic structure, and narrative component all at once. Players interpreted the rudimentary representations according to their own context: in MISSILE COMMAND (Atari, US 1980) they could experience the Cold War, in COMBAT (Atari, US 1977) the Second World War, and in OUTLAW (Atari, US 1976) the Wild West (fig. 2).

Death and survival in games were already provoking reflection in the arcade era. Kevin Recher¹³ mentions the death sequence in SUPER MARIO BROS. (Nintendo, JP 1985) as possibly “the most famous death in videogame history”. Here, Mario does not simply die, he falls off the screen. (In fact, this variant that involved making the character disappear and forcing the player to restart had already been used in DONKEY KONG JR. [Nintendo, JP 1982, arcade]). But where does the character really disappear to? To the afterlife? To limbo? After all, he falls down and does not ascend to heaven. In DONKEY KONG [Nintendo, JP 1981]), the dying Mario at least receives a halo (he falls on his back), while in DONKEY KONG 3 (Nintendo, JP 1983, arcade) he just tips over. Initially arcade visitors are unlikely to have asked themselves questions of this kind, but in the 1980s debates on violence and the prohibition of its

13 Recher 2016, 82.

depiction broadened the discourse in society, in Germany in particular in light of the banning of RIVER RAID (Activision, US 1982) where it might be accessible to adolescents.

The application for its proscription and the justification for the ban referred to assumptions about the game's effects and its interpretation of war/training that went far beyond what was actually depicted.¹⁴ Game developers were happy to engage with interpretation, but initially found the graphics could not fully support their ideas. Jane McGonigal celebrated the milestone of ten billion kills in the game HALO 3, a number reached in April 2009. The players fought for 565 days to achieve this total figure, which corresponds to one and a half times the world's population. On average that means 17.5 million kills per day, 730,000 per hour, 12,000 per minute.¹⁵ She argued that modern generations unaccustomed to war could now catch up with their grandfathers' experiences of war and could pass on their own experiences to others. She thus highlighted experiences beyond the medium and in the real world.

Research and Analysis

Digital games have long trivialised topics such as death and mortality, portraying them primarily as a mechanism that marks the player's success or failure. In this paradigm, death is seen as a temporary setback – a learning experience in which failure forces repetition until success is achieved.¹⁶ Regardless of platform and content, death has been an integral part of digital games for decades. Studies have suggested that 79 per cent¹⁷ or even 90 per cent¹⁸ of games contain physical aggression. Player characters often end up as either victims or victors; threat scenarios justify the action, whether in shooters or world simulations. Death functions here as a metric, especially in action and role-playing games: success is killing others, failure is being killed. Although there is no real intent to cause harm,¹⁹ the experience of

14 Insightful on this topic is Fränkel 2025.

15 McGonigal 2011, 95; see also Piasecki 2017, 412; 686.

16 Andiloro 2025, 6.

17 Vorderer/Bryant 2006.

18 von Salisch/Kristen/Oppl 2007.

19 Vorderer/Bryant 2006, 348; von Salisch/Kristen/Oppl 2007, 65.

violence remains central. And not all deaths are the same, for the narrative context is of central importance. In combat-oriented action games, death becomes largely meaningless because it is so frequent. It primarily fulfils a technical function: storylines are turned on or off, missions are completed, game progress is measured – “screen death” becomes a quantifiable event, not a reflective experience.

Meaningful death does also exist. As early as *PLANETFALL* (Infocom, US 1983)²⁰ and, later, *HEAVY RAIN* (Quantic Dream, FR 2010) death is a serious narrative moment. Here, mortality is not only reproduced mechanically but also recognised emotionally – to the point of placing the player in a position of mourning. It is necessary to distinguish between death events as components of game narration in terms of content. A distinction should be made between *mechanical* death and *reflexive* death. The former uses screen death as a technical function, the latter gives screen death narrative meaning. Hybrid forms are highlighted here separately, using the example of *BIOSHOCK INFINITE* (Irrational Games, US 2013).

“Mechanics of Dying”: Quantifiable Death

In many successful games, fighting – and thus killing or dying – is a central goal. Christian Wessely, who links games to Joseph Campbell’s “hero’s journey”, recognised an extreme intensification of the narrative in level-based action games that justifies an equally extreme counterattack.²¹ The hero’s journey of the player-controlled protagonist becomes a matter of survival, for the protagonist and for the entire game world. It seems, then, that “death” (as an in-game state) and “killing” (within its rules) are central to the medium. Developers and players form an alliance to create the game experience (see fig. 3): what some prepare, others destroy, and game systems follow a digital on/off logic – existing or erased. However, the era in which the game was developed is significant: Wessely referred to straightforward shooters such as *DOOM* (id Software/Midway Games, US 1993–) and *QUAKE* (id Software, US 1996–2021), which dominated the 1990s. At that time, the technical conditions for more complex representations were not yet in place.

20 Murray 1997, 54.

21 Wessely 1997, 195.



Fig. 3: “Play alliance” – Developers and gamers interact in their actions and interests in the course of a game. Illustration by the author.

Market distribution today is similar to that in the early days of screen games: fighting and competitive games have always had a high share. Early titles such as TENNIS FOR TWO (Brookhaven National Laboratory, US 1958), SPACEWAR! (1962), COMPUTER SPACE (Nutting Associates, US 1971), PONG (Atari, US 1972), GRAN TRAK 10 (Atari, US 1974), NIGHT DRIVER (Atari, US 1976), SPACE INVADERS (1978), and PAC-MAN (Namco, JP 1980) required players to defeat opponents – even in sports games, success meant asserting oneself and winning. In arcades, limiting playing time had an economic purpose. COMPUTER SPACE introduced the high-score list, which quantified and made success visible: shooting down opponents determined the score.²²

What, then, is the benefit of *quantifiable* death in games?

Quantifiable death fulfils various functions (see fig. 4). Technically, it structures the game: without screen death, many level designs would lose

<u>Bring about destruction</u>	<u>Avoid destruction</u>
<u>Achievement objective</u> : Killing a character or a group (or destroying weapon carriers or buildings) is important to win a stage or the game	<u>Avoidance goal</u> : analogous to biological existence, one's own ability to act ends with death in the game. This must be avoided in order not to end the game prematurely
<u>Destruction target</u> : a (hostile) world or group etc. must be destroyed	<u>Redemption goal</u> : a world (or city, culture or nation etc.) must be saved

Fig. 4: Death states in the game can ensure the achievement of objectives by preventing or promoting them. Illustration by the author.

22 Piasecki 2017, 566.



Fig. 5: Some games, whose sole purpose is to kill all opponents, leave behind a literally “empty” world whose existence has become meaningless, from left to right. Screenshots by the author.

their excitement, and dangerous situations would be eliminated. Cheats such as invulnerability show that the appeal disappears when mortality is ruled out. At the same time, death justifies the goal of the game itself: only the threat of the player’s destruction – and thus the end of the game – gives the narrative content meaning. Opponents must be overcome and tasks solved, with elimination or deactivation the simplest means, both technically and narratively (fig. 5).

“Reflection on Dying”: Qualifiable Death

The examination of death and dying in digital games opens up a wide field of narrative and ludological approaches. While in many games death primarily functioned as “game over” or a mechanical obstacle (*mechanics of dying*), more complex works, especially since the 2010s, have taken advantage of the opportunity to use the event of “death” as a narrative resource, even as an integral part of the narrative that opens up reflections on mortality, ethics, and the meaning of life (*reflection on dying*). Technically improved sound, higher graphics resolution and greater colour depth, and more system memory have enabled more complex games and created the basis

for “agency” – a term that describes the interactive possibilities for players to act, make decisions, accept the consequences, and to do so against the backdrop of a playful responsibility that in turn is emotionally constituted in the real-world personality construction of the players. It is no coincidence that many differentiated and modern theoretical discourses in *game studies* have developed since the 1990s. Janet Murray described “agency” as the “satisfying power” of performing “meaningful action” in an interactive environment and then witnessing the “results of our decisions and choices”.²³ In doing so, she emphasised the connection between decision, action, and experienced consequence.

Jesper Juul argued along similar lines, emphasising that players make decisions that affect other events within the game framework and its rules.²⁴ How players interpret the game, its content, and its rules is largely beyond the control of the designers.²⁵ Espen Aarseth²⁶ emphasised that games must be understood as “ergodic literature”: the player is actively involved in the production of meaning, not largely passive as in other forms of media. This individual involvement is also related to the issue of death and restarting, as these mechanisms are narrative markers in most games.²⁷ Andrea Andiloro refers to digital games as a “death medium”,²⁸ but he recognises the game *BYE* (*BEFORE YOUR EYES, GoodbyeWorld Games, US 2021*) as an encounter with inevitable and unpredictable death events that goes beyond the innovative control concept,²⁹ for it focuses, literally, on the user interface in addition to the game content. In the game, which is controlled by eye-tracking technology, the recently deceased Benny is on his way to the afterlife, accompanied by a ferryman who wants to hand him over to the gatekeeper of the transition between worlds for judgment.

Juul points out that failure in a game can be both frustrating and meaningful and is closely linked to the game’s defined goal.³⁰ Gordon Calleja, by contrast, differentiates between *immersion* and *incorporation*, emphasising

23 Murray 1997, 126.

24 Juul 2011, 137.

25 Juul 2011, 139.

26 Aarseth 1997, 1.

27 Aarseth 1997, 113.

28 Andiloro 2025, 14.

29 Andiloro 2025, 15.

30 Juul 2013, 86.

ing that reality does not have to be *physical* reality, for it can also be the *perceived* reality of a virtual environment. Death in the game can therefore have real emotional effects.³¹

Death in games no longer merely interrupts the flow of the game, as was prominently the case until the early 2000s, for it is increasingly used as a means of profoundly structuring the plot, character identity, and player experience. Death is by no means merely an interruption; it is a productive factor in storytelling.

Restart, Respawn, Resurrection, Permadeath?

At their core, digital games are rule-based systems for achieving predetermined goals, a structure that was already fundamental to early arcade games. The decisive change lies in the audiovisual design and increasing depth of gameplay made possible by technological innovations and complex game design. Games thus not only set tasks but also create spaces for experience in which players are actively involved in narrative and ludic processes. As Dylan Holmes³² points out, games can be understood technically as a sequence of puzzles within a frame narrative, with questions of life and death becoming central design elements.

Modern game servers analyse players' reactions and dynamically adjust speed and difficulty.³³ In this context, screen death functions as ludic feedback that marks the progress of the game and at the same time structures the narrative.³⁴ It becomes a break in the flow of the game, prompting reflection on previous strategies. While death can occur abruptly, as in *WHAT REMAINS OF EDITH FINCH* (Giant Sparrow, US 2017, see below), it is deliberately anchored as an integrative structural principle.

As an interface between consumption and production, death fulfils several tasks: it is system feedback (screen message), a narrative marker (explanation), and a structural principle (rule of the game). Examples of such functions are found in *FORTNITE*, where respawning is regulated by a time display, and *GTA V* (Rockstar North, UK 2013), which integrates death and

31 Calleja 2011, 183.

32 Holmes 2012, 30.

33 Piasecki 2017, 404–420.

34 Bosman 2018, 16.

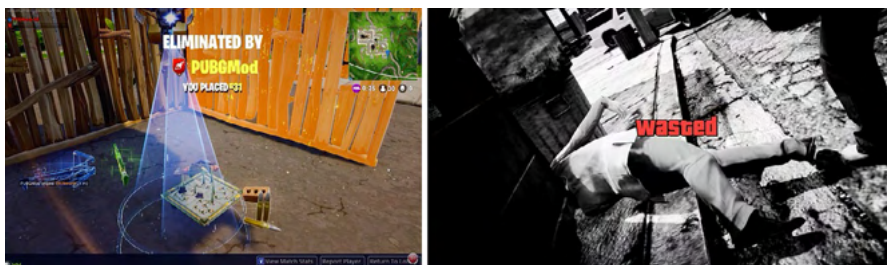


Fig. 6: Respawn sequence in FORTNITE (2017), death sequence in GTA V (2013), from left to right. Screenshots by the author.

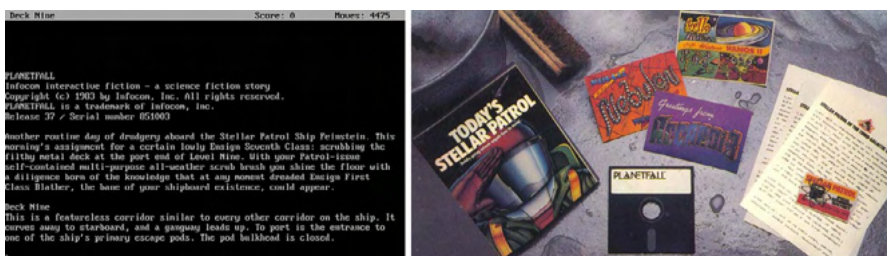


Fig. 7: Text adventure PLANETFALL (1983) and the Feelies included with the game, from left to right. Screenshots by the author.

return into an economic-narrative logic with a loss of money and weapons (fig. 6).

“Permadeath”, by contrast, marks the permanent loss of a character and, in extreme cases, can prevent the player from playing again (“restart”).³⁵ This final form of death is rare in games, but screen death is not without emotional impact. As early as 1983, players reported reactions to the death of the NPC robot Floyd in PLANETFALL. Although the character was irrelevant to the plot, he was found endearing, so his death led to grief and tears.³⁶ This text adventure had no graphics – the effect was created solely by a few lines of text, not by music or visual staging (fig. 7). Early text adventures came with ‘feelies’ – cards, magic stones and other items – so that haptics could compensate for the lack of graphics.³⁷

INFIDEL (Infocom, US 1983) had was similarly affective, but produced other emotions. The text adventure put players in the role of an American

35 Bosman 2018, 19; 43.

36 Holmes 2012, 34.

37 More on <https://t1p.de/beqq1> [accessed 18 June 2025].

grave robber who discovers a treasure but then dies when a tomb chamber collapses. This portrayal of American heroism sparked fierce reactions and debates through BBS's with developer Michael Berlyne. While Berlyne saw it as a reflection of American behaviour in the world, many players felt cheated because they were denied the success they had paid for.³⁸

Immersion and Overcoming Doubt

Gaming enjoyment results from (comprehensible and credible) game rules, (appropriate) graphics, a gripping story, and an inherent sense of (self-)effective “metaleptic”³⁹ intervention, through a user interface, into a game world that is presented as self-sufficient and coherent. Ideally the immersive transition into the game world is not noticeable at all.⁴⁰ The game overwhelms the senses through immersion (or “spatial presence”⁴¹), which is understood as a spatial, mental, and emotional connection to the secondary (virtual) space that causes the real space to recede and be “forgotten” for the moment. It suspends natural disbelief⁴² in the gaming reality. Games achieve immersion with minimal means. In the 1980s, players called low-resolution graphics “super-realistic” and perceived pixelated movements or text dialogues as lifelike and emotional.⁴³ At that time, immersion depended on graphics’ quality and interface: the sharper and more intuitive they were, the easier for the new world to be believed. Limited computing power required constant reloading, preventing real-time analysis. Today, user guidance is largely seamless, and even highly abstract games such as TEMPEST 4K (Llamasoft, UK 2018), GEOMETRY WARS 3: DIMENSIONS (Lucid Games, UK 2014), or AKKA ARRH (Llamasoft, UK 2023) create strong immersion without reference to real-world elements (fig. 8). Despite their artificiality, they enable presence, object deactivation, and the experience of losing lives.

38 See the transcript of the online discussion dated 18 July 1984: <https://t1p.de/p9o9j> [accessed 19 May 2025].

39 Montfort 2005, 30.

40 Buckingham 2006, 9.

41 Wirth/Hartmann/Vorderer/Schramm 2007.

42 Wirth/Hartmann/Vorderer/Schramm 2007, 513. The term originated in literary studies and was revised and taken up by film theory; see Elsaesser 2009, 16.

43 Wirth/Hartmann/Vorderer/Schramm 2007, 496.



Fig. 8: AKKA ARRH (2023) and GEOMETRY WARS 3: DIMENSIONS (2014), from left to right. Screenshots by the author.

Forms of Screen-mediated Death and Loss

Since around 2010, the topos of “loss” has been impressively staged on powerful hardware. The more the image-based media became available, the more aesthetically pleasing their events could appear. Screen games can be effective through individual involvement via immersion (fig. 9). Right at the beginning, *HEAVY RAIN* shows how the player character Ethan loses his son Jason in a car accident.⁴⁴ In *THE LAST OF US* (Naughty Dog, US 2013) the traditional structure of right and wrong is overturned when in the face of a viral epidemic that turns people into zombies, a National Guard soldier shoots the player’s daughter (who appears to be infected) as ordered, but the player then shoots the soldier (who was only following orders), a classic ethical dilemma of guilt and responsibility.

Some games do not elaborate on screen death. A timer may appear before respawning or a short “Game Over” message, sometimes followed by a high-score screen. Real-world concepts of death may be borrowed. *GTA V*



Fig. 9: *HEAVY RAIN* (2010) and *THE LAST OF US* (2013) are examples of the impressive use of the event “death”, from left to right. Screenshots by the author.

44 Holmes 2012, 177.



Fig. 10: RED DEAD REDEMPTION (2010): It doesn't end well. In the end, there is death. Screenshots by the author.

allows the game camera to hover over the deceased game character for a moment, and the image changes to a black-and-white display. After a short black sequence, the character appears in front of the nearby hospital. This scheme is also a visualisation of socially established near-death experiences, which often contain states of limbo and fading consciousness.

Other productions feel compelled to provide more extensive explanations. In the ASSASSIN'S CREED (Ubisoft, CA 2007-) franchise, the games are embedded in an elaborately constructed universe of genetic relationships and continuity of memory.⁴⁵ Dead characters in BIOSHOCK INFINITE are brought back to life in biotanks. The obvious question of why only central characters (can) make use of such possibilities, and not the hordes of enemies, will not be explored further here. Karoline Anderson reports that in the face of excessive violence, players embed their own moral convictions into game characters in order to resolve moral dilemmas for themselves.⁴⁶ These were then also the subject of discussions about the game.

Darvy McDevitt counted that the game hero he controlled shot 910 people in the course of the RED DEAD REDEMPTION (Rockstar San Diego, US 2010) storyline⁴⁷ – and in the end was himself killed in a shootout reminiscent of the end of Bonnie and Clyde, when a good two dozen men shoot the character John Marsten (fig. 10). Death is omnipresent in the game, so the player's tragic end must be celebrated as a veritable high mass of blood. His death, thus the end of the game, is almost celebrated like a religious ritual of sacrifice.

45 See: <https://t1p.de/hghip> [accessed 17 May 2025].

46 Anderson 2022.

47 McDevitt 2010.

Case Studies for the Narrative Use of Death in Games

Below are examples of narratively complex games (AAA/indie, various genres) that show how diverse and profound death can be embedded in the narrative structure in order to mediate the connection between death, gameplay, and storytelling.

The selection of games is justified by their content: the **DARK SOULS** series (FromSoftware, JP 2011–2018) prototypically depicts death as a ritualised learning process. **PLANESCAPE: TORMENT** (Black Isle Studios, US 1999) deals with identity and mortality, with death serving as the driving force for the plot. **WHAT REMAINS OF EDITH FINCH** offers poetic reflections on transience and memory in its vignettes of death. **SPEC OPS** (Zombie Studios et al., US 1998–2012) and **THIS WAR OF MINE** (11 bit studios, PL 2014) handle death as a marker of guilt and responsibility. **GTA V** and **FORTNITE** offer a ludic-economic variant of death, but also show culturally traditional visualisations (floating camera, world transition and inevitability/timer, etc.). **HEAVY RAIN** and **THE LAST OF US** use death as an affective intervention (self-defence/guilt), while **PORTAL 1** leads players into the paradoxical situation that the game's existence continues despite apparent narrative hopelessness.

These and other games listed show variants of ludonarrative approaches to death events. The distinction between mechanical and reflexive death observes “screen death” as system feedback and as a source of meaning. It then allows additional recognition of purely mechanical targets or qualitative contexts of meaning. The selection of games made here provides an overview of the range of forms of “death” and “dying” in the medium: learning through failure, grief as a source of meaning, morality in conflict, the economics of mortality, and aesthetic ciphers of the end. This synoptic perspective combines specific examples and systemic breadth.

PLANESCAPE: TORMENT: The nameless protagonist returns to the game after each death, a mechanism that therefore does not signal failure or “game over”, but functions instead as a narrative resource. The loss of mortality is foundational for the narrative: the central task is for the protagonist to regain their mortality. Each death drives the story forward. In certain situations, dying even opens up new dialogue options and insights into the protagonist's past. Death is used not as a punishment but as a reflection on immortality, identity, morality, and the nature of dying.

DARK SOULS: The repeated death of the player character in the **DARK SOULS** games is an integral part of the gaming experience. It forces repeti-

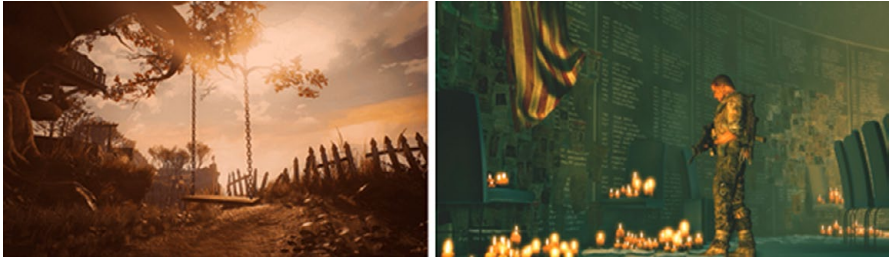


Fig. 11: WHAT REMAINS OF EDITH FINCH (2017) (left), SPEC OPS: THE LINE (2012) (right). Screenshots by the author.

tion, learning, and patient engagement with the game world. Death here becomes a ritual that confronts the player with the fragility of their character and at the same time enables progress.

WHAT REMAINS OF EDITH FINCH explicitly structures its plot around death: each episode recounts the life and death of a family member and traces different fates within a family in terms of unique, stylistically varied deaths.⁴⁸ Death frames the narrative – the player witnesses the fragility of human life as one family member after another dies. Death is thus both a poetic and existential narrative device and the main narrative theme, forcing reflection on transience (fig. 11). Dying is not only depicted within the framework of a “death medium”, but also negotiated as a practice of memory culture.

PORTAL 1 & 2 (Valve, US 2007; 2011) offer an exploration of a death that does *not* occur. In both games, the character Chell finds herself in a laboratory complex from which she wants and needs to escape. GLaDOS, an artificial intelligence that controls the area, seeks to prevent her flight. In the course of the game PORTAL 1, GLaDOS releases a deadly poison gas, contaminates Chell and starts a countdown, creating an expectation that Chell either will die or must save herself. However, she does not die – at least not from this gas. This twist confounds classic player expectations and encourages reflection on loss, finitude, and the tension between ludic freedom of action and narrative determination. It also raises the question of whether GLaDOS is lying or exaggerating (a question *within* the game world) or whether the developers have forgotten the consequences or simply integrated them poorly (a question *outside* the game world). In PORTAL 2, Chell comes into contact with chemical substances and gels; they have positive or negative aspects, but they are not life-threatening. The narrative is thus in-

48 Ramanan 2017, <https://t1p.de/soa9x> [accessed 29 August 2025].

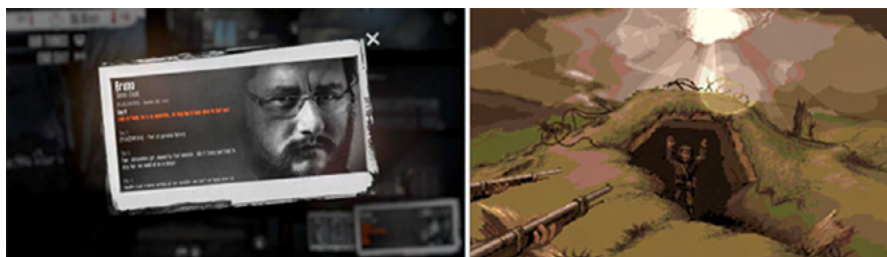


Fig. 12: THIS WAR OF MINE (2014) (left), HISTORY LINE 1914–1918 (1993) (right). Screenshots by the author.

tertained with the ludic experience, and questions of relevance within the game refer to factors outside the game. The threat of death is a productive factor in the storytelling in both games and influences the player's actions.

War games inherently deal with killing and dying. Some of them focus on the fates of victims and perpetrators. A classic example is HISTORY LINE 1914–1918 (Blue Byte, DE 1993), a turn-based strategy game in which cutscenes inform the player that tens of thousands of people lost their lives in the real historical battle on which the game scenario is based (fig. 12).⁴⁹

SPEC OPS: THE LINE (2012)⁵⁰, by contrast, reflects on the mechanics of the typical shooter genre: killings are staged not as heroic acts but as morally ambivalent actions intended to put psychological strain on the player (fig. 11).

THIS WAR OF MINE takes a similar approach. It deals with death from the perspective of civilians in a besieged city. Players must organise food, medicine, and resources and make morally difficult decisions. They deal with the everyday consequences of war. Death often occurs as a result of hunger, disease, or moral decisions, forcing players to think about responsibility and guilt. The death of individual characters here not only follows the mechanics of dying, but also permanently changes the narrative.⁵¹ The remaining characters react emotionally, which can trigger depression or suicide. Death thus structures the narrative progression and forces players to take responsibility for the consequences of their actions, thus serving as a *reflection on dying*.

BIOSHOCK INFINITE is a philosophical first-person shooter with a pronounced narrative. Death in the game is not just a game mechanic (“Game

49 <https://t1p.de/o6xif> [accessed 29 August 2025].

50 <https://t1p.de/qkxhi> [accessed 29 August 2025].

51 <https://t1p.de/8lmc7> [accessed 29 August 2025].

Over”) but a central part of the plot. Death occurs in various forms, and the title character ultimately even accepts his own death as a kind of metaphysical purification (by drowning in his own baptismal water). The game thus transcends the usual mechanical death in shooters (respawn, restart) and at the same time represents a strong reflexive death, which it uses as a meta-physical-ethical plot engine. BIOSHOCK INFINITE thus shows that games can mix the typologies of mechanical and reflexive deaths. Such is also the case with ICO (Sony, JP 2001). Here, the player must free Yorda from her captivity in a ruined castle and lead her to freedom. The setting and Yorda’s often innocent and helpless behaviour encourage sympathy, but ultimately Yorda is only a cleverly embedded technical element that must be preserved until the end of the game and whose special functions must be used in a targeted manner.

The end of a game can defy expectations sometimes, depending on the design of the game world. Through the actions of the players, the actual purpose of the game can be ignored or distorted, as Juul points out.⁵² Games like the GTA-franchise offer open worlds, in which gamers can follow the storyline or focus on other aspects like collecting items or just spending time sightseeing. Quests and the need to discover objects enable a sense of play that goes beyond mere survival and invites players to return.

Conclusion: Beyond “Game Over”

This article has examined the hitherto little-discussed topic of screen death. The explanations cover historical spans (from arcade logic to 1990s shooters to contemporary indie narratives) and design logic (trial and error vs. memorial storytelling), thus representing the typical variance of ludic representations of death. With progressing technical developments, a growing number of games now treat death and dying in more nuanced ways, and there has been some more in-depth reflection on the subject in the literature. A typology that distinguishes between *mechanical dying* (e.g. in action games) and *reflexive dying* (e.g. in more complex titles) is therefore possible, as is illustrated by narrative and ludic examples. This differentiation can help classify games. It also highlights borderline cases such as BIOSHOCK INFINITE, where characters can maintain their strength with food or aids, but the enemy hordes do not have this option.

52 Juul 2007.

The analysis confirms that digital games translate mortality into rules, experiences, and narratives. Death has a dual function – as ludic feedback (failure, reset or restart, calculation of risks and benefits) and as narrative marker (grief, meaning, responsibility). This dual role explains why “screen death” was initially trivialised historically (arcade economy – insert coin; high scores – indicator of success; trial and error – learning path marked by life and death on screen) but has recently become increasingly aestheticised and problematised (individual losses, framing in memory culture, ethical dilemmas). What this means is that games highlight the loss of specific characters who were previously established narratively and in line with a culturally anchored film aesthetic. Practices of remembrance in a game (graves, memorials, diaries) give death a cultural context. Decisions with fatal consequences and no “just” solution (e.g. whom to save?) highlight moral tensions. In short: in older systems, death was primarily a game signal; today, it is more often charged with narrative and ethical significance.

Digital games communicate cultural, social, or religious content to players in a participatory manner.⁵³ Multifaceted, complex, multidimensional games use death not only mechanically, but also reflexively, as a catalyst for storytelling and reflection. Death thus becomes an immersive experience, a moral and narrative responsibility of the players.⁵⁴ It functions as a narrative resource and existential dimension of experience that encourages reflection on mortality and meaning. But only a comparative view across genres and production cultures (e.g. indie/AAA) reveals how dying shapes and influences the mechanics, dramaturgy, and affect of the game. This gives rise to ambivalence in terms of media ethics and pedagogy: repetition can desensitise, but structured staging can promote reflection, empathy, and a sense of responsibility – especially when games actually model consequences and impose ambivalence (e.g. victim/perpetrator shifts, civilian vulnerability).

In making death and dying visible, digital games allow them to be experienced in a playful way. Death takes on a double meaning – it marks boundaries and risks, but it also opens up narrative spaces. Unlike viewers of film or readers of literature, players of such games must actively deal with the consequences of death. Mortality is thus a central structural principle of the narrative and an expression of agency. Existential questions are part of the action.

53 Sisler 2013, 136.

54 Murray 1997; Aarseth 1997; Juul 2013; Calleja 2011.

The analysis here illustrates that death and dying in games structure narratives, open up perspectives, and encourage reflection. From the philosophical debate in *PLANESCAPE: TORMENT* to the paradoxical experience of a non-occurring death in the *PORTAL*-games to the personal stories in *WHAT REMAINS OF EDITH FINCH*, death is used as a central narrative medium, which is in accord with the theoretical approaches of Aarseth, Juul, and Calleja. Responsible design can help promote positive reflection and limit the negative effects of virtual death experiences.

The lack of established category systems for death and dying events in games can be remedied when the following indicators are identified and examined:

- *Distinction* between death as “reflexive” or “mechanical”, or according to its function as “meaning-making” or simply “system feedback”
- *Application* of rule regimes (death event as respawn, permadeath, etc.)
- *Audiovisual presentation* (camera work, sound, blackout, etc.)
- *Interface signals* (timer, on-screen text “Game Over” or “You are dead”, etc.)
- *Narrative functions* (catalyst for character transformation, catharsis, dilemma, punishment/mercy, etc.)

Analytical categories could be:

- *Ludic*: death as a difficulty regulator, learning loop, progress reset, loss of resources.
- *Narrative*: death as a plot engine, change of perspective, memory anchor, moral touchstone.
- *Aesthetic*: iconography (halo/blackout), “spectator camera”, colour desaturation, musical coda.
- *Ethical/pedagogical*: desensitisation vs. reflection; attribution of responsibility; potential for religious/media education.

This article makes the case that (1) typologies (mechanical/reflexive/hybrid forms) are viable if they address ludic and narrative levels of experience together, (2) reception research should focus more on affective and moral negotiations (e.g. moral distress, grief work), and (3) cultural comparisons and platform ecologies (indie vs. AAA, single-player vs. live service) are central moderators of death semantics.

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Dancing with Death in a Post-Christian Society

Satire, Social Order and the Secular Imaginary in the TAKK FOR ALT TV Series (NO 2023–present)

Abstract

From the outside, the role of religion in Norwegian society can seem paradoxical. Church attendance is low by global terms, and in surveys a majority of Norwegians claim to have no religion. Culturally, however, the Lutheran church plays a significant role in marking rites of passage, including funerals, and appeals to Christian heritage play a role in contestations of national identity, suggesting society remains marked by its Christian legacy. To interrogate this post-Christian identity, in this article we examine the Norwegian TV series TAKK FOR ALT (VGTV, NO 2023–present), in which comic actors use Lutheran funeral practices to stage their own funerals. Using Charles Taylor’s concepts of the “secular social imaginary”, “disciplines of disenchantment” and “North Atlantic world”, we ask what cultural work this mockumentary performs and what it reveals about the varieties and self-confidence of the North Atlantic secular imaginary and the preoccupations of Norwegian celebrity culture.

Keywords

TAKK FOR ALT (VGTV, NO 2023–present), Post-Christian Identity, Secular Social Imaginary, Disciplines of Disenchantment, Norway

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Introduction

This article¹ places the Norwegian comedy series TAKK FOR ALT (Thanks for Everything, VGTV, NO 2023–present; henceforth TFA), in which three celebrities stage their own mock funerals, in conversation with the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor’s *A Secular Age* (2007). Taylor’s *magnum opus* charts the marginalization of religion in the “North Atlantic world” between 1500 and 2000. During this period, Taylor argues, a predominantly Christian imaginary was largely replaced by a constellation of secular imaginaries² united by a shared conception of human life as confined to the immanent frame,³ that is without reference to a transcendent realm beyond human life, culture, history and the natural world. Our aim is to shed light on the non-religious negotiation of death in a “post-Christian” society,⁴ on the grounds that humorous cultural texts can provide insight into a society’s preoccupations, practices and taboos.⁵ We describe Norwegian society as “post-Christian” because few people in Norway regularly participate in Christian services and rituals (11.6% attend once month or more⁶), but Norway remains marked by its Christian cultural heritage, a salient example being that some 82% of Norwegian funerals in 2023 were conducted in and by the Norwegian Lutheran church.⁷ Furthermore, some evidence suggests that despite low national religious participation rates, in some regions and segments of Norwegian society, Christian groups such as free church evangelicals and Pentecostals exercise significant cultural influence,⁸ especially in the “Bible belt” areas of the Norwegian South. We therefore ask whether a response to a religious-cultural threat to Norwegian secular imaginaries can be found in a cultural text like TFA.

While Taylor contends that “in our ‘secular’ societies you can engage fully in politics without ever encountering God,”⁹ Norwegians (and their mourn-

1 This article comes out of the project Banal (Non)Religion: Secular Imaginaries in Contemporary Pop-Culture which is financed by an NOS-HS Project Grant from NordForsk.

2 Taylor 2007, 296.

3 Taylor 2007, 539.

4 Brown 2000.

5 Kuczok/Stwora/Świerkot 2020.

6 World Values Survey 2022.

7 Statistics Norway 2024, <https://t1p.de/x7b8r>.

8 Fisher-Høyrem/Herbert 2019; Liebmann 2019, 383; Stephens 2015, 58.

9 Taylor 2007, 1.

ers) are likely to encounter at least God's representatives and their rituals when making their final exit and if they live in the south of the country, in other areas of social life too. A recent study found that non-religious young people in Kristiansand, the largest city in the region, find themselves "outsiders" in the social order, as conservative Christian groups ("the established", in Norbert Elias's typology of "established-outsider" relations¹⁰) are able to exercise social influence, despite being a numerical minority, through the economic and social networks that they largely control:

The superiority of the established group stems not from numerical size or use of force but from a comparatively high degree of internal cohesion together with a certain extent of communal control. [...] Historians have demonstrated how in this region, Evangelical beliefs have been intertwined with commercial interests and political engagement and influence, resulting in a "striking coincidence between religious and commercial networks", at least since the late nineteenth century.¹¹

By "the non-religious" we mean people who say they have no religion, for example when asked in a survey, and by "non-religion" we mean the beliefs, values and culture they hold and produce, particularly when addressing existential challenges that people have tended historically to address using religious resources.¹² The boundaries of this group extend beyond "the secular" in Taylor's sense of being bounded by the immanent frame, because empirical work shows that many non-religious individuals draw on a variety of resources to address questions of personal meaning, navigate life events and articulate their relationship to other people, to moral and social order, and to the natural world.¹³ Use of this terminology therefore leaves space for exploration of whether any openness to transcendence – and hence non-religious but not secular content – features as part of the discourse on death in TFA.

The cultural text on which we focus, an occasional TV series, is a comedy in the "mockumentary" style (see below) and by definition is therefore not intended as a "serious statement" on anything, let alone a philosophical statement of non-religion or secularity. Yet we contend that TFA is a non-religious

10 Elias 1994, 15.

11 Fisher-Høyrem/Herbert 2019, 2–3.

12 Quack 2014.

13 Herbert/Bullock 2020; Woodhead 2016.

text in the sense that it is “other than” yet substantially “defined by, or in relation to [Christian] religion”,¹⁴ because the mock funerals are performed in Lutheran churches in costumes and using language that both parody and mirror religion, and because in addressing the theme of death the performances do some of the “cultural work”¹⁵ of meaning-making and human-connection-making more often performed by religion for previous generations of Europeans.

(Non-)Religious Identification, Religious Participation and Lutheran Culture in the Nordics

The non-religious are a fast-growing group in most European societies, especially amongst younger age groups, and now make up more than half of adults in the Netherlands (54.1%), 42.6% in France, 40.2% in the UK and 36.1% in Germany.¹⁶ In the Nordics the proportion is smaller but substantial, and it is growing, for example 28.9% in Sweden, 25% in Finland and 22.5% in Norway.¹⁷ These figures suggest somewhat higher rates of religious identification in the Nordics than in comparable West European countries, yet in other ways Nordic societies accord *better* with Taylor’s characterization of a world in which religion has been marginalized – less than a fifth of Danes (19.3%) and only around a third of Norwegians (34.6%), Swedes (28%) and Finns (31.7%) regard religion as “rather important” or “very important” in their lives¹⁸ – fewer than in neighbouring France (37.1%) and the UK (37%). Figures for regular participation in religious services are even more striking, with less than 10% of Danes and Swedes (6.4% and 9.7% respectively) attending once a month or more, and slightly more Finns and Norwegians (11.1% and 11.6% respectively), again lower than for France (12.4%) or the UK (16.6%). And yet, while a substantial majority of the French and British never or practically never attend religious services (62.9% and 60.2% respectively), infrequent attendance remains the practice of the majority in most Nordic societies.

The maintenance of regular (if infrequent) attendance at religious services, especially at rites of passage, is likely explained by the long history of

14 Lee 2012, 131.

15 Alexander 2003, 106; 316.

16 World Values Survey (WVS) Wave 7 (2022). Data gathered 2017–2021.

17 World Values Survey (WVS) Wave 7 (2022).

18 World Values Survey (WVS) Wave 7 (2022).

established Lutheran national churches (now continued only in Denmark) and relative societal religious homogeneity, meaning the Lutheran churches are able to play a significant role in national identity, marked by rites of passage such as confirmation and, important for our case, funerals. Thus, while more French and British are actively religious, Norwegians are more likely to experience a common, largely Lutheran religious culture when mourning – and hence to have a shared if shallow familiarity with the Lutheran funeral ritual, a familiarity TFA mobilizes to comic effect.

What mourners bring to and encounter in funeral services is changing. In a small but suggestive qualitative study, Sigurd Øgaard and Guro Buder observe that bereaved relatives express “an increasing degree of demand for ‘personalization’ but display ‘a corresponding decrease’ in the general proficiency and knowledge of hymns, liturgy, and church ceremonies”.¹⁹ This conclusion is supported by Carsten Schuerhoff, who comments that “studies show that there is an awareness [among clergy] of individual wishes and needs, and an effort to accommodate them. Still, the pastor is responsible for a socially sensitive reintegration into the church defined ritual.”²⁰

These trends go some way to contextualizing the mock funerals of the TFA series, which take place in church buildings and take the form of recognizably Lutheran funeral services, which this evidence suggests is likely to be broadly but not profoundly familiar to many. The series plays on this tension to comedic effect, with those performing roles in the mock funeral displaying ignorance of their part, often as part of slapstick.

Taylor’s Secular Imaginary and TFA

For Taylor, the historical transformation from dominant Christian to secular imaginary is profound and deeply transformative of both North Atlantic cultures and the consciousness of individuals formed by them. What was once the sacred centre of social order and shared common sense became an optional peripheral activity and implausible belief system:

We have changed not just from a condition where most people lived “naively” in a construal (part Christian, part related to “spirits” of pagan

19 Øgaard/Buder 2021, 70.

20 Schuerhoff 2023, 41.

origin) as simple reality to one in which almost no one is capable of this, but all see their options as one among many [...] to a condition in which [...] unbelieving construals seem at first blush the only plausible ones.²¹

We contend that the performers of TFA largely inhabit such a world, which characterizes the Norwegian public sphere to the extent that on media forums discussing TFA, while some objected to the show on the grounds that it could offend the sensibilities of the recently bereaved, no one objected on religious grounds.²² This response suggests a publicly confident non-religious culture and a dominant secular imaginary. However, evidence from the southern city of Kristiansand – where the outsider role of non-religious youth contrasts with the established character of the conservative Christian group manifest in social spaces from public parades to social media²³ – questions the extent of this dominance across Norway.

Taylor's description of secular imaginaries as disenchanted resembles that of sociological theories of secularization. But whereas these accounts tend to conceptualize disenchantment as the incremental and stable outcome of some structural feature of modern industrial society such as, for example, rationalization (Weber) or social differentiation (Durkheim),²⁴ Taylor sees the condition as precarious and requiring continuous effort (which he calls “buffering”) – cultural work – to maintain itself. While Taylor does not use the expression “cultural work”, we find the term as developed in cultural sociology²⁵ useful for describing what buffering does for the secular imaginary. For Taylor, in line with the post-structuralist emphasis on power being exercised through language,²⁶ this work is performed discursively, by undermining references to the transcendent in everyday speech using a variety of techniques, which he describes as “the disciplines of disenchantment”. In the following passage Taylor describes the precarity of the secular imaginary's dominance and provides two examples of “disciplines” that support it:

[W]e are widely aware of living in a “disenchanted” universe [...] but also that it was a struggle [...] to get to where we are; and that in some re-

21 Taylor 2007, 12.

22 Løland/Horsinek 2023.

23 Fisher-Høyrem/Herbert 2019, 6–8.

24 Herbert 2003, chapter 2.

25 Alexander 2003; 2022.

26 Foucault 1976; Bourdieu 1991.

spects this achievement is fragile. We know this because each one of us as we grew up has had to take on the disciplines of disenchantment, and we regularly reproach each other for our failings in this regard, and accuse each other of “magical” thinking, of indulging in “myth” [...] we say that X isn’t living in our century, that Y has a “mediaeval” mind.²⁷

In the first “discipline”, which we might term “temporalization”, religion is relegated to the past (“isn’t living in our century [...] has a ‘mediaeval’ mind”), drawing on an Enlightenment narrative of progress. In the second “discipline”, “myth” and “magic” are denigrated as non-rational modes of thinking.

Thus, whereas in sociological accounts secularization occurs unintended, as a result of technological (Weber, rationalization) or organizational (Durkheim, social differentiation) change, Taylor’s emphasis on discourse as the site and mechanism of change means secularization is not guaranteed by some large-scale unfolding structural force but instead asserted (and hence may be contested) in everyday conversation and other cultural performances. Which brings us to a cultural text like TFA.

If the secular imaginary is a contingent historical product marked by an ongoing struggle with religious modes of thinking, it requires ongoing cultural work to maintain it.²⁸ Seen in this light, a text like TFA can be read (at least in part) as a performance of disenchantment, a holding at bay, through parody, of a religious imaginary that must be restrained (and is visibly encoded in costumes worn and rituals performed). Or does TFA illustrate a confident non-religious culture, within which the secular elements have no need to justify or assert themselves against religion,²⁹ but rather feel free to play unchallenged with the cultural repertoire that religion provides? This brings us to our first research question: What kind of non-religious performance is TFA? Is it:

Hypothesis 1: performed against religion, to re-enforce a threatened secular imaginary (as Taylor’s emphasis on the insecurity of the secular imaginary and the role of humor in maintaining it would suggest)?

27 Taylor 2007, 29–30.

28 A view supported by recent cognitive and evolutionary approaches to religion – see McCauley 2020 for a review.

29 See e.g. Zuckerman 2008 on Danish secular culture.

Or

Hypothesis 2: performed in indifference to religion, at liberty to elaborate a non-religious imaginary which is securely, if not fully, secular (as Phil Zuckerman's reading of Danish culture would suggest)?

This in turn leads to our second research question: What kind of social imaginary is projected by TFA? In particular, what does the show tell us about non-religious negotiation of death and the construction and contestation of social order in Norwegian popular culture?

TFA: Between Christian Symbols and Secular Imaginaries

TFA is a Norwegian television programme produced since 2023 by VGTV, a Norwegian ad-funded online TV channel, in which celebrities stage their own mock funerals. To date, three episodes have been released: TAKK FOR ALT, BÅRD YLVISÅKER, featuring the comedian as the main subject; TAKK FOR ALT, PETTER NORTHUG, centred on the nationally famous cross-country skier; and TAKK FOR ALT, LINN SKÅBER, featuring a comedian/actress. Genre-wise, it is a mockumentary, “a fictional audiovisual text, such as a feature film or television programme, that looks and sounds like a documentary”.³⁰ Stylistically, TFA includes documentary features – the camerawork resembles the way real events are filmed, the commentary is a voiceover by the nationally well-known commentator Marte Stokstad, and the people present appear as themselves. The series is a parody of a live television broadcast rather than an imitation of a documentary film, less an American sitcom-style mockumentary and more a play with Norwegian public television style reportage (we suggest “mockportage”).

The film style is minimalist: inside the church, several cameras capture the events from different vantage points, focusing on the coffin, the officiants, and the guests seated in the pews. The camerawork, however, remains predominantly observational. It is fluid and almost imperceptible, without aggressive close-ups or overly attractive editing transitions. There are no direct-to-camera “talking heads” or testimonial inserts from the guests; the camera is confined entirely to the church space during the ceremony. Nor are there the kinds of interstitial segments familiar from reality television,

30 Hight 2014, 515.

in which participants retrospectively comment on the events. The only commentary is in the form of brief interviews, conducted by a VGTV reporter, with attendees waiting outside before the ceremony begins. The comedic dimension is present primarily through the set design arranged in a church (an open coffin with a celebrity lying inside, a funeral wreath in the shape of a fox), props (a television set, a guitar), and effects (flames), and in the language of the speeches from the pulpit, which are somewhere between roast and absurd and are often socially awkward. The primary target of the mockery is a celebrity who is lying motionless in a coffin with their eyes closed, unable to respond to the humorous and malicious taunts directed at them from the pulpit. Another target of mockery is the social conventions of Norwegian society in general, and of a specific group of celebrities in particular. The show is grounded in a satirical exposure of celebrities' relentless pursuit of recognition and their underlying anxiety about fading into obscurity.

Each funeral takes place in a real Norwegian church: Vålerenga kirke, Vestre Frikirke and Kulturkirken Jakob, with the officiants played by each show's host – successively, the comedians Morten Ramm, Vegar Tryggeseid and Snorre Monsson. The replacement of religious professionals with comedians underscores the marginalization of religion, but the ritual is still performed within a Lutheran cultural frame: the officiants' costumes resemble those of religious professionals, and their colour, violet, is the traditional liturgical colour for funerals and mourning services.³¹ However, the ritual diverges slightly from Nordic Lutheran forms to favour depictions familiar from popular culture – for example, the coffin is open, an American, not Nordic, practice.³² While a practical means to present the live celebrity, this device also adds a sense of Hollywood-style spectacle, aligning with Line Nybro Petersen's comment, "Because the media circulate globally and to some extent are dominated by Anglo-American content and formats, the individual living in Nordic countries may become more acquainted with the religious representations of global and Anglo-American media than with the religious content of the Protestant churches in the Nordic countries."³³

31 Thomassen/Elstad n. d.

32 Reimers 1999; Ramshaw 2010.

33 Hjarvard 2011, 132.

A Secular Reading of Hell

In the second episode, Tryggeseid gives a speech about Hell. His vision contrasts with traditional Christian representations. First, he argues that the concept of moral judgement remains relevant, as Petter Northug was a complicated person who did immoral things, referencing the Christian belief in God's judgment. Then, he presents a picture of a medieval depiction of Hell on the screen, with naked human bodies symbolizing souls being consumed by flames. But he immediately rejects this interpretation, substituting a stock photo of a family dinner as a better depiction of Hell. By translating the concept into secular terms within the walls of an actual church, he both demonstrates – and arguably performs – the marginality of traditional interpretations of Christian belief in line with secularization theory. Or, more radically, read through Taylor's concept of the disciplines of disenchantment, he performs the marginalization of religious imagery.

The speech also fits the secular trend of individualization, meaning each person develops and prioritizes their personal interpretation. Starting with a vision from a medieval Christian imaginary, Tryggeseid departs from religious themes and moves to social commentary, attacking middle-class social conventions. While, as Pål Repstad notes, “a great majority in Norway with a varying degree of certainty reject the belief that Hell exists”,³⁴ the voiding of all reference to the afterlife of the deceased is striking. According to Repstad's research, not only do non-believing Norwegians reject belief in Hell, but this phenomenon is also common among believing Norwegians affiliated with the Church of Norway – only one in ten of those connected to the Church of Norway believe absolutely in Hell.³⁵ However, while Hell is not taken literally, a substantial minority of Norwegians believe in an afterlife (39.3%),³⁶ including 24.7 percent of non-religious.³⁷

The concept of mediatization can shed further light on Tryggeseid's use of the idea of Hell. According to Stig Hjarvard, mediatization of religion in the Nordic countries follows on from the mediatization of society: as media consumption becomes more ubiquitous and social institutions such as family, voluntary associations, churches and trade unions weaken, media

34 Repstad 2019, 134.

35 Repstad 2019, 135.

36 World Value Study 2022

37 Gaudett/Cragun/Urstad 2025.

becomes increasingly constitutive of society's social fabric.³⁸ In this context, the form and meaning of religion in the media strongly shapes public perceptions of religion. Hjarvard terms the type of Christianity mediatized in the Nordics a "weak" religion and argues that its mediatization contributes to secularization.³⁹ The interpretation of Hell presented by Tryggeseid can be considered a concrete manifestation of this process, serving as practical evidence that mediatization can indeed foster individualized and secularized reinterpretations of religious concepts. However, Taylor's version of secularization suggests a different reading: reinterpreting religion to align with secular norms does not deal with the existential threats that "strong" religion⁴⁰ sought to contain; rather secular culture must find other ways to ward off these threats, from denial to, as in TFA, mockery. In the context of mediatization, it is worth mentioning Hjarvard's concept of "banal religion", which refers to the presence of religious elements in culture that are more cultural than confessional.⁴¹ In the case of TFA, religiosity serves as background and as part of tradition, rather than being explicitly professed or preached. The performance can also be read, however, as a buffering of the secular imaginary against the relatively recent cultural memory of strong religion – in 1985 some 27 % of Norwegians still believed in Hell – and against its continued influence in Southern Norway and amongst some minority groups.⁴²

A (Non-)religious Afterlife

In each performance at least one song is dedicated to the deceased: "What Does the Fox Say?" for Bård Ylvisåker, as a tribute to his best-known song; "Despacito" to for Petter Northug, referencing his affair with Carina Dahl; and "Uperfekt" for Linn Skåber, as a parody of her relationship with her stepdaughter. "What Does the Fox Say?" has possible afterlife references. In the version performed in the church by pop singer Maria Mena, the original lyrics are kept, but the rhythm becomes slower, and hence more solemn. While singing, Mena has a serious expression. Soon, the choir joins her, re-

38 Hjarvard 2011, 121.

39 Hjarvard 2011, 132.

40 Almond/Appleby/Sivan 2003.

41 Lundmark 2023, 44; Hjarvard 2012, 34.

42 See e.g. Bangstad 2011.

peating the line “Until we meet again!”, possibly gesturing towards a post-mortem future, which contrasts with the fully secular demythologization of Tryggeseid’s sermon.

On the one hand, Scandinavian society is often described as focused on the present, enjoying earthly life without much contemplation of an afterlife.⁴³ Even the titular expression *Takk for alt* (thanks for everything), used at funerals and written on graves in Norway, focuses on gratitude for the earthly life of the deceased rather than their present or future state. The phrase *Hvil i fred*, known in English speaking countries as “Rest in Peace”, is rare as an epitaph, although the English term (including its contracted form “RIP”) has entered Norwegian popular discourse, referring to something that has failed. A Norwegian funeral, which often features speeches commemorating the life of the deceased, serves more as a culmination and commemoration of the deceased’s earthly life than as a reflection on what happens to their soul. On the other hand, the line “Until we meet again!” sung by the choir seems to gesture beyond the immanent frame. However, belief in the existence of an afterlife can persist in the absence of belief in God, and in Norway such beliefs may differ markedly from traditional Christian forms.⁴⁴

The choir supports Mena in singing, but then Snorre Monsson also enters the stage, shocking the audience with rapping, wild screams and barking. Near the end of the performance, he addresses the audience in English: “Does anyone have a lighter? Get your lighters up! I know it’s a funeral but put your hands up!” His use of English can be interpreted as maintaining linguistic continuity with an English-language song, or perhaps it emphasizes the artificiality of the spectacle, detachment from the ritual conducted in Norwegian, and a shift to the mode of a popular music concert. Monsson encourages the congregation to clap and raise their hands, preferably holding lighters, as they would at a secular concert. In response, they not only follow his instructions, but also begin taking videos with smartphones, smiling and laughing as if they are participating in an entertainment spectacle. This shift aligns with Henrik Christensen’s account of the collapse of conventions associated with contexts and genres in hyper-linked streaming culture: “Late Modern culture is a hyper-culture: everything can become culture if it is found attractive and valorized by an audience. [...] choosing to play pop music in church is just as natural (and more telling of the deceased)

43 Zuckerman 2008.

44 Gustavsson 2015, 230.

than an old hymn.”⁴⁵ While the performance of “What Does the Fox Say?” at a funeral remains incongruous, and hence humorous, by personalizing the content of the event to evoke the deceased’s individuality, the song fits with Nordic funerary trends, if in exaggerated form.

Christian references also appear at the end of each episode, although in less sharply satirical form than in the earlier songs and parodies, and they hold out the possibility of an afterlife. The closure of the ceremony is similar across all three episodes – the celebrity stands up from the coffin, greets some guests, and then leaves the church. The moment of departure in each episode is described by Morten Ramm using different words, yet each expression refers to Christian beliefs: Bård Ylvisåker is to “walk into the kingdom of heaven” (*spasere inn i himmelriket*), Petter Northug to “step into eternity” (*gå ut i evigheten*), and Linn Skåber to “go out and into the light” (*gå ut og inn i lyset*). The final shot in each episode is the exiting of the relevant celebrity through the church door, followed by the camera panning upwards to the window and the sky beyond, which can be interpreted as a reference to heaven (*himmel* means both “sky” and “heaven” in Norwegian).

The solemn tone breaks only in the third episode, when Skåber, instead of leaving the church in silence, shouts to the camera: “Now it’s beer at Cafe 33 and a celebration of life!” Chris Miller and Lori G. Beaman propose that scholars sometimes oversimplify non-religious imaginaries, as with Cicirelli’s assertion that as non-religious people lack a belief in “a heavenly paradise waiting after death”, they must aim to create “a paradise on earth”.⁴⁶ Skåber’s statement, while potentially an interesting and subversive expression of a focus on life, could also be interpreted as an oversimplification that fails to capture the full spectrum of beliefs held by nonbelievers. Following Taylor, it can also be read as an exercise in disenchantment, by turning away from the existential threat of death and warding off the religious imagination.

Parodies of Social Conventions and Status Competition

A prominent theme throughout TFA is the satirical take on social conventions and especially status competition, exemplified in Morten Ramm’s opening speech in the first episode. He addresses “all other celebrities who

45 Christensen 2023, 92.

46 Miller/Beaman 2024, 4.

maybe did not know Bård well enough but are here to be able to say that they were present when Bård was buried”, referencing their use of the “funeral” as a publicity event.

Dis(respect)ing the Dead and Mocking Grief

In his study of bereaved people, Cyril Schafer observes, “participants frequently emphasized the intimacy of a relationship before death as an obvious measure of entitlement to post-mortem participation. Those who had a tenuous or strained relationship with the dead individual were represented as having limited (or no) right to participate in funeral arrangement or attendance.”⁴⁷ In TFA, however, open rivals of the dead give speeches, contradicting any assumption that speakers at funerals must have (or at least can claim) a positive connection with the deceased.⁴⁸ For example, in TAKK FOR ALT, PETTER NORTHUG, Northug’s Swedish rival Calle Halfvarsson states spitefully, “When a person dies at a young age, it feels very wrong. It doesn’t feel that way with you.”

Iva Svačinová has defined a funeral gathering as “a group of grieving bereaved who experience emotional distress, and they typically perceive the death of the deceased as a negative, unfortunate situation that arouses confusion and grief”.⁴⁹ In TFA, contrary emotions are expressed, and the symptoms of grief are parodied. Thus, Ylvisåker’s brother uses an onion to bring on tears, while Ylvisåker’s wife misses the ceremony altogether, having already left him for a new lover and a holiday abroad; Northug’s rivals express happiness at his death, and even his father shows no sign of sadness and instead jokes about his son; Skåber’s stepdaughter’s song repeatedly emphasizes that she neither considers Skåber her a mother nor mourns her loss.

In a speech in TAKK FOR ALT, LINN SKÅBER, Christian Skolmen distinguishes celebrities as more or less outstanding, calling Skåber an “A-list” celebrity (*en A-kjendis*), hard to replace as a neighbour in the celebrity apartment complex in Grünerløkka. He adds that his attitude has nothing to do with cultural snobbery or vanity and is only about market value. While not attacking Skåber’s reputation, he does refer to her mostly in terms of her conferring

47 Schafer 2012, 314.

48 Svačinová 2024, 296.

49 Svačinová 2024, 296.

status on him, and he swiftly moves on to list his wife's achievements while ignoring Skåber. Contradicting Skolmen but denigrating Skåber, Ramm describes her as a lower-class celebrity, saying, "it was not the cultural elite who were closest to Linn when it came to celebrities". Such posturing, point scoring and status claiming can be interpreted as a parody of the Norwegian celebrity scene.

Wreaths and Producing Social Relations

In each episode, a wreath is placed next to the celebrity's coffin, and the accompanying text is read out, reflecting contemporary social practice. As Christensen argues, "flowers are not only a *sine qua non* in funerals but are also used to make them more personal and to produce and reproduce social relations".⁵⁰ In TAKK FOR ALT, BÅRD YLVISÅKER, a fox-shaped wreath is placed in front of Ylvisåker's coffin, referencing "What Does the Fox Say?" and serving as a clear and humorous way to personalize the church's scenography. According to Christensen, funeral flowers "tell us something about the relationships between the deceased and various participants".⁵¹

Normatively, wreaths favourably represent the deceased and display the esteem and affection of mourners. However, in TFA just one modest wreath whose cost is shared by many people and organizations is used to invert these norms, showing a lack of generosity and respect for the deceased. Similarly, Ylvisåker's wreath, given by his mother, reads only a minimal "Goodbye, Bård". The texts on Northug's wreaths highlight his substance abuse and sexual promiscuity, while Skåber receives a wreath from the artist Samsaya, on which, instead of a message, is a URL linking to a song on Spotify, placing Samsaya not Skåber centre stage.

In this context, wreaths function as symbolic devices that blend elements of satire and hyperbole, subverting audience expectations through provocation. Christensen notes that "flowers oscillate between their material and symbolic features, being both objects that need to be handled and symbols that produce meaning and relations".⁵² In TFA, the texts placed on the wreaths are rooted in the Norwegian social context and make new meanings around situations and themes that are widely known. Moreover,

50 Christensen 2023, 90.

51 Christensen 2023, 92.

52 Christensen 2023, 91–92.

they also create symbolic relationships (often also as a part of parody), as for example between Bård Ylvisåker and Team Ingebrigtsen, who presents a wreath with emojis instead of text. The aim seems to be to satirize social conventions by exaggerating existing trends.

Discussion

Our reading of TFA suggests that it is not religion that is the primary target of the satire of its comedy, but rather the mores of Norwegian entertainment culture. Religion provides the set and props, which the performers feel free to use without fear of ecclesiastical backlash or public reproach. This attitude is consistent with Taylor's account of religion's marginalization in North Atlantic cultures, as religious institutions and symbols are hollowed of religious content and used to convey secular meanings, and it resonates with Hjarvard's secularization-through-mediatization perspective. This finding contradicts Hypothesis 1 and favours Hypothesis 2: the secular imaginary does not need to put religion down, at least not Lutheran Christianity, for it has already taken its place as a cultural resource and is not a cultural threat to secular autonomy. Yet, the evidence for the ongoing influence of conservative Christianity in Southern Norway and the recency of its wider cultural influence – with more than a quarter of the population having a literal belief in Hell in 1985 – suggest that the rejection of Hypothesis 1 requires nuancing. Performed in Oslo, Hypothesis 1 wins over Hypothesis 2; watched in Kristiansand, the meaning might shift.

Perhaps the deviation from Taylor reflects a difference between Nordic and North American (especially US) contexts with respect to the political salience of religion. Secular space needs to be defended against Christian incursions in the US in a way that it does not, for the most part, in Norway, and this disparity has become far more evident in the years since *A Secular Age's* publication in 2007. Taylor's emphasis on what we have termed the cultural work of language is not therefore now wrong: the work of buffering and shoring up individual worldviews against magical thinking continues⁵³ and in some contexts is part of wider social contention,⁵⁴ but it is not the work of popular satire in most contexts in Norway. Entertainment culture – and the secular taboo on discussion of death – are far more important targets.

53 Herbert/Bullock 2020.

54 Fisher-Høyrem/Herbert 2019.

So, we turn to our second research question – what kind of social imaginary is performed by TFA? And especially, what can we learn about non-religious negotiation of death and the construction and contestation of social order in Norwegian popular culture from engaging with this show? First, while secular assumptions dominate, gestures beyond the immanent frame are also present, at least in episodes 1 and 2, both in the words used at the end of Ramm’s and Ylvisåker’s “funerals” and in the shot panning skywards. These final scenes in each episode gesture towards a more agnostic and contemplative mode, the brief seriousness undercut only in the third episode, by Skåber’s call to join her at a bar. In line with other evidence on the post-Christian and liberal Lutheran⁵⁵ negotiation of death, these gestures towards transcendence persist at the fringes of dominant secular frames (remembering and celebrating the life of the departed) and tend towards the non-specific, while the darker side of Christian death beliefs is dispensed with entirely (Hell recedes or is reinterpreted immanently). In line with liberal Lutheran and secular trends, memorialization is highly personalized.

And so we arrive at the main satirical target of TFA – Norwegian celebrity culture. The series parodies a Norwegian celebrity culture portrayed as status-obsessed and characterized by shallow transactional relationships, disloyalty and narcissistic self-regard. True, the outward form of the funeral remains recognizably Christian, and specifically Lutheran, a point underscored by the social media response arguing that the satire would not work if it was transposed to a humanist ritual, because Lutheranism is what most Norwegians are familiar with.⁵⁶ The comedy, however, plays on the shallowness of this familiarity, as the mock officiants feign to stumble through their lines and roles in a comedic nod to popular ignorance, and the object of mockery is not the religious ritual but rather the performers themselves, who send themselves up as representatives of Norwegian celebrity culture – hence the content of the main funeral orations, criticizing the deceased’s poor character, avarice, addictions and fractured relationships.

Does the series then tell us anything about how non-religious Norwegians navigate existential challenges? The comedic form provides the first clue: in the face of the unease caused by the existential threat of death,

55 Repstad 2019.

56 Diskutopia, 2025.

humour provides a release for anxiety and an opportunity to open an infrequently addressed topic to public scrutiny and debate. Here lies the rationale given by Ramm in interviews after the broadcast and echoed on social media⁵⁷ – death, not religion, remains something of a taboo in Norwegian society, and therefore comedy can seek to break down the barriers to open public discussion. It is this secular taboo, rather than religion, that TFA is designed to challenge.

Conclusion

Reading TFA alongside Taylor has been productive for recognizing the variety of the predominantly secular social imaginaries that the North Atlantic world has spawned. It also provides insight into the power dynamics of Norwegian popular culture (celebrities trump religion, and so are the chief target of social satire even when dressed as priests) and the Norwegian navigation of death, which remains taboo and not fully secular, and is navigated using ancient practices that have largely lost their meaning but are still vaguely familiar to most participants in death-related ceremonies.

Reading with Taylor – because of his emphasis on the construction of the social world in everyday language and performance – was used to unsettle sociological (and more broadly modern social science and indeed post-Enlightenment⁵⁸) assumptions about the steady if incremental advance of secularity. In Taylor's account, secular imaginaries need to be constantly defended by routine, by banal practices such as jokes about religion,⁵⁹ and doing so may open new ways of reading cultural phenomena, such as TFA. In this account, disenchantment is a temporal (and perhaps temporary) phenomenon created by specific historical and cultural conditions within North Atlantic cultures. However, in Norway, despite historical rooting in a common Lutheran culture, secularity's dominance of popular culture is mostly stable and unchallenged – unlike in the US, the threat is largely confined to one part of the country. Lutheranism does not need to be kept down: its subordination is assured, though other strong religions present local and regional challenges. Taylor's disciplines of disenchantment are

57 Diskutopia, 2025; Løland/Horsinek 2023.

58 See Casanova 1994.

59 Taylor 2007, 28.

practised and his conceptual framework, when combined with a concept of cultural work, can provide rich insight into cultural dynamics on both sides of the Atlantic – even though the cultural fields in which they operate are significantly different.

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Filmography

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Life after Death

Shi'i Martyrdom Narratives on Instagram

Abstract

Martyrdom holds an important position in Shi'i Islam, deeply embedded in the historical and theological fabric of the faith. This concept is epitomised by the killing of the Prophet's grandson Husayn – his martyrdom transcends its historical occurrence to serve as a profound symbol of ultimate sacrifice for truth, justice, and resistance against oppression. It resonates throughout Shi'i theology, shaping the community's identity and religious practices. Historical narratives are continuously reinterpreted and retransmitted, influencing contemporary beliefs and practices, including those in digital spaces. When a significant Shi'i figure dies or is martyred, Instagram becomes a key platform for expression, as it is flooded with images of the individual alongside historical figures from early Shi'i Islamic history – primarily Shi'i Imams. This research explores how social media, particularly Instagram, serves as a medium for the reinterpretation of historical narratives. Through the analysis of such posts, the study examines the innovative use of sacred figures and the dynamic connections between past and present events, revealing how digital platforms reimagine and propagate Shi'i martyrdom narratives in the contemporary era.

Keywords

Digital Religion, Martyrdom, Death, Shi'i Islam, Islamic History, Early Islam, Iran, Azerbaijan

Biography

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Introduction

Martyrdom holds a profound significance in Islamic theology, where martyrs are considered not dead but instead alive in the presence of God, enjoying a high and honoured status. Martyrdom is conceived as the ultimate act of sacrifice, through which the believer transcends the limits of worldly existence in pursuit of divine justice and truth. The Qur'anic portrayal of martyrs emphasises their eternal life and proximity to divine mercy, with the belief that they are granted direct entry into paradise. This concept finds greater elaboration in Shi'i thought, where martyrdom is not only revered but also central to religious narratives, especially as framed by Imam Ḥusayn's sacrifice at Karbala.¹ Martyrdom narratives have historically served as a means of inspiration, identity formation, and communal solidarity within Shi'i communities.²

In the contemporary era, with the proliferation of digital and social media platforms, these martyrdom narratives are undergoing significant reinterpretation and dissemination. Instagram, in particular, has emerged as a potent space for Shi'i Muslims to engage with, reimagine, and share these narratives. In this article I argue that Instagram has become a critical field for Shi'i Muslims to reinterpret the notions of martyrdom and death, and these reinterpretations are especially pronounced in the visual representations of martyrs³ and their depiction along with key Shi'i theological figures, such as the Infallible Imams.⁴

- 1 The martyrdom of Imam Ḥusayn ibn 'Alī, grandson of the Prophet Muḥammad, at the Battle of Karbalā' in 680 CE is regarded as the paradigmatic tragedy in Shi'i Islam. Standing against the Umayyad caliph Yazid, whom he denounced as a tyrant, Ḥusayn was killed together with his male family members and companions, while the women and children of his household were taken captive. His death, which occurred on 'Āshūrā', the tenth day of Muḥarram, came to symbolise the perpetual struggle against oppression and injustice. Each year, this event is ritually re-lived through mourning ceremonies, passion plays, and processions, culminating forty days later on Arba'īn, marked by one of the world's largest annual pilgrimages, to Karbalā', where Ḥusayn's shrine is located. See Aghaie 2004.
- 2 Halm 1997; Fischer 2003; Aghaie 2004; Tahiev 2025b.
- 3 While this article refers to specific political or military figures as *martyrs*, this usage reflects the terminology and symbolic framework employed within the official discourse of the studied contexts, namely the Islamic Republic of Iran and Azerbaijan. It does not imply endorsement of this characterisation by the author.
- 4 In Shi'ism, the Infallible Imams are a line of divinely appointed leaders, beginning with Imam 'Alī and continuing through his descendants, who are believed to possess

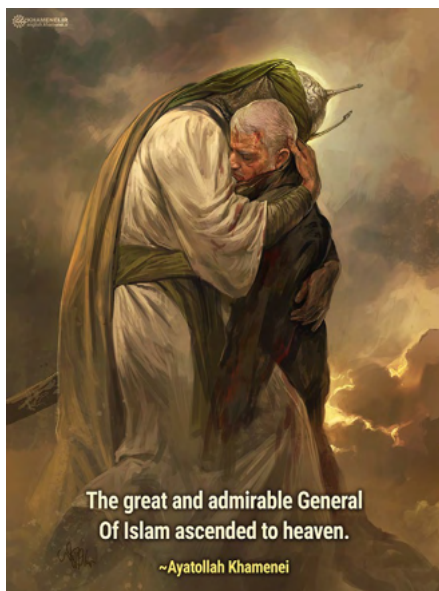


Fig. 1: Image of Qasem Soleimani being embraced by Imam Husayn, published on the official website of Grand Ayatollah Ali Khamenei on 4 January 2020, <https://t1p.de/luqii> [accessed 23 January 2025].

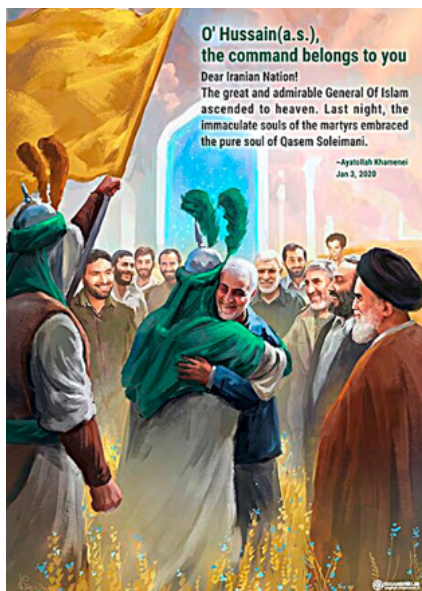


Fig. 2: Image of Qasem Soleimani being welcomed into the eternal circle of martyrs and leaders, including Ayatollah Khomeini, published on the official website of Grand Ayatollah Ali Khamenei on 5 January 2020, <https://t1p.de/h9zcx> [accessed 23 January 2025].

One striking example of this trend is provided by the viral images published by Ayatollah Khamenei's official website following the death of Qasem Soleimani (1957–2020). In these images (see figs. 1 and 2), Soleimani is depicted being embraced by Imam Husayn (626–680) and welcomed into the eternal circle of martyrs and leaders associated with the Islamic Republic of Iran, including Ayatollah Khomeini. This visual narrative, rich in symbolism, was widely circulated and resonated deeply within the Shi'i digital community, illustrating the growing significance of visual media in reshaping theological concepts. Such imagery further politicises sacred narratives by depicting contemporary political or military figures alongside revered holy figures from Shi'i sacred history.

In this study I examine such visual and narrative shifts by analysing Instagram posts that highlight contemporary martyrs and their connection to

perfect knowledge, moral purity, and spiritual authority, serving as the rightful successors of the Prophet Muḥammad. See Halm 1997.

the Shi'i doctrine of martyrdom. Through these posts, the notion of martyrs ascending into the eternal world is visually enriched by incorporating depictions of other martyrs and the Infallible Imams. By investigating such cases through examples from Iran and Azerbaijan, this article explores how Shi'i martyrdom narratives are being dynamically reinterpreted in the digital age and located in contemporary political, religious, and social contexts.

Digital Shi'ism and the Visual Politics of Martyrdom

In recent years, Shi'ism's presence in the digital sphere has expanded significantly, reflecting broader trends in online religious engagement. This digital transformation has provided Shi'i Muslims with new platforms to articulate their faith, engage in theological discourse, and build global communities.⁵

Shi'i Islam's presence on Instagram reflects the broader trend of using social media platforms to explore and express religious identity in contemporary contexts. Scholarly research on Shi'ism on Instagram has focused primarily on religious scholars' online presence, pilgrimage practices, and the role of Instagram in the reproduction of religious culture among Shi'i Muslims, particularly youth.⁶ The commemoration of martyrdom, particularly during the month of Muḥarram, plays a crucial role in the religious life of Shi'i Muslims. Mourning rituals, including recitations, processions, and reenactments of the Karbalā' tragedy, not only honour the sacrifices made by Ḥusayn and his followers, but also reinforce the values of justice, patience, and resistance against tyranny. These practices foster a collective memory that binds the Shi'i community across time and space. Due to its scale, this area of study has attracted considerable scholarly attention within the field of Digital Shi'ism.⁷

Farah Hasan argues that the visual content produced by Muslims on Instagram constitutes a broad yet distinct field.⁸ Given the centrality of martyrdom narratives in Shi'i theology, I find such Shi'i-produced content as a distinct expression within this broader field. Alireza Taherifard, in his study of the online visual culture of the revolutionary youth in Iran, asserts

5 Kalinock 2006, 6.

6 Jafari/Yavar/Hashemi 2020; Rahimi 2022, 228; Tahiev 2025a, 4.

7 Rahimi/Amin 2020; Sparey 2022.

8 Hasan 2022, 10.

that the online culture of Shi'i Iranians remains an underexplored research area due to the limited scope of published studies on internet platforms and religiosity in Iran.⁹ This observation applies equally to studies of Shi'ism on Instagram in general.¹⁰

Even less attention has been given to how Shi'i history itself is visually (re)interpreted on Instagram, especially through the idiom of martyrdom. When a prominent Shi'i figure dies, Instagram becomes a key platform for expression, with images of the deceased accompanied by religious texts, prayers, and messages of mourning. A particularly intriguing trend is the recent phenomenon of depicting contemporary martyrs alongside historical figures from early Shi'i Islamic history, primarily Shi'i Imams.

To understand these Instagram practices, it is necessary to place them within the broader genealogy of religious symbolism in modern Shi'i politics. Scholars have shown how the Islamic Republic of Iran has consistently mobilised Shi'i symbols for political purposes.¹¹ Even before 1979, opposition to the Pahlavi monarchy was framed through the language of Karbalā': protesters equated the Shah with Yazīd and themselves with Imam Ḥusayn's companions, casting revolt as a religious duty.¹² After the Revolution, this symbolic logic intensified.

During the Iran–Iraq War (1980–1988), what scholars have called the “Karbalā' paradigm”¹³ emerged: state institutions and religious leaders invoked the imagery of Ḥusayn's martyrdom to sacralise participation in war.¹⁴ Within this framework, soldiers were represented as Ḥusayn's companions, and dying in battle was discursively redefined as the highest form of martyrdom.¹⁵ Visual culture became a key medium for constructing and circulating this state-sanctioned narrative of sacrifice. Wartime posters frequently juxtaposed anonymous Iranian soldiers with the veiled figure of Imam Ḥusayn, inscribing their sacrifice into a Shi'i narrative of salvation. As Gruber argues, soldiers were “heralded as dramatic and selfless latter-day saints and neo-Husayns” and promised redemption in the afterlife through

9 Taherifard 2022, 6.

10 Tahiev 2025a, 4.

11 Aghaie 2004; Fischer 2003.

12 Nematollahi Mahani 2014, 174.

13 Saramifar 2021, 690.

14 Nematollahi Mahani 2014, 172.

15 Asadzade 2019; Rezamand 2011.

their sacrifice.¹⁶ This visual grammar of martyrdom positioned anonymous soldiers as contemporary extensions of Ḥusayn.

What is striking in the contemporary context, however, is a shift from the anonymous martyr to the named figure. Where war posters tended to depict generalised or faceless soldiers alongside Imam Ḥusayn, Instagram posts today often feature recognisable individuals. This personalisation signals a change in how some Shi'i communities digitally reinterpret their history: martyrdom is no longer a collective, anonymous category; it has become a visually curated narrative in which specific contemporary figures are woven into the sacred genealogy of Karbalā'.

Method

This article adopts a qualitative case study approach to analyse existing Instagram martyrdom narratives and their interpretation. The research data were sourced from relevant Instagram posts, with the primary objective of identifying such content. Given the vast array of images available on Instagram, hashtags were employed as a filtering tool. These hashtags, selected by users when posting content, link posts to others with the same tags, thereby facilitating the discovery of related material.¹⁷ My initial selection of hashtags was broad and was subsequently distilled down to use in posts that already featured narratives related to the martyrdom of significant Shi'i personalities. Many of these posts referenced general religious or denominational themes (e.g., #martyrs, #muslims, #shia, #imamhussain), specific contemporary figures (e.g., #qasemsoleimani, #hassannasralla, #brahimraisi, #poladhashimov), or their associated homelands and organisations (e.g., #iran, #hezbollah, #azerbaijan). Some hashtags appeared with varying spellings (e.g., #nasralla, #nasrallah) and in different languages, primarily Arabic and Farsi. Given the millions of posts associated with these hashtags, an automated search for depictions of martyrs alongside Imams was impractical. Consequently, after relevant posts had been identified manually, I adopted a qualitative approach, which was deemed the most effective method.

The case-study method is particularly useful for examining aspects of a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context. Instagram posts are

16 Gruber 2009, 685.

17 Hasan 2022, 10.

defined here as a form of visual imagery, and the article employs Terence Wright's three approaches to reading photographs: "looking *through*", "looking *at*", and "looking *behind*".¹⁸ "Looking *through*" the posts engages with their internal narratives, interpreting the symbolic, spiritual, or affective meanings embedded within the image itself. "Looking *at*" the posts emphasises their materiality and immediate visual impact, addressing the internal narrative in terms of composition, colour, and form. "Looking *behind*" the posts relates to their external narratives, situating the image within broader social, historical, and cultural contexts and examining the networked conditions that shape its production and reception. Together, these approaches reveal how digital visual objects carry layered meanings that combine self-representing qualities with interpretive frameworks provided by users and society.

Given the study's focus on spaces constructed through online images, an embodied-spatial approach was also employed.¹⁹ It allowed for a systematic exploration of how images, symbols, and visual elements in Instagram posts convey meaning, particularly regarding the martyr's "life after death". In this study, this approach includes analysing depictions of ritualised bodies, examining how Imams' and contemporary figures' bodily postures, gestures, and expressions in posts communicate specific messages or emotions; sacred spaces, focusing on the physical settings portrayed and their relationship to users' identities and conveyed messages; and sensory elements, investigating how posts evoke the physical and sensory dimensions of martyrdom traditions.

In line with ethical research practices, I have anonymised portions of my dataset that involve contentious figures such as members the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, given the potential risks of surveillance, harassment, or legal repercussions for users. I have additionally done so to avoid sharing material from organisations designated as banned or terrorist in certain jurisdictions. In the case of posts featuring Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi, I have anonymised the posts but retained the images, given the importance of their visual content and the fact that some were widely reposted. Therefore, they remain non-identifiable even when the image is provided. For commemorative posts related to Azerbaijani military officials, I provide proper citations. A more detailed discussion of my methodological

18 Wright 1999, 38.

19 Taherifard 2022, 6.

approach to working with publicly available Instagram posts on Shi‘ism, and its attendant complications, is available elsewhere.²⁰

“Martyrs Never Die”

Martyrdom holds a central and revered position in Shi‘i Islam, deeply embedded in the historical and theological framework of the faith. Its prevalence within the family of the Prophet is summarised by David Cook, who writes: “Beyond the martyrdoms of ‘Alī and al-Ḥusayn, the history of the family of the Prophet Muḥammad is one of martyrdom.”²¹ This concept finds its most profound expression in the death of the Prophet’s grandson Ḥusayn, who is honoured with the title *Sayyid al-Shuhadā’* (Master of Martyrs). In Shi‘i theology, his martyrdom transcends the historical event and serves as a profound symbol of ultimate sacrifice for truth, justice, and resistance against oppression. Beginning in the latter half of the twentieth century, this narrative was increasingly employed within Iranian political discourse to sacralise revolutionary struggle and state power.²² This shift is crucial for understanding how contemporary Shi‘i visual culture came to depict modern political figures alongside sacred ones, effectively merging theological symbolism with political legitimacy.

The concept of martyrdom in Shi‘i Islam transcends individual experience to become a collective phenomenon that unites the community through shared grief and remembrance. Tareq Ayoub explores this dynamic in light of grief. He asserts that rituals of mourning transform death from an individual occurrence into a communal phenomenon, emphasising that “death becomes a collective feat”. This shared experience of grief creates a “continuous presentness of dying” that links the temporal past with the affective present. Rituals of remembrance, particularly those observed during Muḥarram, illustrate this communal continuity, as they invoke collective emotions and sustain the Shi‘i identity.²³

Discussing Muḥarram processions in physical and digital spaces, Rhys Sparey highlights their role in unifying the personal and collective dimen-

20 Tahiev 2026.

21 Cook 2007, 59.

22 Aghaie 2004; Fischer 2003.

23 Ayoub 2023, 10.

sions of martyrdom. He describes the *matamdārān* (participants in mourning ceremonies) as performing “a politically charged religious emotionality” informed by their personal experience as Shi‘i Muslims. This emotionality allows them to empathise with Ḥusayn’s martyrdom while simultaneously demonstrating their commitment to God. Yet these practices defy simple categorisation, eluding dichotomies such as religious versus political, personal versus collective, and sacred versus secular.²⁴

The oxymoronic nature of martyrdom celebrations is reflected in the idea that “martyrs never die”. This paradox is amplified by the politicisation of Shi‘i Islam in the latter half of the twentieth century, when the notion “Every day is Ashura, every place is Karbala”²⁵ began to take on political connotations. The narrative became a powerful tool for various groups, framing contemporary struggles as extensions of Karbala’s ethos. In today’s digital age, the martyrdom narratives have found new expressions. When a significant Shi‘i figure dies, online platforms are inundated with images of the deceased adorned with religious symbolism, prayers for their soul, and visual representations of their likeness alongside historical figures from early Shi‘i history, primarily the Imams. This visual and textual blending underscores the continuity of the martyrdom narrative.

Martyrs “meeting” the Imam

In this section, I will examine Instagram posts featuring contemporary figures alongside Holy Imams and how such imagery encapsulates the profound theological meaning of martyrdom, specifically the notion of “life after death”.

Qasem Soleimani

The image captures an emotional and symbolic moment in which two figures embrace: Imam Ḥusayn and Qasem Soleimani, the former commander

24 Sparey 2022, 292.

25 This phrase reflects the ongoing and universal struggle between justice and oppression, as embodied by Imam Ḥusayn at Karbala. It emphasises that Ashura, the day of Husayn’s martyrdom, and Karbala, the site of his sacrifice, are not confined to a specific time or place, and that the values of resistance, sacrifice, and standing for truth are timeless. Such interpretation and usage of this phrase can be seen in many of Ayatollah Khomeini’s statements. See Khomeini n.d.

of Iran's Quds Force, who was killed in Iraq by a U.S. drone strike on 3 January 2020. The visual elements of the image, including dramatic lighting, traditional attire, and the expressions of the figures, convey a profound sense of spiritual connection and mourning. Soleimani's death was a significant event that heightened tensions between Iran and the United States. Following his assassination, Iranian media widely portrayed him as a martyr. The official website of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei published the illustration showing Soleimani being embraced by a figure symbolising Imam Ḥusayn (see fig. 1). The same image was subsequently disseminated widely across social media platforms and reshared by numerous accounts on Instagram.

The internal narrative of Soleimani's embrace with Imam Ḥusayn communicates divine acceptance through colour, gesture, and luminosity. From an embodied-spatial perspective, the upward gaze and gestures of embrace position the viewer as a participant in the act of witnessing martyrdom, collapsing physical and digital sacred space. Looking *through* the image, we perceive a vision of the martyr's eternal life; looking *at* it, the interplay of light and shadow dramatises transcendence; and looking *behind* it, the image participates in the visual culture of Iranian revolutionary martyrdom. Externally, it resonates with Iran's revolutionary semiotics of martyrdom, where state media construct visual continuity between the Karbalā' archetype and modern political sacrifice.

Beyond this image, the official website of Khamenei, numerous social media users, messaging platforms, and the Iranian newspaper Resalat circulated another widely popular image, in which Soleimani is depicted being welcomed into Heaven by both Imam Ḥusayn and Ayatollah Khomeini (see fig. 2).²⁶

The depiction of Qasem Soleimani being embraced by Imam Ḥusayn was among the first of the widely circulated representations on social media of the revered Shi'i Islamic figure alongside a contemporary political leader and was, arguably, the most successful. The symbolism of Imam Ḥusayn embracing Soleimani reflects a narrative of martyrdom, sacrifice, and divine acceptance. Imam Ḥusayn, representing resistance against oppression and the ultimate sacrifice for justice, is thus actively politicised and placed at the core of the concept of resistance, aligned with the way Soleimani was portrayed by Iranian and other popular Shi'i media following his death.

26 Anon 2020.

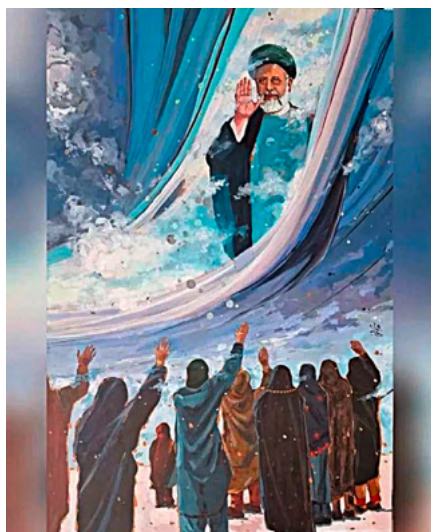


Fig. 3: Instagram post (anonymised) with Raisi [accessed 21 January 2025].

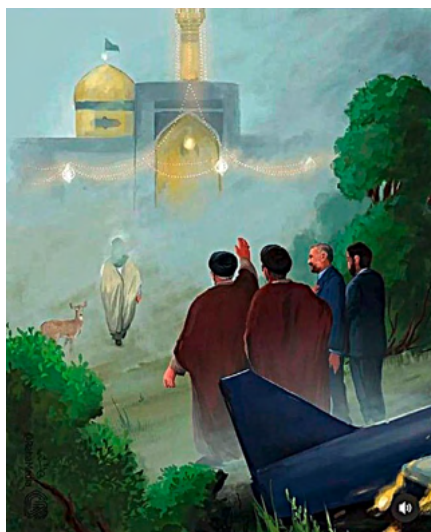


Fig. 4: Instagram Post (anonymised) with Imam Reza and Raisi [accessed 21 January 2025].

Ebrahim Raisi

On 19 May 2024, Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi, Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, and six other individuals were killed when their helicopter crashed near the village of Uzi in East Azerbaijan province. The crash occurred under adverse weather conditions, which were identified as the primary cause of the accident. Investigations found no evidence of foul play or sabotage, and foreign officials and Iranian state television reported that the crash resulted from challenging climatic and atmospheric conditions.²⁷

Despite the circumstances of his death, Raisi was widely honoured as a martyr within Iranian state narratives and public discourse. His death was framed as a sacrifice in service of the nation, with many official tributes portraying him as a figure who had ascended to a higher spiritual status, aligning with the state's tradition of venerating fallen leaders as martyrs. An example of this portrayal can be seen in an Instagram post (see fig. 3) featuring a mural or painting depicting a group of people, primarily women in traditional attire, raising their hands in reverence towards an image of Raisi

²⁷ Anon 2024.

emerging from the clouds. He is shown waving, symbolising his departure and transition to the afterlife. The celestial background, with flowing fabric-like elements, suggests a spiritual ascension, which accords with themes of martyrdom and divine acceptance.

By looking *through* the Raisi mural, we can access the imagined heavenly transition; looking *at* it draws attention to the upward motion and celestial tonality. Symbolically, the image reinforces Raisi's portrayal as a revered figure who has ascended to a higher realm. This artistic tribute reflects themes of collective mourning, admiration, and belief in the eternal legacy of leaders within Iran's religious-political framework. The caption of the Instagram post includes hashtags in Farsi and Arabic such as #شهید_رئسی (#martyr_raisi) and #خادم_الرضا (#servant_of_reza). The latter hashtag is particularly noteworthy as it refers to Imam 'Alī b. Mūsā al-Riḍā (Imam Reza, 766–818)²⁸ and establishes connections between Raisi and this revered Imam, even to the extent of suggesting that Imam Reza welcomed Raisi after his death.

Another Instagram post (see fig. 4) features a group of men standing near the wreckage of a helicopter and gazing towards the illuminated shrine of Imam Reza. The shrine, located in Mashhad, Iran, is a significant pilgrimage site in Shi'i Islam. A figure dressed in white, representing Imam Reza, is seen walking from the shrine towards Raisi, Amir-Abdollahian, and others who perished in the crash, seemingly welcoming them. Imam Reza's face, as with artistic depictions of Imam Ḥusayn, is not revealed; instead, it is covered with a shadow. However, it is clear that the figure represents Imam Reza, as he is depicted alongside a gazelle, a well-known symbol associated with the Imam's miracles and compassion in Islamic tradition. This association has earned Imam Reza the title *Ḍāmin-i Āhū* (The Guarantor of the Gazelle) in regions such as Iran and the Indian subcontinent.

In both depictions the spatial arrangement of the crowd beneath Raisi's image and the Imam figure emerging from the clouds construct a vertical hierarchy of sanctity, translating theological ascent into visual form.

The presence of the shrine implies a spiritual journey, symbolising Raisi and his companions being welcomed into the afterlife under the protection of Imam Reza. The misty atmosphere adds an ethereal and otherworldly

28 'Alī b. Mūsā al-Riḍā, the eighth Imam in Twelver Shi'ism, is a central figure in Shi'i theology and devotional practice. His shrine, located in Mashhad, Iran, has become one of the most important pilgrimage sites in the Shi'i world. See Britannica Editors n. d.

tone, reinforcing themes of divine acceptance and martyrdom. The caption, which includes phrases such as *Labbaik Ya Imam-e-Raza* (Here I am, O Imam Reza), reflects a sense of devotion and submission, emphasising the belief that Raisi's passing was a transition to a higher spiritual state. The artistic composition blends political and religious symbolism, portraying Raisi not just as a leader but also as a figure who achieved spiritual elevation through his service and sacrifice. Ebrahim Raisi's connection to Imam Reza is both religiously and politically significant. Raisi held key positions within Iran's religious institutions, most notably as the head of Astan Quds Razavi, the organisation responsible for managing the shrine of Imam Reza in Mashhad.²⁹ This role placed him at the centre of the religious and economic activities surrounding the Imam's legacy, which holds immense importance for Shi'i Muslims. Raisi's leadership of this institution solidified his association with Imam Reza, which in turn reinforced his standing within the clerical establishment and shaped his political career. Ebrahim Raisi was buried at the shrine of Imam Reza in Mashhad.³⁰

Polad Hashimov (1975–2020)

While the individuals already discussed here and the topic of Iranian state discourse are well-known and have been researched, the case of Azerbaijani Shi'ism has not yet received such attention, particularly in academic research. Yet this case is significant because it illuminates how Iranian religious-political symbolism is received and recontextualised beyond Iran's borders, revealing the transnational dimensions of Shi'i visual culture and the diverse ways in which sacred imagery acquires political meaning. In the earlier cases, the martyr figures were Iranian and their Shi'i identity was strongly highlighted. The situation in Azerbaijan is different, with appeals to Shi'i identity relatively rare, especially from the state's perspective. Before exploring this contrast in detail, let us examine an Instagram post related to this case.

The post (see fig. 5) depicts a figure in white, symbolising Imam Ḥusayn, embracing General Polad Hashimov and thus proposes a profound spiritual connection between historical and contemporary figures of martyrdom. With Imam Ḥusayn widely revered as the Master of Martyrs, this depiction

29 Zeidan 2025.

30 Gritten 2024.

The illustration conveys that these modern-day heroes have achieved the highest spiritual honour by following the path of Ḥusayn, embodying values of bravery, loyalty, and unwavering faith. It symbolises their entry into a place of divine acceptance and eternal rest, while the solemn expressions of the soldiers reflect the deep emotional connection to their cause. The text in Azerbaijani on the image, “General *şəhidimiz cənnətdə!*”, translates as “Our martyr general is in paradise.” The accompanying caption on the post, “Canab General Ruhun *şad olsun, məqamın ucadır, Allah daha da uca etsin*”, translated as “Dear General, may your soul rest in peace, your rank is high, may God raise it even higher”, captures the admiration and reverence for the fallen hero. By aligning General Hashimov’s sacrifice with that of Imam Ḥusayn, the illustration elevates the former’s status from mere national hero to spiritual and moral exemplar. This artistic tribute honours the memory of the martyrs of the Azerbaijani–Armenian conflict and connects their sacrifice to a broader, centuries-old narrative of struggle for justice and righteousness.

Azerbaijan is officially a secular country, yet it has a complex relationship with religion, culture, and national identity. While the Azerbaijani government promotes secularism and maintains a separation between religion and state, religious and cultural traditions still play a significant role in the lives of many citizens.³¹ Fallen soldiers are always referred to as *şəhidlər* (martyrs). The use of imagery featuring Imam Ḥusayn in this context reflects the deep cultural and historical ties Azerbaijan has with Shi‘i Islam. The majority of Azerbaijan’s population is nominally Shi‘i Muslim³², and figures like Imam Ḥusayn hold profound symbolic value, especially during times of war and conflict, as they provide a powerful narrative of perseverance, honour, and ultimate sacrifice for one’s homeland.³³ While everyday public life in Azerbaijan is largely secular, religious and cultural heritage remains important, especially during significant events. Thus, religious imagery is used strategically to invoke emotions of patriotism, solidarity, and collective memory, particularly in times of conflict or national remembrance. The depiction of General Polad Hashimov and other martyrs with Imam Ḥusayn exemplifies how historical and religious symbolism is used to elevate national heroes and link their sacrifices to a greater moral and spiritual cause.

31 Goyushov 2008; Williamson Fa 2025.

32 Tahiev 2021, 15.

33 Williamson Fa 2025, 93; Tahiev 2024, 125–126.

Conclusions

The Qur'anic notion that “those who were slain in Allah’s way” are not truly dead underscores the belief that martyrdom grants eternal life and divine reward. This concept has travelled from traditional narratives into the digital sphere, particularly Instagram, where images construct a visual theology that transcends physical death by depicting martyrs as spiritually alive, reunited with sacred figures, illuminated by divine light, or welcomed into paradise. Examining the presentation of Shi'i Iranians on Instagram, Narges Valibeigi highlights the platform’s dual role as both sacralised medium and space for social connection among believers.³⁴ Building on this awareness, I propose that Instagram facilitates a complex interplay of de-sacralisation and sacralisation, particularly when contemporary figures are depicted alongside sacred personalities. By placing modern individuals in proximity to revered Imams, these visual narratives both sacralise the contemporary figures by associating them with the Imams’ sanctity and subtly shift the Imams into a more immediate, socially mediated context. Traditional markers of holiness are transformed into forms that are more relatable and more readily consumed in digital spaces. While such representations maintain devotional significance, they move the sacred from its fixed historical and ritual context into a digitally curated public sphere. In this process, narratives of martyrdom are repurposed to support contemporary ideological frameworks and provide comfort during periods of grief.

This study demonstrates how Instagram serves as a potent platform for the reinterpretation and dissemination of Shi'i martyrdom narratives. By juxtaposing contemporary figures with sacred personalities from early Islamic history, Instagram users construct a visual discourse that transcends temporal boundaries, reinforcing collective identity and solidarity. At the same time, the accessibility and reach of these images contribute to the fluidity of religious expression in the digital sphere, challenging traditional modes of representation and reception. These findings underscore the evolving nature of Shi'i visual culture in the digital age, where the interplay of sacralisation and de-sacralisation continues to shape contemporary religious experiences and expressions.

Many of these Instagram depictions of contemporary figures alongside sacred personalities were likely produced or circulated by political, religious,

34 Valibeigi 2018.

or other organised actors, though this is not always the case. Similarly, just as the paintings reproduced in Iran–Iraq War posters were often created by independent artists rather than state institutions,³⁵ many of these digital images also originated with individual creators acting outside formal organisational agendas.

The analysed images are predominantly directed at a Shi'i audience, as they reference Imam personalities who hold profound significance within Shi'ism. These representations remain largely esoteric to non-Shi'i viewers, who may not recognise the figures depicted. The Imams themselves are not portrayed directly, as the *nūr* (radiant light) appears as their faces. Instead, their presence is suggested through elements such as background, iconography, and accompanying captions, which all make clear references to specific Imams, reinforcing their spiritual and cultural relevance within the Shi'i community. Notably, bodily postures play a crucial role in these visual representations, with Imam Ḥusayn often depicted embracing the martyrs, symbolising acceptance and spiritual connection, while Imam Reza is shown welcoming martyrs into the eternal realm. Also, the depictions are often accompanied by evocative textual elements, including hashtags, religious slogans, poetry, and personal reflections, all of which work to evoke emotional and spiritual resonance among viewers.

A recurring motif in these Instagram posts is the depiction of Imam Ḥusayn, reflecting his centrality within Shi'i martyrdom narratives and highlighting his title Master of Martyrs. His symbolic embrace of contemporary martyrs serves to establish a spiritual continuity between historical and present-day sacrifices. Furthermore, the images incorporate calligraphy, religious symbolism, and objects closely associated with the martyrs, such as the remains of a helicopter to signify Ebrahim Raisi's fatal crash or visual references to Imam Reza's shrine, an institution Raisi governed for many years.

In these representations, the Imams, who according to Shi'i belief attained eternal peace, do not merely console the new martyrs but actively welcome them into a new spiritual space. They convey the message that martyrdom renders death irrelevant, for it is a mere physical transition rather than an end. The study's findings highlight how Instagram users harness this narrative framework to reinforce the notion of "life after death".

35 Gruber 2009, 687.

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Media Reviews

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Short Film Review

IF I DIE IN AMERICA

(Ward Kamel, US 2024)

A dark street, a close-up of a bloody face, a mouth forming the words “Sameer, Sameer, Sameer. Wake up!” This is how the short film *IF I DIE IN AMERICA* (Ward Kamel, US 2024, 15') begins. We learn that Sameer (George Shakkour) has died in a car accident, and we follow his husband, Manny (Gil Perez-Abraham), for the rest of the film. Manny, deeply grieving for his husband, has to deal with Sameer's traditional Muslim family. They want to bury Sameer's body in Kuwait and try to get Manny to sign the necessary papers. In the process a family member insists that Manny and Sameer did not have a real marriage. Manny talks to Sameer's mother Noora (Ilham Malki), who acknowledges that the two were married and asks him for her



Fig1: Manny grieving for his husband. Film still, *IF I DIE IN AMERICA* (Ward Kamel, US 2024), 00:00:44.

son's body with the words, "You had him while he could still choose. Do you need him now that he can't?" (00:13:10). The film ends with Manny packing his suitcase – perhaps to fly to the funeral in Kuwait – leaving the bedroom and turning off the light.

A central medium and the primary site of contestation in *IF I DIE IN AMERICA* is Sameer's dead body. From Manny's perspective, the body is that of his husband. Even if we do not know anything about Manny's own religious convictions, it is clear that for him, no quick funeral, as according to Muslim tradition, is necessary. The body's physical presence is necessary for him to process his grief. From the perspective of the in-laws, the physical body is needed for a ceremony to be held as soon as possible, in Kuwait, and certainly not in America. While there are ritual justifications for the family's position (ideally no more than 24 hours between death and burial), there are also other considerations, such as the status and reputation of Sameer's family, as when Dalal (Hana Chamoun) – a female member of Sameer's wider family – mentions "delays" that are "offensive to the family and the faith". The family suggests the compromise of Manny holding a memorial ceremony without the body, but no such middle ground between the two positions is feasible. Director and writer Ward Kamel revealed in an interview that his own experience of immigrating to the United States from Syria during the infamous "Muslim travel ban" inspired the scenario of *IF I DIE IN AMERICA*.¹ The context of immigrants being artificially separated from their families is important for understanding the lack of compromise about what can happen.

This incommensurability is also evident in the film's aesthetics, which depict a rather grey, generic America. In this moment of grief, Manny is alone and isolated. Though people send him messages with condolences, there is no one there with him (fig. 1). His isolation is reinforced by frequent close-ups of faces, contrasting music (electronic music with a pulsing beat versus soothing Bach) and slow lateral camera movements, all of which help the viewer empathize with the main protagonist and his emotional state.

This aesthetic of isolation makes the final scene, in which Manny is shown packing a small suitcase and then exiting the bedroom and switching off the lights, with Bach playing in the background, all the more powerful (fig. 2). Manny and Sameer are probably about to travel together on one last

1 *The Hollywood Times Official*, Interview with Ward Kamel, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6c5e0NzrcCw> [accessed 17 December 2025].



Fig. 2: Manny packing his suitcase at the end of the film. Film still, IF I DIE IN AMERICA (Ward Kamel, US 2024), 00:14:09.

trip, to Kuwait. Perhaps the funeral there will ultimately help Manny grieve, but the story ends before we reach this point.

As we see it, possession of Sameer's dead body is the reason for the conflict. Conflict is essential to film narratives. Conflict of different kinds often moves the narrative forward: it helps create structure, develop characters and generate motivations. When religion is a part of a film story, through characters, beliefs or spaces, it often serves to create tension or conflict. The conflict in IF I DIE IN AMERICA shapes how religion is represented and understood in this short film. On a first viewing, the portrayal of religion may seem unsympathetic. IF I DIE IN AMERICA presents a religious tradition related to how to treat the dead, a tradition with a focus on a collective. From the perspective of Sameer's family, the individual's grief is not crucial, or at least much less important.

Connected to this conflict, religion in this short story also has the role of a moral voice. Religious characters in films often express moral standpoints that lead them to seem set in their ways and unwilling to compromise. However, a religious-moral perspective can challenge a simplistic understanding of what is happening. In IF I DIE IN AMERICA, religion is used to move the perspective away from personal loss and onto family and community – to the needs of the many instead of the few. The interests and wellbeing of those closest to the dead (often the partner left behind) are frequently prioritized, but here the audience and the character Manny are challenged to look at grief in a different way – to not be “selfish”, as Sameer's mother

puts it, but to see the needs of others as well. To reach out and meet others in a situation of grief.

We can explore the connection between the individual and the collective in relation to Manny. Throughout the film, the camera follows him closely and shows his changing emotions in dealing with his loss and his traditional-religious in-laws. But who is Manny?

Let us gather “the facts”. We know that Manny was married to the man who died, although Khalil (Moud Sabra), one of Sameer’s relatives, calls their relationship simply an “arrangement to get a Green Card”. We know that Manny is aware of the non-acceptance of homosexuality among his husband’s relatives, and we know that he is unaware of Muslim practices regarding the burying of the deceased. But his views and values are never explicitly articulated in the film. He is almost without name, without qualities, and possibly without religion, and therefore arguably without justified demands in relation to the funeral. We see his emotions but learn little about his ideas about the world and his way of life. All of this remains open and can be filled in by us, the audience. Does this make it easier for us to identify with Manny? The title of the film can be taken into consideration here. The short is not called “If Sameer Dies in America”, but rather “If I Die in America”. Who is this “I”? Is it Manny, who suddenly becomes aware of his own mortality? Is it we, the viewers of the film? Is the film a *memento mori*? Numerous images, such as the leftovers from a party, the decaying flowers, or the lights being turned off, are *vanitas* motifs. So, is Manny a blank canvas that we can fill individually with our own values and questions?

The film is complex and nuanced in many ways. It requires special effort for the viewer to recognize how it assumes that “religion” has particular justificatory power that transcends secular, individually held or unsystematically articulated views, and also how it constructs the tensions between different worldviews, styles of living and emotional bonds.

We conclude by posing three questions that highlight the particularity and relevance of this multifaceted and polysemic short film for the study of religion and media:

(1) How are religious customs – particularly the urgency of Muslim burial practices – used as a means to explore queer identity, death and associated emotions? Could one have told a similar story with another religious or ritual context (Christian, Hindu, Jewish etc.)?

(2) What does this film tell us about current trends concerning the representation of religion in translocal or diasporic contexts, and especially about the distance between diasporic contexts and imaginations of “home”? Is this distance shown as “growing” – perhaps in light of borders becoming everywhere more rigid?

(3) How does this film navigate the potential pitfalls of depicting foreign cultures and societies in a negative light, thereby either challenging or inadvertently reinforcing stereotypes within the Western imagination? Conversely, is there a danger in portraying non-religious people as inarticulate and lacking in values? Can the film distinguish between individual life-stories and a larger cultural and religious context that may often be more flexible and diverse than imagined?

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Song Review

Rosalía, “Berghain”

LUX, Columbia Records / Sony Music Entertainment, ES 2025

Rosalía Vila Tobella, the 1992-born Catalan singer and producer known simply as Rosalía, has become one of the most distinctive voices in 21st-century popular music. Her work fuses flamenco heritage with global pop idioms, moving fluently between trap, reggaetón, experimental electronica, and classical instrumentation infused with symbolic imagery: in *El Mal Querer* (Columbia Records, ES 2018) she reinterpreted a medieval tale of confinement and redemption through flamenco; in *Motomami* (Columbia Records, US/ES 2022) she imagined the female body as a site of self-creation. The use of Christian iconography is a leitmotif in all these previous works. In the single “Bagdad” (2018), for example, she works with the idea of redemption and baptism.

Her fourth album bears the title *Lux* (Latin for “light”). Other tracks are likewise weighty in tone, such as “Divinize”, “Reliquia”, “Dios Es Un Stalker”, or “Mio Christo Piange Diamanti”, alongside more profane references to club culture and hedonism common in contemporary pop: “Sexo, Violencia y Llantas”, and “Sauvignon Blanc”. On the cover, Rosalía appears in white couture and a nun’s coif, illuminated by a bright light. Her arms, hidden beneath a robe, suggest a gesture of self-embrace, yet the posture also evokes restraint, as if she is bound in a straitjacket. A gold lipstick accentuates her mouth and hints at a smile.

“Habemus Album”, she wrote on 20 October 2025 on her Instagram account, announcing the release set for 7 November 2025.¹ *Zeit Online* describes the album as signalling a new phase of artistic self-stylisation,

1 Rosalía via Instagram Post, <https://t1p.de/fmc5g> [accessed 24 November 2025].

marked by sacred imagery and aesthetic provocation.² The eighteen songs are arranged into four chapters, inspired by the stages of canonisation in the Roman Catholic Church. In the booklet, two mottos precede the music: one by Rabia al-Adawiyya al-Qaysiyya (“No woman has ever claimed to be God”), the other by Simone Weil (“Love is not consolation, it is light”). At a central moment in the album, Rosalía proclaims: “Ego sum nihil / Ego sum lux mundi” (“I am nothing / I am the light of the world”), explicitly echoing John 8:12.

With these citations, the album establishes its guiding tone: the citation, rupture, and remix of Christian tradition through a pop-feminist lens. This tension between *devotio* and *blasphemia* has long shaped pop iconography, from Madonna’s *Like a Prayer* onward. Rosalía stands in this lineage while reworking it on her own terms.

Rosalía’s new lead single and video “Berghain” (2025) surpassed ten million views within three days of release. The piece features contributions from Björk and Yves Tumor and includes orchestral arrangements performed by the London Symphony Orchestra.

The title alludes to Berlin’s famed club, yet the video does not depict it literally. Rather, it evokes a symbolic place where sound and body intersect. In an Apple Music interview with Zane Lowe, Rosalía clarifies her intention: she interprets “Berghain” as the German compositum *Berg-Hain*, literally “mountain grove”. For her, the word carries metaphorical weight – an image for the inner landscape of our thoughts, in which we can lose ourselves. She explains: “We all have these labyrinths in our minds, these forests of thought.”³

Musically, “Berghain” blends orchestral strings, choral textures, and lyrical expansiveness, signalling a departure from the urban-pop and reggaetón palette of Rosalía’s earlier work.⁴

The track is trilingual. It opens with German verses – “Seine Angst ist meine Angst / Seine Wut ist meine Wut / Seine Liebe ist meine Liebe / Sein Blut ist mein Blut”⁵ – and then shifts into Spanish and into an imagery of dissolution. In the middle section, Björk appears as a bird resting on Rosalía’s

2 Balzer 2025.

3 Lowe/Apple Music 2025.

4 Richardson 2025.

5 Translation: His fear is my fear, His anger is my anger, His love is my love, His blood is my blood.



Fig. 1: Music video still, BERGHAIN (Rosalía et al., Columbia Record / Sony 2025), 00:00:48.

hand, singing in English: “The only way to save us is through divine intervention”, before Yves Tumor concludes with the outro. The online journal Pitchfork highlights the dramatic architecture of these shifts, calling the track “a trilingual liturgy of dissolution and rebirth”.⁶

The accompanying video places Rosalía in mundane domestic settings, starting in a minimalist apartment, almost monastic in its sparseness, with a statue of the Virgin Mary and a gold icon on the wall. She pulls aside a heavy curtain as daylight floods in, revealing a black-clad orchestra trailing her. Rosalía, however, remains unaware. Throughout the day, she performs ordinary tasks: dipping a sugar cube into coffee, ironing, making the bed (fig. 1). She moves through the city, followed by the orchestra: on a bus, at a medical appointment with an ECG, and at a jewellery shop. One recurring symbol accompanies her: a small gold heart pendant. In the evening, she returns home. The apartment is dark; the orchestra has vanished. Instead, forest animals enter the room and gather around her. The atmosphere shifts: it is unclear whether these animals are companions or intruders. Dark blood streams from a fawn’s eyes; ecstatic, trembling images unfold between dream and trance. Animals undergo metamorphosis into half-human forms

6 Green 2025, <https://t1p.de/wty73> [accessed 24 November 2025].

and back again, intercut with silhouettes of the orchestra members. Then a sudden cut: morning. Light enters the room. Rosalía turns in her bed; in the next moment she has vanished, and a white dove rises from the sheets.

This immersive interplay of sacred gesture and physical exposure in the BERGHAIN performance invites broader interpretive tools. The lens offered by German theologian Wilhelm Gräb proves helpful. His concept of *Lebenswelthermeneutik* – a hermeneutics of everyday life – expands religion beyond doctrine, locating it instead in those very aesthetic and emotional intensities where individuals seek meaning. For Gräb, religion is not limited to institutional belief but emerges wherever human beings interpret their lives in search of ultimate meaning. It becomes visible in everyday aesthetic forms – art, narrative, music, or ritual – wherever experiences of contingency, finitude, and hope come to expression.⁷

The video's movement from domestic mundanity to orchestral transcendence as a back-hum mirrors what Gräb describes as the human effort to reinscribe the ordinary world with significance. The orchestra that follows Rosalía through her apartment makes visible how the sacred accompanies the mundane, revealing transcendence within the contours of the life-world. The mythic club-name functions similarly: detached from literal geography, *Berghain* becomes a metaphor for contemporary spaces of longing, where secular individuals enact rituals of transformation without recourse to explicit theology.

“Berghain” may be seen as a secular ritual: the orchestra as liturgical procession, the body as a site of symbolic death and rebirth. One critic observes that Rosalía “enters symbolic death to be reborn, to rise again like Jesus Christ”.⁸

The narrative movement resembles a rite of passage, the multilingual lyrics reinforce this hybridity: German invocation, Spanish dissolution, English plea – a polyglot spirituality. The reference to the club *Berghain* gestures toward a community of the ecstatic and marginalised. Techno culture often casts the dance floor as a site of transcendence; by translating this experience into orchestral ritual, Rosalía merges sacred and secular. One reviewer notes that the piece “turns that image of hedonism into something almost sacred – a spiritual awakening wrapped in high art”.⁹ The video's imagery –

7 Gräb 2006.

8 Pujadas 2025.

9 Pareño 2025.



Fig. 2: Music video still, BERGHAIN (Rosálía et al. / Columbia Record / Sony 2025), 00:02:44.

Björk as bird-prophet, wandering animals, metamorphosis – underscores a mythic reading: the artist as pilgrim and vessel.

Several motifs amplify the register towards passion: the heart pendant; the Marian echoes; the image of the Sacred Heart in the apartment (00:01:59); the ECG line that briefly goes flat (00:02:00). The robin is especially significant (fig. 2). In Christian folklore, it is said to have tried to pluck a thorn from Christ's crown or to comfort his wounds, staining its breast with blood. Its red plumage thus becomes a sign of compassion and sacrificial love. The video adopts this symbolism when the robin delivers Björk's prophetic line about the need for divine intervention in life. Grief functions as a metaphorical heartache – perhaps even a form of spiritual pathology – its weight intensified by the religious imagery that surrounds it. The source of this grief remains undefined, gesturing toward romantic loss, emotional rupture, or a shared vulnerability – as hinted at in “Seine Angst ist meine Angst.”

“Berghain” exemplifies how global pop refracts the sacred through the languages of performance and sound. By merging orchestral form, multilingual lyricism, and the club signifier, Rosálía constructs a sonic and visual liturgy of transformation – symbolic death and rebirth and emergence into new selfhood. While not devotional in a traditional sense, the work performs a pop-cultural anthropology of vulnerability and yearning for transcendence.

A central feature of the piece is its collage-like structure: multiple languages, musical styles, and symbolic registers – religious, mystical, alchemical in their gestures towards change. This fragmentation can be read as a meaningful synthesis mirroring the complexity of spirituality in a postmodern world, or as aesthetic layering without inner cohesion. The constant

shifting between codes and traditions raises the question: does the work articulate a coherent logic, or does it rely on atmosphere?

This ambiguity – moving between sacred earnestness and aesthetic play – is central to the video’s effect. Gräß’s life-world hermeneutics proves illuminating precisely because it does not assume religious authenticity: it enables us to see how Rosalía deploys Christian symbols as aesthetic resources within a secular horizon of meaning. Instead of measuring the work against doctrinal standards, this perspective shows how religious imagery produces affective depth, existential resonance, and a sense of symbolic gravity.

The sheer abundance of Christian motifs suggests that this symbolic reservoir is still presumed capable of pointing to a higher reality. At the same time, it opens a critical insight: the sacred vocabulary may serve less a genuine quest for transcendence than an artistically crafted aura of significance and self-mythologisation. The tension remains between aesthetic grandeur and conceptual openness: everything seems possible, nothing is finally affirmed.

And in this very openness, the work becomes less radical than its hype suggests. It can be read as religious or non-religious; as critique of religion, feminist manifesto, Marian gesture, even as a form of female Christology; as pop-Catholic revival, metaphor of orgasmic transcendence, or the aftermath of a self-consuming relationship. Faced with this overflow of musical styles, textual fragments, and proliferating symbols, one may marvel and descend into the rabbit hole of possible meanings – yet its very indeterminacy can just as well leave a faint sense of emptiness.

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Series Review

KIZILCIK ŞERBETİ (CRANBERRY SORBET)

(Show TV, TR 2022–present)

Since 2022, the television series KIZILCIK ŞERBETİ has been broadcast weekly on one of Türkiye's most-watched television channels, Show TV. As of 25 January 2025, the 85th episode is airing. From its very first episode, the series has portrayed the tensions and conflicts between individuals who, on one hand, comply with and, on the other, reject practices with roots in Turkish-Islamic culture. Focusing on two families – one secular and the other conservative – the series depicts one of the most critical dichotomies in Turkish politics for many years: the issue of the headscarf and belief in God. Through these characters, it mirrors broader societal conflicts within the country. The series focuses on the relationship between the Ünal family, who lead a conservative lifestyle in accordance with the principles of Islam – in the context of the series, the Turkish Sunni state religion – and the Korkmaz family, who represent a more modern and secular way of life.

In the first episode of the series, two main characters, Fatih Ünal and Doğa Korkmaz, fall in love and decide to marry hastily after Doğa becomes pregnant. Kivılcım Korkmaz, who is the young woman's mother and the matriarch of the Korkmaz family, is portrayed as a hardworking, strong, authoritative, and disciplined woman. Abdullah Ünal, who is the patriarch of the Ünal family, is depicted as a traditionalist, a charismatic, authoritarian, disciplined, and wealthy father figure. In Turkish society, premarital sexual relations, especially when they result in pregnancy, are considered inappropriate and may be followed by marriage as a corrective measure. While the conservative Ünal family supports the young couple's sudden decision to marry, the secular Korkmaz family strongly opposes it under any circumstance.

This marriage, which both families object to due to their contrasting lifestyles and values, is also subject to certain regulations in both the Turkish Constitution and the State religion. According to the Turkish Civil Code and Turkish Islamic law, which is based on the Qur'an, the most fundamental requirement for the establishment of a new family is a lawful agreement between a man and a woman who meet the necessary conditions. In other words, marriage is formalized through a valid contract that establishes a new family unit.¹ While the Turkish Civil Code does not impose any restrictions based on religious differences with regard to marriage, Islamic law does, especially regarding non-Muslims. However, the families in the series are not non-Muslim. Their lifestyles differ, not their religious beliefs.

The television series explores tensions that primarily stem from cultural differences and contrasting perspectives. The headscarf stands as a symbol of the conflict between a traditional Muslim Turkish family and a modern Muslim Turkish family. A young woman who marries into a conservative family is the only woman in the household who does not wear a headscarf, reflecting core dynamics of Turkish society, where cultural tensions often arise despite a shared religious background.

The series reflects a long-standing public debate in Türkiye: after the Turks adopted Islam in the 10th century, influenced by Arab and Iranian cultures, Turkish-Islamic culture acquired a new character, in which wearing a headscarf or turban symbolised a woman's modesty, chastity, and "mystery".² However, as this issue became politicized in the 1980s, a public perception emerged in Türkiye of veiled women as narrow-minded and reactionary, while those without headscarves were considered modern and educated. Over time such cultural differences can cause internal alienation within a society, as the series presents. It depicts an internal religious discourse, which is illustrated here by two different families, and highlights the diversity of Muslim views. Islam's approach to the headscarf has varied. The Qur'an contains verses regarding the covering and clothing of both women and men. Verses related to women's covering, known as "Hijab", are referred to repeatedly in the series:

Episode 2/Season 3, Surah Al-A'raf, Verse 26:

O children of Adam! We have given you clothing to cover your private parts and as adornment. But the best clothing is the clothing of right-

1 Karakaya 2024.

2 İşçi 2000.

eousness. These (clothing) are among the signs of Allah, (which He has bestowed upon you), that they may understand the truth.

Episode 2/Season 6, Surah Al-A'raf, Verse 27:

O Children of Adam! Let not Satan deceive you, as he removed your parents from Paradise, stripping them of their clothing to show them their private parts. Because he and his followers see you from where you cannot see them. Verily, We have made the devils allies to those who do not believe.

Episode 3/Season 8, Surah An-Nur, Verse 30:

(O Prophet!) Tell the believing men to lower their gaze (from looking at what is forbidden) and guard their private parts. (Indeed) that is purer/more appropriate for them. Indeed, Allah is all-aware of what they do.

Episode 3/Season 13, Surah Al-Ahzab, Verse 33:

(O wives of the Prophet!) Stay in your homes and do not display yourselves as [was] the display of the former times of ignorance. And establish prayer and give zakah and obey Allah and His Messenger. (O people of the Prophet's) household! Allah only intends to remove sin from you and to intends to purify you thoroughly.

Episode 4/Season 15, Surah Al-Ahzab, Verse 59:

O Prophet! Tell your wives and your daughters and the women of the believers to bring down over themselves part of their outer garments. This (clothing) is more suitable, that they will be known and not be hurt. And ever is Allah Forgiving and Merciful.³

While the general idea of covering is common to Muslims, the interpretation of what “covering” means varies from country to country and region to region.⁴ In Türkiye, traditional women cover themselves primarily by covering their hair. With changing fashion trends and the influence of popular culture, more modern and hat-like coverings have often replaced long garments and large headscarves in the form of turbans. It is striking that the series does

3 Abdel Haleem, M. A., 2008, *The Qur'an. A New Translation*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

4 Yıldız 2017.

not highlight this broad spectrum and instead draws a clear dichotomy between modern and traditional. The quoted verses from the Qur'an not only guide women to cover themselves but also aim to shape their way of life, including their participation in society and work. The urbanization that began in Türkiye after 1950, with migration to cities increasing as a result of certain economic policies, also affected women, who began to occupy different positions in society.⁵ The participation of women in the workforce has increased, regardless of whether they wear a headscarf. Particularly since 2013, when the headscarf ban in public spaces was lifted, the number of women wearing headscarves in higher education and the private and public sectors has risen, and they no longer are "othered" to the same extent.

These debates and developments are reflected in the series *KIZILCIK ŞERBETİ*. The headscarf serves as a symbol for different lifestyles: women's clothing, in particular their wearing of a headscarf, is a visual cue to their conservative or secular lifestyle. A social divide is evident: the women of the conservative family do not work outside the home and instead organize family life and prepare wonderful meals; the women of the secular family are portrayed as highly educated and successful in their careers.

In the first episode, Kivilcim, who is depicted as a modern and authoritarian educator, expresses her disapproval of a woman wearing a headscarf whom she bumps into at a store, saying, "They are everywhere." Her reaction reflects an underlying tension. In this dialogue, the woman who is wearing a headscarf is othered in a snapshot of the longstanding societal conflicts surrounding the headscarf in Türkiye. Later in the episode, as women in headscarves begin to voice their objections, Kivilcim, who claims that veiled women have no place in the modern shopping world, finds herself confronted by law enforcement. As the series progresses, the modern character ultimately apologizes to the conservative side. This development recalls the headscarf debates of the 1990s in Türkiye and highlights the significance of the current social acceptance of the headscarf. Throughout its modernization, from the Ottoman period to the present day, Türkiye has marginalized the headscarf, a symbol in tradition and religious belief, through its interactions with the West and particularly through populist political discourses. Where the elites in Türkiye frequently disregarded the headscarf even as other segments of society continued to wear it, since the 2000s the headscarf has also gained acceptance amongst the elites.

5 Altınöz 2011.

Dialogue during the scene in the first episode when the young woman introduces her boyfriend to her mother also reflects opposition to headscarf-wearing, with references to “those with covered heads”. When Doğa’s mother hosts Fatih at their home to meet him for the first time, she offers him alcoholic beverages. Fatih’s reaction, reminding her that consuming alcohol is a sin, reveals another point of cultural and religious tension. According to traditional Islamic beliefs, and particularly the concepts of halal and haram, all intoxicating substances and those produced with the intention of causing intoxication are forbidden, and their consumption is sinful.⁶ Furthermore, during this visit Fatih kisses the grandmother’s hand and brings it to his forehead as a sign of respect, a gesture that is met with disdain by the modern mother, who describes him as “uncultured” and “low-class”. While these actions are traditions specific to Anatolia, they also reflect the respect shown towards elders in traditional Turkish Islamic culture. The conservative side refers to those who follow a secular lifestyle as “degenerate people who have lost their way in the name of modernity”, while the secular side sees such physical acts and the headscarf as symbols of backwardness, associating them with slums, poverty, and underdevelopment. In the series, the distinction between the two attitudes is conveyed by outward appearance and by physical actions.

Throughout its airing, the series, which focuses on the conflicts between individuals from two families with different perspectives, uses the headscarf, work-life, and bodily practices to portray individual freedoms and values. All members of a single family do not necessarily share the same values. With 85 episodes, this series has been extremely successful. Using family constellations, it raises social and religious questions that are much debated in Türkiye. However, it also reduces the complexity and diversity of Turkish Islam to just two positions, the traditional and the secular, and plays them off against each other.

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KIZILCIK ŞERBETİ (CRANBERRY SORBET, created by: Melis Civelek, Show TV, TR 2022–present).

Jan Wysocki

Game Review

HOLLOW KNIGHT: SILKSONG

Team Cherry, 2025

The miniscule two-legged bug named Hornet enters a great hall and faces a shining gate. In front of the gate stand two other bugs, clad in simple robes. They are exhausted by the pilgrimage they have endured, climbing through the kingdom of Pharloom, traversing its labyrinthine caves full of monsters and other dangers. They have finally arrived at the gate to the Citadel, which is where they hope to end their journey and fulfil their religious duty. Hornet, in her bright red coat and with her trusted weapon, musters the two hopeful bugs. She knows what they must have survived to arrive here. She has seen the countless remains of other pilgrims on the long road to this hall, pilgrims who died lonesome deaths and whose lifeless husks have been cast aside, cared for by no one. It's a wonder that those two simple bugs stand here with Hornet. But they can't get the heavy gate to open and so ask Hornet for help. Just then the whole hall starts to tremble and from its ceiling drops a behemoth, a figure in metal armor that towers menacingly above Hornet. And with a mighty swing of its weapon – a gigantic incense burner – it carelessly sweeps aside the two pilgrims, who now face the same fate as the countless other dead pilgrims in Pharloom. The mighty creature's name, the Last Judge, appears on the screen and a fight begins. A struggle that will probably last for many, many tries and that will cost the player – as it did this reviewer – a lot of nervous tension.

The game described here is HOLLOW KNIGHT: SILKSONG, by the small Australian developer studio Team Cherry. It's a sequel to the studio's very first commercial video game release, HOLLOW KNIGHT. After its initial and surprising success in 2017, HOLLOW KNIGHT gained many fans, who were then excited when HOLLOW KNIGHT: SILKSONG was released eight years later. Its arrival was such a big event that other game developers had to reschedule

the release of their own products because SILKSONG soaked up all the attention of the gaming audience. In only a few weeks Team Cherry sold millions of copies of SILKSONG. One striking feature of the game is its beautiful hand-drawn art style that resembles an animated cartoon with loveable characters and mysterious places in a world full of talking bugs.

From both a game-studies perspective and a religious-studies perspective, it is particularly interesting (1) that a game that is so difficult and often frustrating has been so well received by a broad gaming audience, and (2) that the aesthetic and narrative elements of SILKSONG have such strong recourse to religious imagery.

The difficulty of video games is still a hot topic in gaming discourse. Arcade games in the 1970s and 1980s were often deliberately hard to master, to ensure a player returned to a machine repeatedly, paying to play again and again. When games became “domesticated” and developed a broad appeal, game designers began to include difficulty options or made games more accessible to players with limited gaming experience. Such was the standard in the 2000s and 2010s, up until the arrival of the DARK SOULS phenomenon. This series of role-playing games from the Japanese development studio FromSoftware gained many fans in the West despite being very difficult and requiring great patience from the player. Initially treated as niche games, the DARK SOULS series transcended its original target audience to gain much attention in the broader gaming world. It was viewed as an “authentic” or “true” gaming experience that did not cater to modern inclusive sensibilities; it could be mastered only through trial and error. Its marketing embraced the notion of DARK SOULS as a hard game, declaring, for example, “Prepare to die. Over and over again” in its video trailers, or naming its Microsoft Windows edition the “Prepare to Die Edition”. This approach was a strong departure from the ideal of a frictionless gaming experience through which the player could flow.

In their own way, both HOLLOW KNIGHT and HOLLOW KNIGHT: SILKSONG rode this wave of appreciating difficulty in games and embracing the resulting frustration as part of the challenge and reward of playing. SILKSONG is all about repeating sections of a game, learning how to traverse the environment, how to read and dodge enemy patterns and how to use openings left by enemies to attack. The result is a very physical experience and a specific kind of work. After some time, the player can control SILKSONG’s protagonist, Hornet, in just fractions of a second through muscle memory that builds up in the fingers after playing the game excessively. Games scholar

Espen Aarseth coined the term “ergodic literature” to describe texts that need some kind of non-trivial work (“ergon”) to be navigated and experienced.¹ Video games can be seen as a very elaborate form of this kind of ergodic hypertext. Playing SILKSONG is all about the work. The author of an academic text is often expected to be somewhat detached from their topic and to approach the subject without emotion. But here I can say that this author was and still is very, very frustrated with this game and questions his decision to spend more than 50 hours on it. Yet I must admit that those 50 hours of aching fingers, sweaty palms, and a lot of cursing created an experience that other media cannot provide. Negative emotions were (eventually) followed by my jumping triumphantly from my couch. Maybe this kind of experience is a big part of the enjoyment that players derive from games like HOLLOW KNIGHT, HOLLOW KNIGHT: SILKSONG or the DARK SOULS series.

HOLLOW KNIGHT: SILKSONG and the DARK SOULS series also share some narrative and aesthetic elements. DARK SOULS asks about the nature of death and builds its lore around creation myths of fire and darkness; players explore shrines, churches or other such structures with religious names. SILKSONG also draws heavily on religious narratives. The currency which Hornet can use to buy helpful items is called “rosary beads”. Those red balls are strung together on a cord, thus resembling an object one can find in different religious traditions, including Christianity and Buddhism. Throughout the game the players encounter many bugs who were on a pilgrimage but succumbed to a curse that either killed them outright or made them aggressive. After fighting these bugs, Hornet can collect the rosaries that the pilgrims carried with them. The bugs are on a journey to the Citadel, a place designated as “holy” and guarded by the Last Judge. The giant incense burner this figure wields is only one of many allusions to religious practices, in this instance to Roman Catholic tradition. The Last Judge, as the game notes, is tasked with judging the bugs according to their sinfulness and with admitting only those deemed “pure” and without sin.

When the player defeats this gatekeeper, they enter the Citadel and are greeted by large cathedral-like halls with gold ornamentation and columns that are reminiscent of classical Greek temples. Hornet encounters figures called Scrollreaders, whose task is to “read and recall the near endless scrolls of prayer”², and Vaultkeepers, who are “responsible for delivering

1 Aarseth 1997, 1.

2 The quoted descriptions are from notes found in the game itself.

sermons and leading prayer”. Hornet can find “Psalm Cylinders” that contain recordings of sermons or songs that resemble Gregorian chant. Those who are deemed to have committed sins against the Citadel are found incarcerated as penitents. Some are granted absolution – though only after death. There’s even an automated confessional stall where Hornet can have her sins forgiven if she toils hard enough.

HOLLOW KNIGHT: SILKSONG is full of such interesting connections to religious aesthetics and narratives. It could make for a fun and helpful teaching object in religious-studies classes, where students could debate how religion is depicted in popular media and the purposes it serves in media products such as video games. Unfortunately, the usefulness of SILKSONG has to be balanced against its great difficulty. Scholars of religion interested in exploring its resonances firsthand must be ready to die over and over again and be prepared to invest a lot of their precious time. But those willing to risk their time (as well as their peace of mind) will experience a captivating connection between physical “ergon” and religious world-building in a video game.

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