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DIGITAL CORPSES

creation, appropriation, and reappropriation

Nadia de Vries

universiteit van amsterdam

Digital Corpses:
Creation, Appropriation, and Reappropriation

ACADEMISCH PROEFSCHRIFT

ter verkrijging van de graad van doctor

aan de Universiteit van Amsterdam

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Introduction:

Defining the Digital Corpse

Newer technology provides a nonstop feed: as many images of disaster and atrocity as we can make time to look at.

- Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (108)

In 1999, when I was eight years old, a computer room was introduced at my primary school. The room occupied a corner of the school's ground floor and contained six desks set up in a U-shape, with a computer on top of each of them. The computers were intended as educational instruments and came pre-installed with various software programs for learning grammar, spelling, mathematics, and geography. The computers also came with Internet access. The students were free to use the computers any time after lunch and before the building's closure at five o'clock every day. There were no teachers supervising the computer room, at least not initially. No one thought that children as young as ourselves would be able to use the computers for any harmful ends.

One day, three of my classmates downloaded an image from a website that, I later learned, was called Rotten.com. It showed a charred human corpse, salvaged from a building destroyed by a fire, in hideous detail, with dried patches of blood on the scalp where the hair had burned away. The three boys from my class had downloaded it and installed it as the desktop image for all six of our school's computers, so that whoever used the computers after them would be greeted by this ghastly, disturbing image. I was one of the students who fell victim to their scheme. Up to this point, I had managed to keep myself safe from shocking imagery, so it took me some time to realize what I was looking at, but the open mouth of the charred corpse indicated to me that I was witnessing something quite horrific. The computer room was never quite the same after this moment of shock.

Over the years that followed, I was made privy to many more disturbing online images, often without personally wanting to view them or seeking them out. I saw journalists being decapitated by terrorist organizations,¹ suicide victims whose mangled limbs were strewn about

¹Here I am specifically referring to the video of American journalist Daniel Pearl's decapitation by members of Al-Qaeda that was posted online by his killers as a warning to the US government in 2002. See Roger.

on train tracks, corpses at Abu Ghraib smeared with feces,² and corpses used for pornographic ends. Being online as a teenager in the early 2000s meant being constantly vulnerable to confrontations with shocking images. Online technologies provided me with what, in a passage that I cite in this introduction's epigraph, Susan Sontag identifies as a "nonstop feed" of images of other people's suffering, dying, or dead bodies. Even though I never decided to make time to watch these images deliberately, they still assaulted my eyes. Despite their number, I never got used to watching them. No matter how often I saw a dead or wounded body flash by on screen, the images remained horrifying to me.

The horror I felt in watching these images sparked my interest in the reasons for their widespread circulation. I learned that many people who frequented the same forums actually *enjoyed* watching these images for their shock factor. Like the boys in my primary school, they reveled in the sense of superiority that came with enduring these images, and the 'edgy' status that their (seeming) indifference towards such shocking pictures gave them. Importantly, these people I knew were not alone in their fascination with gory images. In 1996, Rotten.com claimed to "get around fifteen million hits a day" (Kerekes and Slater n. pag.) and in 2017, the death porn site LiveLeak was "ranked 969 globally and 522 in the United States among the world's most-visited websites" (Malkowski 164).

What these statistics made me realize is that my primary school classmates' interest in digital corpses was not some isolated, pre-adolescent fascination. Indeed, as the gore sites mentioned above indicate, there are designated spaces for looking at digital corpses online. Moreover, as my accidental encounters with shocking images show, there is no guarantee that such images will remain within the confines of these demarcated spaces. The digital circulation of images of corpses, then, cannot be restricted to selected audiences: after all, the key characteristic of digital images, as British new media scholar Julia Davies puts it, is that they "can be quickly copied, developed, and transmitted across vast geographical, social, and cultural areas" (115). This also makes digital images of corpses less controllable than their non-digital equivalents.

My study takes the increasing ubiquity of digital images of dead and dying bodies, and the increasing lack of control over such images as its departure point. With this twofold shift in mind, I will ask: With what motivations and effects are digital corpses(-to-be) created, appropriated, and reappropriated online? What are the ethical stakes involved when

² Here I am specifically referring to the images of the Abu Ghraib prisoner abuse scandal from 2003. See Hersh.

(re)producing a human corpse or dying body on a digital platform? And what role do social constructions of gender, race and (dis)ability play in the creation, appropriation, and reappropriation of such digital dead and dying bodies? To address these questions, I analyze three different types of digital corpses(-to-be): (1) images of *offline corpses* that circulate online; (2) *fictional dead and dying bodies* that were *created online* or in contemporary digital video art and photography; and (3) images of *offline dying bodies* that circulate online. For practicality's sake, I will shorten "digital corpses(-to-be)" to "digital corpses" throughout this study, except in Chapter 4, where I specifically focus on the presentation online of dying bodies as corpses-to-be.

As my case studies for addressing the questions listed above, I have selected images of a dying Princess Diana and 9/11's Falling Man to illustrate how the early Internet changed the circulation of images of dead and dying bodies (Chapter 1); images of the corpses of Nikki Catsouras and Nedā Āghā-Soltān – two young women whose dead or dying body was photographed (and/or filmed), uploaded and then shared online – to demonstrate how the circulation culture of the Internet may detach images of corpses from their original context, giving rise to ethical questions about agency and control (Chapter 2); the digital-only dead and dying bodies in Shelley Jackson's hypertext work *Patchwork Girl* (1995) and Pierre Huyghe and Phillippe Parreno's art project *No Ghost Just a Shell* (1999-2002), to illustrate how the human corpse may be produced as a digital fiction with fewer ethical restraints than its offline counterparts, precisely to address some of the ethical questions raised in Chapter 2 (Chapter 3); and images of the dying bodies of bloggers Tom Mandel and Katherine E. Brandt, to show how dying users, through terminal illness blogs, may claim agency over their own online images as a way of anticipating and challenging the appropriation of these images by others (Chapter 4).

Now that everyday human life, including dying, is increasingly intertwined with digital technologies and online cultures, it is important to understand how this entanglement affects existing social norms, including those that relate to death. The ethical questions that my case studies pose are all related to the large-scale shareability, malleability, and vulnerability of dead or dying human bodies as digital images. Though my study is not a comparison between the ethics of engaging with digital corpses and those of engaging with non-digital corpses, I do explore the consequences of digitizing the human corpse in a global, highly interactive environment (the Internet), and ask what these consequences reveal about the power dynamics between living and dead bodies. More specifically, I look at how these power dynamics are

influenced by the perceived distance between the viewer (the user) and the viewed (the dying person or corpse), and how this perceived distance informs the mobilizations that the digital corpse is subjected to in a digital environment. With regard to the latter, I distinguish between the *creation*, *appropriation*, and *reappropriation* of digital corpses.

As a general definition of *appropriation*, the Oxford English Dictionary has: “The making of a thing private property, whether another’s or (as now commonly) one’s own; taking as one’s own or to one’s own use.” Accordingly, I use the term in this study to refer to the taking of a digital image of a dead or dying body for one’s own purposes. As my analyses will make clear, such purposes are not necessarily private or individual, as the large-scale shareability and malleability of images in digital environments also allow for public and collective uses. By *creation*, I refer to the deliberate production of a human-looking corpse in a digital environment, for purposes that may be similar to those of appropriations or that may be intended to critique the latter. Finally, by *reappropriation*, I refer to the mobilizations of digital corpses performed by dying people in an effort to reclaim control over their own image and its meanings on digital platforms.

The ethical questions that I see arising around the creation, appropriation, and reappropriation of the digital corpse revolve around agency, responsibility, and ownership. The perceived distance between a digital corpse and its creator, viewer, or disseminator, and the fact that digital corpses circulate as public, shareable objects, makes it unclear who has (or should have) *agency* in relation to the digital corpse, who is (or should be) held *responsible* for the meanings and functions acquired by the digital corpse over the course of its circulation, and who can (or should be able to) claim *ownership* of the digital corpse. It seems to be the case that the more distance there is perceived to exist to a digital corpse, the more extreme and less accountable the uses to which it is put become. In addition, the increasing scale and intensity of the circulation of digital corpses makes it harder and harder to identify which actors are involved in this circulation and who can consequently be held to account for the various meanings and functions imposed upon digital corpses.

While digital corpses may seem a world apart from the physical materiality of offline corpses, the digital should not be seen as something that stands in binary opposition to the physical, the corporeal, or the ‘real.’ Hong Kongese philosopher Yuk Hui argues that “[d]igital objects are not simply bits and bytes [...]: they are actually objects that we drag, we delete, we modify, and so on” (381). What Hui rightly emphasizes here, against what has been called “the IRL fetish” – American media theorist Nathan Jurgenson’s term for “the habit of viewing the

online and offline as largely distinct”³ – is that, just as is the case with non-digital objects, the interactions that we have with digital objects are shaped by real-life actions (such as the dragging, deleting, and modifying that Hui mentions). Similarly, in his influential book *Media Ecologies*, British cultural scholar Matthew Fuller asserts that digital materials such as code, metadata, and algorithms are “informational as much as physical,” and thus materially perceptible and tangible (2). With regard to the online realm as a whole, British art theorist Stephanie Bailey emphasizes that “the Internet is a physical thing,” as material constructions such as “satellites and fibre optic networks are but some of the necessary technologies facilitating the transmission of data between people and places” (129).

The arguments of Hui, Fuller, and Bailey illustrate both the intricate interconnection between digital and non-digital materiality, and the close relationship between digital objects and non-digital environments. They are essential to this study, as they make clear that interactions on digital platforms are not separate from the power dynamics at work in non-digital interactions, but rather informed and shaped by them. Conversely, interactions on digital platforms also feed into the power dynamics of the larger world. For example, in her work on homophily and the digital “enactment” of non-digital power structures, American media scholar Wendy Hui Kyong Chun asserts that “network analyses rest on and perpetuate a reductive identity politics, which posits race and gender as ‘immutable’ categories and love as inherently ‘love of the same’” (cited in Apprich xi).⁴ In this regard, analyzing the ways in which digital corpses are mobilized has a twofold value. First, it sheds light on how the power dynamics of the offline world – including those involving gender and race – inform the creation, appropriation, and reappropriation of digital corpses; second, it sheds light on the sociopolitical effects such manipulations of digital corpses can have, both online and offline.

In the remainder of this introduction, I will situate my study and its methodology in relation to the fields of cultural analysis, new media ethics, and digital death studies. I will devote a separate section to the latter, as digital death studies is this study’s primary field of engagement. I will conclude the introduction with a chapter outline.

³ Jurgenson (n. pag.) describes “the IRL fetish” as a product of “digital dualism,” and asserts that the term “IRL” (‘in real life’) does not denote the opposite of digital life as it is led on, for example, social media platforms like Facebook, but that “we live in an augmented reality that exists at the intersection of materiality and information, physicality and digitality, bodies and technology, atoms and bits, the off and online.”

⁴ See also American sociologists Natalie Boero and C.J. Pascoe’s work on online dieting communities, particularly that of the “pro-ana movement,” in which they argue that these communities’ focus on “body size and bodily practices” is “fraught with the contradiction that online spaces are fundamentally disembodied ones” (29).

Reading Digital Corpses Through Cultural Analysis and New Media Ethics

This study, as noted, explores the ethical issues raised by the creation, appropriation, and reappropriation of digital dead and dying bodies by *living* non-digital actors. I examine these issues by turning to the practice of *cultural analysis*. Dutch cultural scholar Mieke Bal describes cultural analysis as a scholarly practice that,

like anthropology, does construct an object, albeit with a slightly different sense of what that object is. At first sight, the object is simpler than anthropology's: a text, a piece of music, a film, a painting. But [...] [after analysis] the object constructed turns out to no longer be the "thing" that so fascinated you when you chose it. It has become a living creature, embedded in all the questions and considerations that the mud of your [analysis] spattered onto it, and that surround it like a "field." (4)

To practice cultural analysis, then, is to put the object of analysis center stage and examine it closely, not just as confirming the analyst's expectations or as exemplifying particular theoretical concepts but also as potentially challenging these expectations and concepts. By paying attention to points of friction between the object as "a living creature" and the "questions and considerations" brought to it, the analyst allows the object to "speak back" to their preconceptions, as well as to the theories with which they surrounded the object (Bal and Gonzales, 138). In the words of Dutch cultural scholar Esther Peeren, "the practice of cultural analysis turns the cultural object into a theoretical object, an object that *does* theory" rather than simply having theory applied to it (2008: 3, emphasis original). Peeren adds that "[t]he cultural analyst, in turn, takes up an intersubjective stance in relation to this interaction [between theory and object], inserting herself into the exchange as an interlocutor" (2008: 3) – an interlocutor that, crucially, keeps an open mind.

In line with the analytic practice that Bal and Peeren describe, my study of digital corpses consists of a series of close analyses of six case studies. My analyses place the object in the center and, prompted by questions concerning the digital corpse that this object raises for me, bring it in conversation with theoretical concepts from contemporary media studies and other disciplines, such as the "lived-body subject" (Sobchack) and the "plastic image" (Warren-Crow), which are also rethought in their engagement with the object and with myself as a cultural analyst coming to the object and the theory with a specific background and particular preoccupations.

In terms of its conceptual framework, this study mainly builds on – and intervenes in – recent thinking in new media ethics. The circulation of images of dead or dying bodies is not unique to the online age, as I will make clear in a short historical survey (Chapter 1), but, as already noted, digitization did bring about an intensification of this circulation, extending it, for example, to children in a Dutch primary school. I study the ethical ramifications of this intensified circulation through the framework offered by the American media scholar Charles Ess. In *Digital Media Ethics* (2013), Ess claims that ethics, in the age of new media networks, is subject to “distributed responsibility.” With this term, he refers to

the understanding that, as these networks make us more and more interwoven with and interdependent upon one another, the ethical responsibility for an act is distributed across a network of actors, not simply attached to a single individual. (xvi)

Ess contrasts this new form of responsibility with more traditional takes on ethical responsibility. In his words,

while we in the West recognize that multiple factors can come into play in influencing an individual’s decision ... we generally hold *individuals* responsible for their actions, as the *individual agent* who both makes decisions and acts independently of others. (17, emphasis original)

In the face of digitization, this more traditional understanding of ethical responsibility is making way for a form of responsibility that is, in Ess’ words, “shared, so to speak, across the network” (17). According to him, the task of the new media ethics scholar is not so much to define a separate framework of ethical thinking exclusively for these digital-media contexts, but to understand how the inner workings of digital contexts influence the ways that ethical thinking operates within them.

Canadian media ethicist Stephen J.A. Ward notes that digital media have complicated the ethical frameworks of journalism not just by making it difficult to know whom to hold accountable for a particular act, but also by expanding the range of possible – and possibly unethical – acts. “Digital media give rise to controversial practices,” he observes, “from using software to effortlessly alter images to using social media to invade the privacy of individuals” (2). At the same time, Ward emphasizes that digital media have also had the positive effect of opening up discussions about media ethics. He notes that “citizens and non-professional bloggers participate in discussions on media ethics,” and that new media ethics are, as a result,

no longer exclusively the terrain of journalists: “it is important that media ethics engage not only professional journalists and journalism students, but also all citizens” (3).

Acknowledging this greater inclusivity of new media ethics, Ess argues that the discourses and practices of new media ethics now operate on the basis of a “bottom-up” model, a model in which the “general principles” of communities take precedence over the “top-down *deductive* model of ethical reasoning [...] that moves from given general principles to the specifics of one particular case” (29, emphasis added). However, “the great difficulty” resulting from this model is that digital contexts have “no general rule/procedure/algorithm for discerning which values, principles, norms, [or] approaches apply” (Ess 29). Here, then, is where Ess’s concept of distributed responsibility comes in. To illustrate the ethical reasoning induced by the experience of distributed responsibility, Ess offers the example of illegally downloading music online. Due to the online distribution of responsibility, which conceals the user illegally downloading music as a single perpetrator, the user is “pulled and influenced in [their] thinking” by considerations such as: “I’m not likely to get caught, so there’s virtually no possibility that this will actually hurt me in some way” (Ess 28-29). As long as there is no “procedure” or “algorithm” in place to apprehend the user, regardless of whether they act individually or as part of a larger group, the user can continue to “test” the boundaries of their responsibility against the backdrop of anonymity that the digital context provides – a backdrop that is, in part, an illusion, as in practice it is often possible to identify and hold accountable users who steal from, or threaten, other users, by tracking their IP address.⁵

What Ess’s notion of distributed responsibility and the example he gives demonstrate is that digital environments may prompt users to abdicate their ethical responsibilities towards the objects they encounter there. This is highly relevant in relation to the digital corpses that I discuss in this study, as these corpses are consumed and shared by multiple, often anonymous actors. Such wide-scale consumption can reduce the ethical responsibility that these actors experience with regard to how they treat digital corpses and what meanings they attach to them. The questions that I pose in this study thus revolve around the consequences of the distributed responsibility that Ess describes: they concern the ethical implications of images of dead or

⁵ Even though individual users can, with enough technical knowhow, almost always be traced, such knowhow is not within everyone’s reach. As American communication scholars Scott R. Stroud and William Cox note: “Even without using measures to hide all traces of your identity (such as your IP address), one can still easily create a new name, gender identity, and even choose an unrealistic photo avatar to shape their online self” (295). These “malleable identities,” they further add, “allow trolls and other harassers the chance to hide their identity from offline consequences as they create harms for their targets” (295).

dying bodies being surrendered to the bottom-up model of online, networked communities and other digital contexts.

In this section, I have specified my study's engagement with cultural analysis and new media ethics. I will now elaborate on its engagement with digital death studies, the field my analyses most directly intervene in. In the next section, I first briefly introduce death studies and the position of digital death studies within this broader field; second, I explain why the study of digital corpses and their creation or (re)appropriation is an important focal point in contemporary death studies; third and lastly, I highlight the key works of existing scholarship that my study responds to, and what my study contributes to the field.

Digital Corpses and Digital Death Studies

Death studies, or “thanatology” as it is often called in the United States, is “the science that studies the events surrounding death, as well as the social, legal, and psychological aspects of death” (Galeotti 4362). The key questions in the field relate to “the cause of deaths, legal implications of death such as the rights and destiny of the remains [...], and social aspects surrounding death,” such as grieving and memorial practices, and the cultural attitudes towards death more generally (Galeotti 4362). British sociologist Tony Walter⁶ describes death studies as a “cross-disciplinary academic field” that originated “in the USA in the late 1950s” and “re-incarnated in the UK in the 1990s” (2020: 250). The field encompasses medicine, sociology, philosophy, archeology, history, art and literature, as well as more practice-based fields such as counseling and nursing, but also the paranormal: magic and spiritualism.⁷ As this wide range shows, the field's subdisciplines vary greatly in their theoretical and practical approaches. Within the context of death studies, however, they all share an interest in the ways that death, dying, bereavement, and the disposal of (non-)human remains affect, complicate, or otherwise relate to their discipline-specific practices and conventions.

Over the past ten years, the subject of digital mediations of death has attracted increasing attention in death-related scholarship. A landmark text is the three-part anthology

⁶ From 2011 to 2015, Walter was the director of the Center for Death and Society (CDAS) at the University of Bath, the central hub for international academic practices related to death, dying and disposal of remains. The CDAS is also the base of the Taylor & Francis journal *Mortality* and the biennial *Death, Dying, and Disposal* conference. The Center and the journal, and the academics involved with them, have been very helpful to me during my research for this study.

⁷ Classic titles in the field – besides the texts I will discuss in the historical overview in Chapter 1 – include *Death, Ritual and Belief* (Davies 1997), *On Bereavement* (Walter 1999), *Bereavement and Commemoration* (Tarlow 1999), and *Beyond the Body* (Hallam et al. 1999).

Digital Death: Mortality and Beyond in the Online Age (2014). Editors Christopher M. Moreman and A. David Lewis bring together twelve studies that capture how digitization – and the increasing presence of digital media in everyday life – has changed attitudes towards mourning, mortality, and memorialization. These changing attitudes are the object of inquiry for the academic subfield of digital death studies, whose emergence Moreman and Lewis describe as follows:

[...] audiences are growing more accustomed to extending their sentiments for traditional mourning into digital environments [...]. This population of individuals who experience dying, death, mourning, grieving, and even mortality itself as a hybrid between the physical and the digital has grown in such a number that it has become the focus of academic discussion. (2)

Moreman and Lewis's anthology provides an overview of "the complexities of navigating [...] mortality in the rapidly changing landscape of digital technology and virtual reality" (2). These complexities include the ephemerality of digital archives and databases, the tension between digital presence and non-digital embodiment, and the ethical dilemmas that arise when a person's social media profiles remain live after the person in question has passed away. In this study, I expand the list of complexities by including dying bodies in my inquiry into the creation, appropriation, and reappropriation of digital corpses, as well as by exploring how the treatment of digital corpses varies depending on how they are gendered and racialized. In addition, I address how digital images of dead bodies are used for shock value, either as a form of harassment or as a form of political activism, and how this shock value can, in turn, be repurposed by users who voluntarily choose to digitize their own dying body. In my afterword, in particular, I reflect on how the shock value of the digital corpse can function as an incentive for global political action.

One of the contributors to *Digital Death* is American religion scholar Candi K. Cann, who, also in 2014, published the monograph *Virtual Afterlives: Grieving the Dead in the Twenty-First Century*. In her study, Cann discusses the influence of digital cultures on contemporary grieving practices, and the new forms of memorialization that have come into practice as a result of this influence, namely "virtual" memorials "that reflec[t] the gradually disappearing body" as the site of mourning (14). Cann describes these memorials as "bodiless memorials," that is, memorials that focus not so much on the body of the dead – as a gravestone in a cemetery does – but on the bodies of the living mourners. As examples of "bodiless memorials" she lists "tattoos," "car-decals," "T-shirts," and "online memorials" (14). These

memorials, Cann writes, “function as replacements of the [dead] body, since we cannot keep the body among us; they must be reinscribed in public space, in material remembrance, etched into our bodies, pasted on our cars, worn on our bodies, or transfigured on our social-network sites” (16). In my research, I pick up on the “replacements” of the corpse that Cann refers to by analyzing the placement of human corpses in digital spheres as images. In emphasizing the way in which these images are appropriated and reappropriated, I move beyond Cann’s focus on (digital) reinscription as a way to “keep the body among us” by drawing attention to the lack of control a deceased’s loved ones have with regard to demarcating what purposes their digital corpse will be made to serve beyond that of memorialization.

Another recent volume on the subject of digital death is *Mediating and Remediating Death* (2016), edited by the Danish communication scholars Dorthe Refslund Christensen⁸ and Kjetil Sandvik. This book thematizes the relationship between media environments (Facebook, blogs, video games) and the materiality of death (graves, spirits, religious objects), just as I do in this study. However, unlike my work, which focuses on the ethical aspects of remediating death online, Christensen and Sandvik focus primarily on the technological affordances of new media environments, such as the online network’s “possibilities for chats and forums,” which facilitate new ways of collective mourning and sharing grief in a public place (13). The volume *Digital Afterlife: Death Matters in a Digital Age* (2020), edited by British sociologists Maggi Savin-Baden and Victoria Mason-Robbie, also looks into the ways in which digital environments allow for remediations of death. At the same time, this study also differs from that of Christensen and Sandvik: rather than on technological facilitation, Savin-Baden and Mason-Robbie focus on the legal, social, and pedagogical issues that digital remediations of death give rise to, such as the post-mortem ownership of social media profiles and the online agency of the dead. In my study, I take up these questions of post-mortem ownership and online agency, and relate them specifically to digital (re)productions of dead and dying human bodies.

A study that considers images of dead and dying bodies in a digital context in a similar way to mine, is *Dying in Full Detail: Mortality and Digital Documentary* by Jennifer Malkowski (2017). Malkowski, an American film and media scholar, examines what digital renditions of human death reveal about both the gaze⁹ of the person who made them and that

⁸ Refslund Christensen runs the Death Online Research Network (DORN) at the University of Copenhagen, which was founded in 2013 and facilitates the biennial Death Online Research Symposium (DORS).

⁹ Malkowski explicitly uses this psychoanalytic term to describe the act of looking. They do so via Vivian Sobchack’s *Carnal Visions*, in which Sobchack “grants ethical approval to five [...] ways of looking,” all of them termed “gazes”: the “accidental gaze,” the “helpless gaze,” the “endangered gaze,” the “interventional gaze,” and the “humane gaze” (19). To this list, Malkowski adds “the expectant gaze, the automated gaze, and the ubiquitous

of the viewer seeking them out. The problem with these digital renditions, Malkowski argues, is that “the promise of seeing death’s ‘full detail’ can never be fulfilled by any image technology,” as “cameras have little chance to communicate the totality of this experience” (202). Digital (image-based) documentation, Malkowski thus asserts, faces a problem of representation, as “documentary records of lives ending in front of a camera [...] [are] perched precariously on the edge of representation” (199). In their study, Malkowski explores in what ways, and to what extent, digital technologies succeed in capturing death, and how different forms of digital documentation affect the viewer’s ethical response to the death in question. Although their study also considers the ethical stakes of the digital circulation of images of death, I do so with a somewhat different focus than Malkowski, who concentrates on moving images of death in digital documentary film. In my analyses, I look at how the digital circulation of images of dead and dying bodies, both still and moving, poses ethical problems in the specific context of the Internet, particularly as a result of this medium’s interactivity and scale of content dissemination. My interest, moreover, is less in the question of whether the offline experience of death or its totality can be adequately conveyed by digital images than in the question: how can users interact with digital corpses, even when they portray death in incomplete or even fictional ways?

Malkowski not only addresses the difficulty of showing a realistic depiction of death in a fabricated environment, but also questions the extent to which digital media can preserve these deaths, be it for posterity or evidence. “Digital files, too,” they write, “will degrade, disappear, or be abandoned by their guardians at some point in the exhausting, expensive, and ceaseless cycle of content migration to ever-newer formats” (Malkowski 204). In my study, I do not question the *format* of the digital as a preservation method for digital corpses as much as the distributed ethical *responsibility* that arises in relation to such corpses as shareable, interactive objects whose functions and meanings may change radically as a result of the actions to which they are subjected by different (groups of) users. My analyses, in short, build on Malkowski’s study of digital death by shifting the focus from questions of realism and preservation to the questions of agency, responsibility and ownership that arise in the context of the *online* circulation of digital corpses (including, potentially, those in the digital

gaze” as additional “ethical” ways of looking (20). While I also refer to Sobchack’s text in Chapter 2, my analysis does not focus on the function of the gaze, but on how the dead bodies function in images as, in Sobchack’s terms, a “visual taboo” (242).

documentaries Malkowski discusses) beyond their intended, imagined, or desired functions and meanings.

Finally, a recent study on the material remediation of the human corpse, *Technologies of the Human Corpse* (2020) by American death scholar John Troyer, outlines “the dead human body’s historical and theoretical relationship to technology” (xxxii). Troyer presents a chronological study of modern corpse-preservation technologies, from the embalming machines of the nineteenth century to the *Body Worlds* exhibitions from the 1990s and early 2000s.¹⁰ Particularly relevant to my discussion of the sociopolitical functions and meanings of images of corpses, is Troyer’s analysis of HIV/AIDS corpses as “product[s] of American cultural politics,” a topic which I will address in Chapter 1 in my historical outline of the Western corpse-image’s political instrumentalization (49). Furthermore, all my analyses lean on Troyer’s technical approaches to the remediated corpse when they address the access, agency, and control that is gained or lost once the human corpse is digitized within a global, shareable environment.

The texts in digital death studies that I have discussed here provide a valuable foundation for the questions I raise in this study. They each offer new insights into the digital remediation of human corpses as posing ethical dilemmas (Moreman and Lewis), as prompting embodied memorials (Cann), as ethnographic and pedagogical instruments (Christensen and Sandvik; Savin-Baden and Mason-Robbie), as requiring mobile archives (West and Schäfer), as moving images (Malkowski), and as subjected to technology (Troyer). These insights feed into but are also expanded by my exploration, in the chapters that follow, of the ways in which digital corpses are *created*, *appropriated*, and *reappropriated*, and the specific ethical questions these three types of mobilizations raise in terms of agency, responsibility, and ownership.

Chapter Outline

In the four chapters that follow, I study the historical lineage and different contemporary mobilizations of digital dead and dying bodies. In doing so, I focus mostly on Western case

¹⁰ *Body Worlds* is a series of exhibitions that display dissected human bodies. The concept for the exhibitions was developed by German anatomist Gunther von Hagens, who invented a novel plastination technique to preserve human bodies in the late 1970s. The first *Body Worlds* exhibition opened in Tokyo in 1995 and it has traveled to over sixty countries since, with permanent exhibits opening throughout Europe and the United States from the late 2010s onward. Besides being known for its spectacular presentation of human remains, *Body Worlds* has repeatedly generated ethical controversy. See Jespersen et al.

studies, in the awareness that my materials are part of a broader spectrum of cultural and media practices – practices that are unthinkable outside a global media context but shaped by different local traditions.¹¹

In Chapter 1, “Historicizing the Digital Corpse,” I present a historical overview of dead and dying bodies in Western visual media, specifically photography, in order to discuss the changing attitudes towards images of dead and dying bodies that, to various extents, remain relevant in the digital age. In this chapter, I am especially interested in the different purposes that the visually mediated corpse or corpse-to-be – as a corpse-image – has traditionally served, which range from acting as private mementos to being used as political tools. I also outline the ethical questions that have historically arisen around such images, and that still play a role in the digital environments on which the rest of this study focuses. Through this historical overview, I demonstrate that the circulation of images of corpses and corpses-to-be is not unique to the digital age, but that digital media have radically *expanded* their accessibility and shareability.

For this chapter’s theoretical framework, I primarily make use of French historian Philippe Ariès’s germinal *The Hour of Our Death: The Classic History of Western Attitudes Towards Death Over the Last One Thousand Years* (1977), particularly his description of the gradual twentieth-century shift towards conceptions and depictions of death as “ugly and dirty” (569). I illustrate how – in response to this new perspective on death, which replaced the nineteenth-century emphasis on its beauty – images of death acquired a new political potential as incentives to shock people into action. I explore this potential by discussing the case of Emmett Till – a 14-year-old African-American child whose lynching in 1955 attracted worldwide attention after an open-coffin public funeral – as well as performances and happenings that mobilized the human corpse in overtly political ways, such as the “Ashes Action” movement of the 1980s AIDS crisis. Then, I move to a discussion of how certain (gendered, racialized) corpses have historically been “fetishized” in Western image culture, a discussion which I mediate via Elisabeth Bronfen’s *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic* (1992), and how contemporary artists (most notably American artist Hannah Wilke in her *Intra-Venus* series) have subverted this fetishizing tradition by using images of

¹¹ See, for relevant analyses that include additional contexts, Russian cultural scholar Dina Khapaeva’s *The Celebration of Death in Contemporary Culture*, which compares American and Russian ‘cults of death’ in media and pop culture. See also *Death in Contemporary Popular Culture*, edited by Romanian death scholar Adriana Teodorescu and Danish sociologist Michael Hviid Jacobsen, which explores popular approaches to death in a global context.

corpses as a form of sociopolitical critique. I conclude the chapter with an analysis that presents the controversies around photographs of Princess Diana Spencer's death (1995) and the 9/11 Falling Man (2001) as exemplifying the persistence of the aestheticization of death that accompanied its twentieth-century status as a visual taboo.

The three chapters that follow this historical overview each correspond to one of the types of interaction with the digital corpse identified above: creation, appropriation, and reappropriation. I start by discussing the *appropriation* of digital corpses in Chapter 2. I begin with appropriation instead of, as may seem more logical, creation because I will contend that the case studies of the *creation* and *reappropriation* of digital corpses I discuss in Chapter 3 and 4 function as counter reactions to the case studies of appropriation presented in Chapter 2. Moreover, my own primary school encounter with digital corpses appropriated for their shock value directly fed into my motivation for undertaking this research; it was the disturbing effect of this appropriation on me and my classmates that first made me aware of the difficulty of controlling the ways that images of dead and dying bodies are circulated online and the ethical questions this raises. Finally, my choice to start with the *appropriation* of digital corpses is inspired by the fact that a central worry about the corpse, according to Danish communications scholar Carsten Stage, is the "disruption" of the body's "biological, social, cyclical, linear, self-oriented and other-oriented rhythms" (2016: 205) it implies. Through death, Stage argues, "the body in a way loses its own rhythm and becomes an object controlled by the rhythms of the other (for example, during the funeral)" (2016: 205). The highly interactive context of social media platforms and other digital environments, I contend, exacerbates the loss of this rhythm and takes ethical concerns about what alien rhythms may be imposed upon a dead body to new heights.

In Chapter 2, I thus begin my inquiry by focusing on the *appropriation* of digital corpses. In this chapter, titled "Appropriating the Digital Corpse," I analyze two images of corpses that were distributed widely on social media by various actors, and whose public visibility was significantly impacted by the global accessibility, large-scale shareability, and memeification that typify social media platforms. The first corpse-image I discuss is that of Nikki Catsouras (2006), an American teenager whose lethal car crash was photographed and actively shared online, and the second that of Iranian activist Nedā Āghā-Soltān (2009), whose assassination by a government sniper was the first human death to be uploaded onto YouTube. These cases allow me to reflect on the ethical consequences of a corpse becoming visually available for widespread appropriation on social media. I argue that, in different ways, both

case studies illustrate how, and to what effects, the image of a digital corpse may become detached from its original sociopolitical context. The specificities of the case studies prompt me to examine two particular motivations for appropriating images of digital corpses – (sadistic) pleasure and political activism – and to pay specific attention to how the gender of the person whose corpse-image was appropriated affected the functions and meanings it acquired and how (in)appropriate those functions and meanings were considered to be.

Through the controversies that arose around them, the two case studies poignantly illustrate the ethical tensions that may arise when images of a human corpse become highly shareable objects in a digital environment, and the risk of ethical detachment that such digital appropriation, as a result of its participation in a system of distributed responsibility, poses. I address these tensions through, among others, American media theorist Vivian Sobchack’s notion of the “lived-body subject” as a visual reproduction of a single, human life (242); and South African art historian Griselda Pollock’s critique of digital images and the ethical “severance” that digital environments, as a “mode of encounter,” enable (225).

In Chapter 3, “Creating the Digital Corpse,” I focus on the fictional digital corpses created by American author Shelley Jackson in her hypertext work *Patchwork Girl* (1995) and by the French artists Pierre Huyghe and Philippe Parreno in their video exhibition *No Ghost Just a Shell* (1999-2002). I examine these two digital art objects – which both revolve around a fictional, dead or dying female protagonist in a digital environment – to address how the *creation* of digital corpses allows a further investigation of their appropriation and of the ethical issues that arise in its wake with regard to agency, responsibility, and ownership. Specifically, I look into how these two fictional corpses were constructed by their creators, and then read and appropriated by readers (in the case of *Patchwork Girl*) and viewers (in the case of *No Ghost Just a Shell*). I argue that these fictional corpses bring similar ethical questions to the fore as the non-fictional corpses discussed in Chapter 2, but do so in a less controversial and thus more freely experimental manner, since these corpse-images are not based on ‘real-life’ bodies. Unlike the photos of Catsouras and Āghā-Soltān, both of which depict what were once actual living bodies, the corpse-images created for *Patchwork Girl* and *No Ghost Just a Shell* never lived outside the digital realm. This, however, does not mean that these fictional digital corpses can be separated from the frameworks of oppression (sexism, racism) that have long dominated many everyday lives, non-digital and digital alike; in fact, I argue that they allow the effects of these frameworks on how (digital) corpses are and should be handled to be explored at the level of the reader or viewer.

As such, the digital corpses created by Jackson and Huyghe and Parreno offer valuable insights into the questions of how people engage with corpse-images and how social constructions of gender and race impact this engagement. I use American media scholar Heather Warren-Crow's notion of malleability and the "girled image" (that is, the image as a "viewable, shareable, alterable" object) to explore how the gendering of the fictional digital corpse influences the way it is encountered and subsequently appropriated by readers and viewers (92). I also refer to American media scholar Dorothy Howard and New Zealand art historian Tim Gentles's notion of the "cartoon body," which allows me to further consider the extent to which such body images as digital corpses reproduce the political – and particularly the labor-oriented – narratives of the corporeal world, and to what extent they may be able to critique such narratives (n. pag.).

In Chapter 4, "Reappropriating the Digital Corpse," I focus on the digitization of corpses-to-be – dying bodies, that is – through an analysis of two American terminal illness stories that were shared online. Tom Mandel (1994) and Katherine E. Brandt (2019) both produced extensive online writings about their terminal experience with cancer. In a comparative study of these writings, I explore how online illness narration can serve as a tool for reappropriating the image of the dying body, in order to reclaim control over the function and meaning assigned to one's digital corpse(to-be). I illustrate how Mandel and Brandt mobilized their experiences of dying as a way to foster a support network online, and how their respective online illness narratives helped them to assert themselves in a more personal (Mandel) and a more political (Brandt) manner. I also show the flipside of this practice, by highlighting how the online illness story's interactive features may be (ab)used by others to put pressure on or critique the author. This risk of exploitation, which constitutes the appropriation of a reappropriation, I contend, adds another twist to the ethical questions raised by the circulation of digital corpses by suggesting that even the presence of their owner cannot guarantee full agency or control over such corpses.

As a theoretical framework for my discussion in this chapter, I make use of American sociologist Arthur W. Frank's notion of the illness narrative, particularly the "quest narrative" as a form of storytelling that "affords the ill person a voice as teller of her own story" (115). I also refer to Carsten Stage's analysis of terminal illness blogs as "transmitters of affect" (2015: 174) and American medical scholars Jessica Keim-Malpass et al.'s discussion of online terminal illness writings as ways of "legacy making" (209). By relating these texts to Mandel's and Brandt's online illness writings, I unpack how the narrativization of a digital corpse-to-be

contributes to its potential to serve as a tool for the dying to reclaim a sense of agency in digital space, allowing the digital corpse-to-be to become a political instrument wielded by the dying. However, my reading of the two case studies also challenges overly optimistic accounts of the degree of empowerment that online illness storytelling affords. Through the work of British sociologists Stephanie Alice Baker and Chris Rojek, I demonstrate how terminal illness blogs function as products of “attention capital,” which precludes certain users (with certain bodies) from benefiting from the social and economic empowerment that terminal illness blogs potentially offer.

Finally, in the afterword, titled “Recapitulating the Digital Corpse,” I summarize my findings and offer a critical reflection on my account of digital corpses in light of two social crises that dominated the news at different stages of this study’s writing. The first is the European refugee crisis, to the severity and human cost of which European audiences were alerted in 2015 by the corpse-image of Alan Kurdi, a three-year old Syrian boy who drowned while his family attempted to flee to Europe. The second concerns the transnational protests and riots following the murder by police officers of George Floyd in Minneapolis on May 25, 2020; just like Kurdi’s viral photograph, photos and videos of Floyd’s murder prompted a broad transnational protest against systemic racism. Both cases demonstrate the profound, global social and political impact that images of digital corpses can have. The findings in this study, I conclude, offer tools to think through current events in which lives and bodies are at stake, and to reflect on the roles that digital corpses play – or can play – in these events: they can damage and hurt, they can reinstate *and* undermine existing power relations, they can serve therapeutic purposes, and they can uncover local instances of social injustice on a global scale, and thereby serve as potential instigators of political change.

Chapter 1 – Historicizing the Virtual Corpse:

From the Victorians to the Falling Man

A new image of death is forming: the ugly and hidden death, hidden because it is ugly and dirty.

- Philippe Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death* (1977)

Introduction

In this chapter, I introduce the historical framework on which my discussion of the digital corpse is based. For this purpose, it is crucial to note that the corpse-image is not exclusive to the Internet age. The public circulation of visual representations of human corpses is a practice that started long before social media platforms gained prominence.¹² Here, I will present an overview of how, and for what purposes, images of human corpses have been created and circulated in Western culture over the past hundred and fifty years. I have chosen this timeframe because almost all the digital images of corpses that I discuss in this study are photo- or videographic and thus historically indebted to a practice first popularized in the mid-1800s with the invention of the daguerreotype, a technology after which, according to Walter Benjamin, “the painters were left behind by the technician” (17).

“Ever since cameras were invented in 1839,” Susan Sontag writes in her influential book-length essay *Regarding the Pain of Others*, “photography has kept company with death” (21). Sontag points to the long-standing tradition of using photography as a tool for documenting death, which encompasses the photographs taken during the American Civil War (1861-1865) as well as the visual documentation of the destruction camps of the Second World War (1939-1945). She describes how, from the moment “the camera was emancipated from the tripod,” – that is, made portable – the act of “picture-taking acquired an immediacy and authority greater than any verbal account in conveying the horror of mass-produced death”

¹²Czech art historian Daniela Rywíková demonstrates, for example, that Christian beliefs around “Death, the Last Judgment, hell, and heaven” were “popular themes of late medieval iconography—with the Last Judgment being frequent in painting and sculpture from the eleventh century” (xxi). Towards the thirteenth century, Rywíková notes, the iconography of death started to become more varied, as “[c]ommissioners and artists naturally strove to visualize death in all her semantic accents and contexts” (xxi).

(21). In the essay, Sontag famously argues that photography made death, violence, and the atrocities of war available to the greater public, and that this mass-circulation of death and violence contributed to Western society's gradual numbing to images of death and violence.

In this chapter, I will not be discussing the history of photography in terms of the *affects* (or lack thereof) that images of dead and dying bodies produce, but rather in terms of their media *effects*. My main interest is in the question of how the medium of photography influenced the sociopolitical standards for circulating images of death. I will explore this question by providing a succinct overview of historical photographic images of dead and dying bodies that illustrates the dominant means of and reasons for circulating such images. This overview serves to highlight the changing sociopolitical functions and meanings of depicting corpses in visual media, a practice that follows not only an aesthetic and social tradition (in relation to practices of mourning), but also an activist or political one. It is the social and political implications of the circulation of corpse-images that I will use as the springboard for my analysis of the ethical questions raised by the circulation of digital corpses(to-be) in this study's later chapters.

“When the new technology of photography emerged as a practical working proposition in the 1840s,” British art historian Audrey Linkman notes, “its first major commercial application was portraiture” (309). Portraiture was “a long-established thriving trade,” so when photography emerged as an artistic occupation in mid-nineteenth-century Britain, “photographers appropriated a set of ideologies and practices that had been developed over centuries by painters working with oil on canvas” (309). “Post-mortem portraiture,” Linkman notes, “was one of [these] established practices that photographers inherited from their predecessors” (309). But post-mortem photography was not just a continuation of traditional portraiture practices; it was also a tool that helped to vernacularize the portrayal of death throughout different social classes in British society. “While relatively few people may have been able to afford a painting or drawing of a dead relative, photography brought portraiture within the financial reach of a wider section of society,” Linkman writes (312). As a result, both the well-off and less affluent people could now commission post-mortem portraits (Linkman 312).

The history of the post-mortem photograph is relevant to my discussion of digital corpses, as post-mortem photography not only vernacularized the portrayal of death but also made it easier to reproduce and share such portrayals. British cultural scholar Raymond Williams notes that, as camera technologies improved over the course of the nineteenth

century, “[p]rofessional and then amateur photography spread rapidly, and reproduction and then transmission, in the developing newspaper press, were achieved” (10). These characteristics (they are easy to spread, reproduce, and share) photographic images share, to an extent, with online imagery. The same goes for the ethical questions about agency, responsibility, and ownership at the center of this study. The Internet, then, does not represent something completely new, but a next stage in the historical development of death images – one that has further intensified their vernacularization and circulation.

As I mentioned above, this chapter serves to present a brief outline of the history of photography and its role in vernacularizing and widening the circulation of images of death. Before turning to my discussion of how digitization has intensified long-standing ethical questions about the circulation of images of dead and dying bodies, however, it is important to first discuss these questions, and to examine how pre-Internet images of corpses were created and disseminated. Therefore, in what follows, I revisit and rethink the history of post-mortem photographs in the context of present-day social media practices. By presenting a chronology of influential corpse-images throughout recent history, I demonstrate not only how visual depictions of corpses and their circulation have changed between the late nineteenth century and today, but also what historical sociopolitical purposes of the corpse-photograph still resonate with contemporary, digital images of dead and dying bodies. This chapter, then, serves to situate the digital corpse in a longer history of bearing witness, visually, to dead and dying bodies, so as to illustrate how the digital corpses that I discuss in the coming chapters continue, in new ways, long-standing discussions about the ethics around dead and dying bodies, and the circulation of their visual representations.

In the first section of this chapter, I discuss the nineteenth-century tradition of post-mortem photography, which started as a convenient way of involving far-away relatives in the intimate process of grieving, but gained a more political and public function in the twentieth century, notably in the case of lynching victim Emmett Till, which I discuss as a pioneering instance of the corpse-photograph’s sociopolitical mobilization. I present this discussion via the work of French historian Phillippe Ariès, who describes how historical representations of death have shifted from being considered private to first becoming public and then being rendered a taboo in his seminal 1977 text *The Hour of Our Death*. In relation to the latter phase of this development, I discuss how the tradition of post-mortem photography has recently been repurposed in contemporary art, specifically by American photographer Sally Mann and Russian art collective AES+F, in order to break the taboo on death.

In the second section, I move to an analysis of the corpse's aestheticization in Western visual history from the mid-1800s (when photography was invented) onward and, more specifically, of the role that gender has traditionally played in this aestheticization. Here, I will make use of German-American cultural scholar Elisabeth Bronfen's seminal text *Over Her Dead Body* (1992), which draws attention to the historical fetishization of the female corpse. I briefly discuss the depiction of dead women in Pre-Raphaelite painting as a prime example of such fetishization, before moving to a discussion of American artist Hannah Wilke's *Intra-Venus* photo series (1991-1992) as an artwork that seeks to subvert it.

In the final section, I discuss how images of dead and dying bodies became controversial in print news media towards the end of the twentieth century and, as a result, gradually became a rare sight. As examples of this development, I discuss the way many newspapers across the world refused to print images of the corpse of Princess Diana Spencer (1997), as well as the controversy surrounding the 9/11 Falling Man photograph (2001). As a theoretical frame for this discussion, I make use of American media scholar Barbie Zelizer's influential study of "about-to-die" depictions – that is, images of individuals who face their imminent death. It was the taboo on corpse imagery in print media, as I will demonstrate, that heightened public curiosity about uncensored images of death. This helps to explain why, as discussed in the Introduction, shock sites like Rotten.com became so popular in the early twenty-first century. It was this popularity, I argue, that gave rise to many of the appropriative practices surrounding digital corpses that I will discuss in later chapters.

Depictions of the Dead: From Practical to Political

The first post-mortem photographs, dating from the mid-nineteenth century, were mostly taken for practical reasons, as tools for remembering the dead. Photographs of the dead, Swedish archeologist Susan Matland writes, were "framed and displayed openly on walls and mantels, and were sent to relatives and friends, many who could not attend the funeral" (170). As trains and boats were slow, and air travel not yet an option, many people depended on a photograph to see their lost relative one final time before they were buried. American historian Deborah Lutz writes that post-mortem photography was a convenient way of reproducing the object of mourning (that is, the corpse): it made the dead shareable in a way that less portable objects such as "death masks, effigies, marble busts, miniatures, and tombstones" did not (160). Like Matland, Lutz argues that the main purpose of these photographs was to share images of the

deceased with those who “lived too far away” to attend the funeral procession (160). This use of the post-mortem photograph foreshadows the role that digital media would play in the intensified circulation of death in the late twentieth and twenty-first century.



Figure 1.1: A post-mortem family portrait from the Victorian era, of a couple posing with their deceased daughter. Year and photographer unknown.¹³

As noted, post-mortem photography did not only make images of death more shareable, but also more economically accessible. Danish communications scholar Luca Tateo argues that the invention of photography made post-mortem portraiture “more accessible to the lower social classes” and that “grief became more democratic” as a result (476). This also meant that images of the dead became more common. Italian cultural scholar Melanie Borgo and her co-authors describe how, “[s]tarting in 1840, post-mortem pictures became so popular that they were the most lucrative form of income for photographers” (104). However, this did not necessarily make post-mortem photographs cheap. Though photographs were definitely more

¹³ Image source: <https://www.thevintagenews.com/2018/07/03/post-mortem-photos/> (Accessed: 18 Aug. 2020).

affordable than painted portraits, British historian Julie-Marie Strange notes that “[p]hotographic portraits were still a luxury for most working-class families at the turn of the twentieth century” (215). Strange further adds that post-mortem photographs (Figure 1.1) were a particular “indulgence” for working-class families, due to “[t]he extra cost of requesting the photographer to attend the family home” (215).

With the costs of a post-mortem photograph being relatively high, the taking of such a photograph was an important social occasion, and the deceased’s surviving family took preparations accordingly. Borgo et al. observe that nineteenth-century post-mortem photographs had their own “iconography,” a style that they describe as “the last sleep” (105). For this style, the corpse’s body and facial position was arranged “to give an expression of serenity,” with the state of death being “emphasized by symbols such as crucifixes, flowers, and holy books” (Borgo et al. 105). The performative setting served a spiritual purpose, Lutz adds, allowing mourners to position the corpse in a way that made it look “tranquil” and, through this process, “record the evangelical, ‘happy death’” (160).

While post-mortem photographs are no longer an active tradition in Western culture in the spiritual, Victorian sense,¹⁴ they do continue to be referenced in contemporary art. Here, two influential art projects that were inspired by post-mortem photographs and that both revive and rethink the evangelical “happy death” alluded to by Lutz merit attention. The first is *Défilé*, a photo series that the Russian art collective AES+F produced between 2000 and 2007. As the artists write on their personal website, *Défilé* “explores the way individuals deal with the concept of mortality by juxtaposing images of death with images of beauty, in this case high fashion.” For the project, AES+F acquired a set of seven embalmed corpses of both men and women, young and old, with their faces contorted by rigor mortis, and dressed them in *haute couture* fashion robes. The bodies, clearly dead and not at all peaceful-looking like their counterparts in nineteenth-century post-mortem photography, were photographed in state-of-the-art lightboxes, similar to those used for the covers of high fashion magazines (Figure 1.2).

German art scholar Kerstin Mey observes that, while *Défilé*’s images “may reference the tradition of posthumous portraiture,” the corpses as staged by AES+F are vastly bleaker in

¹⁴ The not unrelated practice of forensic photography, of course, persists until today. American forensics scholar Robert C Shaler has outlined the contemporary uses of, and techniques for, photography in a forensic context in *Crime Scene Forensics* (2011), and American photography scholar Gale Spring has written amply about the various types of photography that can be used as forensic evidence in present-day crime cases, including in *The Focal Encyclopedia of Photography* (2007). One of the case studies I discuss in Chapter 2, that of Nikki Catsouras, concerns a corpse-image originally taken for forensic purposes. Furthermore, the Sally Mann exhibition I discuss below also makes reference to forensic photography.

demeanor than their historical counterparts (153). The photographed corpses are “isolated from their surrounds and any human company, except of their own kind within the ensemble of the nameless deceased” (Mey 153). The dead in *Défilé*, therefore, are not representative of the “happy death” that Lutz describes. On the contrary, the bodies presented by AES+F are, in Mey’s words, “socially ‘tarnished’ cadavers” (153). As the project’s title indicates, *Défilé* explores the post-mortem photograph’s potential as a site of defilement. Without the spiritual associations from the nineteenth century and the effort taken in that era to make corpses appear as if merely asleep, AES+F’s project makes clear, a post-mortem photograph becomes a visualization of the ruthless destruction of life by death, with a susceptibility to being experienced as repellant.



Figure 1.2: *Défilé #1* by AES+F. 2000-2007, digital collage, light-box, 205 x 106 cm.¹⁵

¹⁵ Image source: <https://aesf.art/projects/defile/> (Accessed: 18 Aug. 2020).

What AES+F's *Défilé* project demonstrates is that, in a contemporary context, the post-mortem photograph's morally redemptive connotations are no longer dominant. While this does not mean that the familial, "happy death" function of the post-mortem photograph has become fully obsolete,¹⁶ contemporary corpse photographs tend to serve a more public, often artistic function. Susan Matland affirms that, in the present-day artistic landscape, "post-mortem photographs have evolved from being primarily a personal undertaking to being acceptable as an expression of art" (167).

Another striking example of the post-mortem photograph's transition towards the realm of public art, besides the *Défilé* project, is the 2003 photo series *What Remains*, by American photographer Sally Mann. For this project, Mann documented the decaying bodies on a body farm¹⁷ in Knoxville, Tennessee. Mann's photographs depict human carcasses as they decompose on the farm grounds, in black-and-white, some of them in close-up (Figure 1.3). The dead bodies in Mann's photographs, like those in the *Défilé* project, do not evoke the tranquility of nineteenth-century post-mortem photography; instead, they (quite explicitly) reference the possible violence of death through the bodies' placement at a site for forensic research centered on the intricacies of the human decomposition process. Rather than its *tranquility*, Mann's work emphasizes the *utility* of the dead human body in the context of forensic science and, by association, investigations of future homicide cases. Despite the aesthetically pleasing black-and-white color scheme of *What Remains*, the photo series' decomposing subjects have a violent undertone that confront the viewer with the reality – as well as the necessity – of body farms as tools for advancing forensic research.

This violent undertone was not overlooked in the series' reception. One reviewer for *The New York Times*, Sarah Boxer, called Mann's corpse photographs "disgusting," not so much because of their depiction of death as because of Mann's ethical approach to her dead subjects: she accused Mann of breaching "the privacy and the decency of the dead" (a critique that, incidentally, was also leveled at the *Body Worlds* exhibition that I discussed in the Introduction). A central point of Boxer's ethical criticism concerns the question of agency.

¹⁶ See, for example, the contemporary practice of taking pictures with stillborn babies, as described by British art scholar Margaret Godel (2007).

¹⁷ A body farm is "a research center where scientists study the human decomposition process" (Slodden 112). The first body farm, which is the one where Mann took the pictures for *What Remains*, was founded by forensic anthropologist William Bass, in Knoxville, Tennessee, in 1971. The bodies studied at body farms are sourced by "either tak[ing] possession of unclaimed bodies left at the state medical examiner's office, or alternatively, people mak[ing] arrangements prior to their death to donate their bodies" (Slodden 112). At present, there are seven active body farms in the United States, one in Canada, and one in Australia; there are plans for developing a body farm in India as well (Bridges).

Other than the subjects of post-mortem photographs of the Victorian era – a time when post-mortem photography was a common and relatively private social practice among well-off families, on whose potential enactment members could anticipate – the subjects of Mann’s photographs were unlikely to have foreseen having their bodies featured in a public post-mortem photo series. In this sense, Boxer’s critique of Mann’s photographs is similar to the imbalance in agency that I will discuss in Chapter 2 in relation to the cases of Nikki Catsouras and Nedā Āghā-Soltān. Just as in those cases, in Mann’s photos, images of a dead (or dying) body are circulated beyond the control of the depicted or their surviving loved ones, and, in this circulation, also change contexts, in this case, from a scientific to an aesthetic one. Such changes in context not only affect the function of corpse-images, but also their meaning.



Figure 1.3: *Untitled (Body Farm #18)* by Sally Mann. 2000. 30 x 38 inch silver gelatin print with soluvar varnish.¹⁸

¹⁸ Image source: <https://www.jacksonfineart.com/artworks/31335/> (Accessed: 18 Aug. 2020).

It would be presumptuous to assume that Mann herself was not aware of her photo series' ethical charge. One could even argue that her *What Remains* project is itself a critique of (re)mobilizations of human corpses, as it highlights the physical processes (such as the body's closely monitored decomposition while being positioned naked in a research facility) as well as the appropriative processes (the mobilization of human decomposition as an artistic intervention) that the dead can be subjected to when they yield (or, in the case of some body farm subjects, let others yield) their bodies to science. In drawing her viewers' attention to these processes, Mann, one could say, simultaneously exposes corpses to the public *and* critically interrogates the act of exposing.

Despite Mann's disturbing depictions of corpses – and the ethical critiques that were voiced of her work – the *What Remains* series would be displayed in such major art museums as the Tate Modern in London and the Moderna Museet in Stockholm. What interests me here are not the details of its public reception as such, however, but rather a recurring thread in the public responses to Mann's photo series and AES+F's *Défilé* project. Both art projects suggest that the circulation of a corpse-image is possible and considered acceptable (at least by some people) in contemporary Western culture when it is presented under the auspices of artistic or scientific practice. A similar premise of acceptability underpins Gunther von Hagen's *Body Worlds* exhibition, so American death scholar John Troyer argues. In his words, this exhibition “us[es] the language of anatomical science to further indulge man-made fictions” (89). I will return to this notion of the greater acceptability of the corpse-image in the context of contemporary art and science in my discussion of Pierre Huyghe and Philippe Parreno's *No Ghost Just a Shell* exhibition in Chapter 3.

In their 2016 study of death and illness photography, Spanish art scholars Rebeca Pardo and Montse Morcate observe that the practice of photographing the dead moved “[f]rom the open, proud production and exhibition of such photographs to family members and acquaintances in the second half of the nineteenth century” to becoming “an almost disgraceful private practice in the second half of the twentieth century” (72). Indeed, after centuries of public display, the exhibition of the dead human body itself became a taboo practice in twentieth-century Western culture. Just how problematic the public discussion and representation of death has become today is indicated by such calls for a more progressive approach to death as the “death positivity movement” and its so-called “Order of the Good Death,” which was founded by American death scholar Caitlin Doughty in 2011. Doughty writes on the Order's website: “The Order is about making death a part of your life,” and

“[a]ccepting that death itself is natural, but the death anxiety and terror of modern culture are not.” By encouraging the integration of death in everyday practices, Doughty aims to decrease the taboo on death in contemporary Western society.

In 1977, French historian Philippe Ariès already reflected on the sociocultural desecration of the human corpse in his widely-cited historical study *The Hour of Our Death*. With a tangible sense of regret at the realization that death is becoming a more and more private and abject event, he writes:

Death no longer inspires fear solely because of its absolute negativity; it also turns the stomach, like any nauseating spectacle. It becomes improper, like the biological acts of man, the secretions of the human body. *It is indecent to let someone die in public*. It is no longer acceptable for strangers to come into a room that smells of urine, sweat, and gangrene, and where the sheets are soiled. Access to this room must be forbidden, except to a few intimates capable of overcoming their disgust, or to those indispensable persons who provide certain services. *A new image of death is forming*: the ugly and hidden death, hidden because it is ugly and dirty. (569, emphasis added)

In Ariès’s view, with time, death has turned into a “nauseating spectacle” in the twentieth-century Western context, and, by implication, images of death have accrued a provocative power. This new, shocking power of the death-image can be deployed for aesthetic purposes (as in the work of AES+F and Mann), for shock value (as happens in media entertainment),¹⁹ but also for political aims. It is this political function to which I want to turn now.

In the death-conservative twentieth century, forced exposure to a human corpse became a potent tool for raising sociopolitical awareness of injustice, such as (violent) discrimination based on gender, sexuality, or race. Consider, as an early and particularly poignant example, the 1955 case of Emmett Till. Till was a fourteen-year-old African-American boy from Chicago who was lynched in Money, Mississippi, after a white woman, Carolyn Bryant, falsely accused him of sexual misconduct. Till was, as American historian Thomas L. Bynum describes the case, in Mississippi at the time to visit his uncle and had supposedly “made ugly remarks toward [Bryant]” when he “entered the local grocery store” that she owned, although

¹⁹ An extreme example of the deployment of the corpse’s shock value in contemporary media is the comedy-horror magazine *Girls and Corpses*, which couples the visual language of traditional men’s magazines like *Playboy* and *Hustler* (women in bikinis, racy centerfolds) with images of fake human corpses. Though the fakeness of the corpses is evident, it actually amplifies – rather than diminishes – their shock value because it allows for them to be presented in horrific, or otherwise over-the-top ways: the corpses are, for example, zombified or dressed in vaudevillian attire. See the magazine’s website: <http://www.girlsandcorpses.com/>.

“[o]ther accounts maintained that [Till] only said, ‘Bye-bye, Baby’” (80). A few days after Bryant and Till’s encounter, the boy’s “body was found in the Tallahatchie River severely disfigured with a cotton gin fan around his neck” (Bynum 80). Till had been abducted and murdered by Bryant’s husband and half-brother, who were prosecuted but found not guilty by an all-white jury. Much later, in 2017, Bryant admitted that she had made up the accusations against Till.²⁰ Till’s corpse provided such clear evidence of his violent death that his mother, Mamie Carthan, “demanded that her son’s body be shipped to Chicago, where, in a glass-covered open casket, she displayed his body so people could see what race hatred looked like” (Pool 414).

Besides holding an open-casket funeral, Till’s mother also decided to allow her deceased son’s body to be photographed and to allow publication of the images. In the words of American political scientist Heather Pool, “[e]very major African-American paper of note published pictures of [Till’s] body, and his funeral was covered in most national news outlets” (415). The explicitness of the corpse-images forced readers, especially those in the North, to acknowledge the violence of the Jim Crow laws that upheld racial segregation in the Southern United States, and, in turn, to act against it: American historian Darryl Mace, for example, writes that many Americans (both African-American and white) protesting at the time “point[ed] to [...] the gruesome photograph of the disfigured body [of Till] as the impetus of their protest” (25). As Anderson outlines, the photographs became an important rallying point for the Civil Rights Movement.

American media scholar Margaret Schwartz writes that, in the case of Emmett Till, “the audience viewing the photograph comprises not just voyeurs but witnesses—persons with a direct relationship to the reality of what that body stands for” (53-4). This direct relationship, Schwartz further adds, “is one of responsibility: to act in solidarity with the martyred body by affirming the truth of [Till’s] body as a witnessing text” (54). Through this affirmation, Till’s body is “martyred” and thereby the act of seeing his body becomes a sociopolitical act: that is, the point is “to act in solidarity with the martyred body by affirming the truth of his body as a witnessing text” (Schwartz 54). The photographed dead body of Till, then, marks a clear shift from the nineteenth-century spiritual and commemorative connotations of the post-mortem photograph: here, the image of the dead body is meant to alert viewers to the violence that brought this corpse about and to prompt them to condemn and resist this violence. As Schwartz

²⁰ See Pérez-Peña.

emphasizes, the images of Till's body "deviate from the traditional Western mourning practice in that nothing has been done to make the body appear to be at peace or to resemble the deceased in life" (54).

The Till case is an important moment in the history of the corpse's visual depiction; it served as a catalyst for political action, and imbued the corpse-image with a new, political meaning in Western culture. Although photographs of dead bodies designed to testify to the violence that had brought them about were not unprecedented (think of the images of the World-War-Two destruction camps that Sontag mentions), what made the images of Till's corpse different was that his mutilated body was presented in an individualized manner rather than as an unnamed corpse among many others, and that it was shown in an open casket at his funeral, indicating that his loss was being mourned. Dressed in a suit, and placed in a formal coffin, but with the signs of the violence done to him clearly visible, Till's body confronted viewers with the human individuality of this corpse as a victim of systemic racist violence – and thus forced them to become witnesses in the way that Schwartz describes. His case demonstrates how the circulation of a corpse-image that broke with the tradition of making corpses look beautiful and tranquil could be used as a powerful tool to raise awareness about social injustice, particularly at a time when corpse-images, even beautified ones, had become rare.

A more recent example that uses not the *image* of a corpse, but their very *material presence* as an activist instrument is the "Ashes Action" devised in the early 1990s by ACT UP. At the time, this organization focused on raising public awareness about AIDS. In October 1992, as the American sociologist Deborah B. Gould describes, the ACT UP collective encouraged members of the LGBTQ+ community that had lost friends and other loved ones to AIDS to bring their "actual ashes" to Washington DC (230). The ashes were to be scattered at the White House as a way of boosting awareness about the AIDS crisis and its exorbitant death toll. "In using the ashes of dead people," Gould writes, "the action was an escalation in tactics, a shift from actions that deployed representations of death (e.g. mock tombstones and fake coffins) to a funeral procession that carried the actual bodily remains of loved ones dead from AIDS-related complications" (230). For ACT UP, this simulation of a funeral procession was no mere performative provocation, but a challenge to the US government's lack of an adequate response to the AIDS crisis. The human remains were taken from the zone of "hidden death"

described by Ariés to be placed in plain view as an activist effigy.²¹ The same impulse to make devalued deaths publicly visible was central to another protest form in which ACT UP invoked the dead human body – the so-called “‘die-in,’ in which living bodies [i.e. the protestors] lay down in a pantomime of a mass grave, marking a site where greed and neglect have converged in the lives of people with HIV and AIDS” (DeLand 35).

ACT UP’s ashes actions and die-ins helped to solidify the display of (images of) corpses as an effective political tool and form of resistance, a practice that continues into the digital age with, among others, the Black Lives Matter movement. Black Lives Matter started in the United States in 2013 and became a global movement in the wake of the police killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis in May 2020.²² In acts that recalled the public mobilization of Emmett Till’s murdered body, images and videos of African-American victims of police violence, including, next to Floyd, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, and Sandra Bland, were repeatedly shared on Facebook and Twitter as a way of increasing awareness of structural racism in policing, the justice and prison system, and American society as a whole. By sharing these images, which show the victims while alive, dying or already dead, activists confront social-media users with the violent reality of structural racism. When these images appear as part of normally quite banal social media feeds, this everyday appearance makes the encounter even more shocking and, therefore, more powerful in prompting people to take action, online or offline. In the case of the Black Lives Matter movement, American psychologist Ashley N. Hurst and their co-authors point out that social media have become particularly valuable political tools, as they have “provided the platform for a deeply frustrated, outraged and fearful black public to organize collectively and begin demanding accountability for the violence that law enforcement has perpetrated on black and brown bodies for centuries” (65).²³ As I will explain in more detail in my afterword, in using social media as a site of testimony to racist police violence, the Black Lives Matters movement challenges the sociopolitical biases of the American justice system that, nearly sixty years prior, let the actions of Till’s murderers go

²¹ The most famous instance of an ACT UP die-in took place at St. Patrick’s Cathedral in New York City on 10 December 1989. See DeLand.

²² In 2013 the activists Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi introduced the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag and used it to mobilize social media users to protest for Black rights in both digital and non-digital spaces. The catalyst for the movement was the fatal shooting, in February 2012, of seventeen-year-old Trayvon Martin in Sanford, Florida, by local neighborhood watch member George Zimmermann. Zimmermann was initially not even charged with the murder, on the basis of his appeal to the Stand Your Ground law, and later – after the Black Lives Matter protests had resulted in a trial – found not guilty (Lebron). See also Ransby.

²³ For further discussions of the role that social media played in the Black Lives Matter movement, see Garza; Weijers; and Simon.

unpunished, and that perpetuates discriminatory and frequently fatal treatment of African-Americans today.

What the historical examples that I have discussed so far illustrate is that the impact of an encounter with a corpse or an image of a corpse is dependent on its form, medium, and context. The examples of postmortem photography, Emmett Till, ACT UP, and Black Lives Matter indicate that the way in which the corpse is shown (beautified or not, intact or not, named or not, in the process of dying or already dead) plays an important role in how the (image-)corpse is mobilized and (re)appropriated; the same is true for the medium that is chosen to display the corpse (whether it appears as a photograph, in color or in black-and-white, or as a video, and whether it is encountered in a museum, a newspaper, or on a social media timeline) and for the context in which it circulates (who is putting the corpse or image on show, with what purpose(s), how common is such putting on show, and how is it received?). Of equal influence with regard to the ways in which a corpse-image is composed and (re)appropriated are its racialization, as I discussed above in relation to Till and Black Lives Matter – and its gendering. As most of my case studies concern female digital corpses, in the next section of this chapter I will zoom in on the historical gendering of corpses and their visual representation.

The Western Fetishization of the Female Corpse

In his 1846 essay “The Philosophy of Composition,” Edgar Allan Poe reflects on the poetic craft on the basis of “The Raven” – his poem about a man who, unable to process the recent death of his wife, is visited by a raven that tells him his wife will return “nevermore.” In the essay, Poe infamously states that “the death [...] of a beautiful woman is unquestionably the most poetical topic in the world.” In this section, I will discuss, first, how this type of fetishization of the female dead (and dying) body resonated in Western art practices throughout the nineteenth and twentieth century, and, second, how the same fetishization continues to play a role in contemporary digital appropriations of images of dead and dying women, such as the ones that I will analyze in Chapters 2 and 3.

German-American cultural scholar Elisabeth Bronfen examines historical fetishizations of the dead female body, including Poe’s, in her influential 1992 study *Over Her Dead Body*. In analyzing the legacy of famous female deaths in Western art, literature, and film, both fictional and non-fictional (from that of a fairy-tale character like Snow White to that of the

American poet Sylvia Plath), Bronfen explores how the female corpse has been aestheticized, eroticized, and otherwise exploited and appropriated as a source of entertainment. Using the example of Snow White – who is famously placed in a transparent, glass box after her death and is ultimately revived by a prince’s kiss – Bronfen criticizes how the female corpse, once aestheticized, eroticized, and exploited, seemingly excuses the desire of the viewer to gain access to or to look at that corpse. Bronfen elaborates on the privileging of this desire through Freud’s theory of “scopophilia”: the notion that “seeing leads to physical appropriation; that it should be preparatory to the sexual activity of touching the other body” (102). In her analysis of the *Snow White* fairy-tale, she argues that scopophilia is performed by the prince, who feels compelled to kiss Snow White after seeing her dead body in the glass coffin. “The aesthetic staging [of the glass coffin] masks the prince’s ‘perversity’ [in the Freudian sense],” Bronfen writes, “for art too remains in the register of the gaze, forecloses touch, displaces touch on to the gaze, transforms the gaze into a form of touch” (102). In other words, the aestheticization of Snow White’s body as a beautiful, female corpse is made morally acceptable – rather than perverse – because the visual satisfaction that the sheer image of the female corpse offers makes it unnecessary to seek further proximity to the corpse in the form of physical contact: “Death sanctions what would otherwise, for Freud, be a perversion – the exclusive privilege of the gaze as it *becomes, supplants, and excludes* the sexual activity connected with touching the other (Bronfen 102, emphasis added). Indeed, the prince’s gaze upon the dead Snow White *becomes* a kiss – the experience of the beauty that is gazed upon “makes the desire to touch obsolete, or rather *functions as a form of touching*” (Bronfen 102, emphasis added). It is the sexualized act of looking, Bronfen thus argues, that supplants the sexualized act of touch – an form of looking that, in the case of *Snow White*, morphs into a form of touching when the prince proceeds to kiss Snow White’s “dead” body.

In the example of *Snow White* that Bronfen uses, the aestheticization (end eroticization) of the female corpse “leads to [the] physical appropriation” of that same corpse by enabling the viewer to feel a physical sense of thrill – or satisfaction, even – without having to have any interaction with the corpse besides the act of looking. Here, then, the act of looking itself functions as a form of appropriation – one that mobilizes the image of the dead body in an exploitative way. In Bronfen’s words, this act merely serves the “viewer’s fantasies [...] while the agent of death, the woman [in the image], has no subject, because no internal focaliser position” due to the fact that she is dead and, therefore, deprived of agency (102). In the chapters that follow, I will address this appropriative potential of the act of looking, particularly

in terms of the (lack of) agency of the dead or dying body that is looked upon. For the digital corpses whose circulation and (re)appropriation I study, this appropriative dynamic is not necessarily different than in Bronfen's account. However, it is intensified by their digital form and environment, which allow a potentially infinite number of viewers to project their desires onto these digital corpses at the same time and on a global scale. In Chapters 2 and 3, in particular, I will analyze how the female gendering of particular digital corpses affects the (aesthetic, eroticized, exploitative) terms of their appropriation in ways that recall Bronfen's reading of *Snow White*.

While Bronfen's discussion of the female dead body and its portrayals in Western visual culture provide a helpful art-historical background to my analyses in later chapters, there is one aesthetic tradition that she does not cover in her text (at least not in detail) that is relevant to my discussion of the aesthetic and erotic potential of the female corpse-image. This is the nineteenth-century Pre-Raphaelite movement. The Pre-Raphaelites are a well-known art collective whose members frequently chose dying women as their subject. Paintings in this tradition include John William Waterhouse's *The Lady of Shalott* (1888), featuring the cursed woman from Alfred Lord Tennyson's eponymous poem (1832), pictured moments before her death in a boat laden with colorful tapestries; and John Everett Millais's rendition of *Ophelia* (1850-'51), which shows Prince Hamlet's love interest singing while drowning in a brook, draped in flowers. The female deaths depicted in these paintings are symbolic, beautified, and stripped of any sense of dread or anguish. As such, these paintings stand in stark contrast to the images of death that I discussed in the previous section (Emmett Till, the ACT UP Ashes Actions), which try to show the reality of death – and that of violent death, in particular. “The Pre-Raphaelite woman,” American cultural scholar Jonathan Freedman writes, “comes to being under the sight of mortality; [...] she is envisioned as both the vehicle through which death is confronted and the means by which it may (or may not be) transcended” (210). Like the example of *Snow White* that Bronfen discusses, the death of the Pre-Raphaelite woman is rendered aesthetic and erotic, to the point that the image of her death becomes desirable. Through this aestheticization, the Pre-Raphaelite woman's death becomes a “vehicle,” as Freedman describes, that makes it possible for the viewer to face death without being shocked or otherwise repelled by it. The viewer, in other words, is enabled to “transcend” their aversion to death as an ugly and dirty thing, to borrow Ariès's terms. In positing the death of the female body as an aesthetic experience, these Pre-Raphaelite works turn the act of looking at death into a pleasurable experience free from grief or fear. This mechanism is relevant to my

discussions of the gendered digital corpse in Chapters 2 and 3, because it sheds light on and historically contextualizes the appropriative dynamics that make it possible for contemporary digital images of female death to be publicly enjoyed and fetishized.

Similar to how Mann and AES+F challenged the tranquil representation of the corpse in the historic tradition of post-mortem photography (and, in the process, countered the twentieth-century taboo on death), contemporary artists have also challenged the fetishization of the dead and dying female body in Western literature and art from a feminist perspective. American artist Hannah Wilke, for example, used her own sick and (later) dying body as the subject of her art practice after she was diagnosed with lymphoma in 1987. Wilke, a sculptor and performer who is renowned for conjuring physical self-intimacy in her work, photographed her cancer-ridden, post-chemotherapy body for a project that she titled *Intra-Venus*.

The project's title refers to both the goddess of sexuality and the intravenous treatment she was receiving at the time. The photographs show Wilke in a surgical gown or naked, covered in plasters and scars. Due to an extensive corticosteroid treatment, Wilke's body has a bloated, weakened appearance in most pictures, and yet she poses sensually, sometimes holding flowers in an imitation of a Venus, and, at times, beatifically, in photos that tangibly recall both the 'happy death' tradition of post-mortem photographs and the aesthetic, erotic death that we saw in the Pre-Raphaelite paintings (Figures 1.4 and 1.5).

While these resonances with postmortem photography and pre-Raphaelite painting may suggest that Wilke's work should be placed in the aestheticizing tradition critiqued by Bronfen and Freedman, it also works against it. In her photos, Wilke reenacts the Western iconography of the dying woman that Bronfen outlines, but simultaneously undermines this iconography by using her own, truly dying body, thereby emphasizing the disconnect between the cultural fetishization of female death and its sober reality. American philosopher Diana T. Meyers aptly describes the *Intra-Venus* series as "a masterpiece of transposition that lets loose an unsurpassable critique of Western culture's practice of figuring death as a woman" (287). Wilke materializes this transposition, so Meyers adds, by "wrench[ing] culturally normative conceptions of gender, mortality, medicine, and art from their accustomed framing"; "by relocating them in radically different mediums, she dislocates and reinvents them" (287). Rather than perpetuating the notion that "the death of a beautiful woman is the most poetical topic in the world," to paraphrase the Poe citation with which I started this section, Wilke subverts it by emphasizing the painful, unattractive aspects of dying – the body weakening; the necessity of IV-drips (Figure 1.4) – and by contrasting the idea of death as a beautiful or

tranquil event with visual elements that clearly undermine this idea, such as the hospital cap that she uses to evoke Mary Magdalene's image (Figure 1.5).



Figure 1.4 Hannah Wilke's *Intra-Venus Series No. 4, July 26, 1992* (left).²⁴



Figure 1.5 Hannah Wilke's *Intra-Venus Series No. 4, February 19, 1992* (right).²⁵

Wilke's self-portraits present the stark reality of life with a terminal illness, but they also pose a challenge to late twentieth-century social norms around death, dying, illness, and femininity. Canadian art historian Caryn Narvey writes that "Wilke, until the very end of her life, chose her own ravaged landscape to confront and challenge hegemonic social control" (150). Wilke activated her terminally ill body (her "ravaged landscape," in Narvey's words) as a critical tool to subvert the sociopolitical structures that posit the dying body, and particularly the female dying body, as docile, inactive, and powerless – the same qualities that the painters of the Pre-Raphaelite movement eroticized. By documenting her own dying body on her own terms – by "owning" this dying body – Wilke takes up the "focalisor position" that Bronfen describes the fetishized dead or dying female body as lacking (102). In this way, Wilke upends the aesthetic conventions of female death that Bronfen criticizes in her work, and reclaims

²⁴ Image source: <https://feldmangallery.com/artist-home/hannah-wilke> (Accessed: 18 Aug. 2020).

²⁵ Image source: <https://feldmangallery.com/artist-home/hannah-wilke> (Accessed: 18 Aug. 2020).

agency and ownership over her dying body in a way that positions it as an active subject, rather than as a passive object to be gazed at.

Wilke's *Intra-Venus* series thus demonstrates how, through the act of photographic self-documentation, the terminally ill or dying may actively anticipate the sociopolitical frames that will be projected onto their bodies as they die and after they pass. By doing so, they can challenge these frames and thereby reclaim a sense of agency, as well as a subject position for the dead or dying (female) body. This potential of the photographic image – to serve as a tool for reclaiming the dead or dying body as subject rather than object – is relevant to this study's ethical focus of agency, responsibility, and ownership. It offers a counter response to the risk of appropriation that, as I will show, looms over images of dead and dying bodies in digital environments – and that was, as Bronfen shows, already present in the pre-digital world, albeit on a less intensive scale.

I will discuss the appropriative uses (and abuses) of digital corpses in detail in Chapter 2. However, in the final section of this chapter I will turn to two examples of corpse-images in contemporary news media that contrast with the artistic examples that I have discussed in this section. I am referring to the corpse-images of Princess Diana Spencer (1997) and of the 9/11 Falling Man (2001). Specifically, I will discuss how, as a result of the taboo on publicly depicting death that Ariès saw developing over the course of the twentieth century, these images were withheld or withdrawn from circulation. As I will demonstrate, it is the taboo on showing dead or dying Western bodies in news media that forms the historical backdrop to and catalyst for the intensified circulation of digital corpse-images that I will discuss in Chapter 2.

The Concealed Corpse: Images of Death as a News Media Taboo

As a result of the “new image of death” within twentieth-century Western contexts, where a cultural perspective on death as a “nauseating spectacle” dominated, the image of the Western dead body became a taboo in visual news media as well (Ariès 569). In what follows, I will discuss the deaths of Princess Diana and the Falling Man as two high-profile examples of Western deaths that had considerable historical significance, but were not pictured in relevant news coverage as a result of this taboo. As I mentioned earlier, the concealment of images of these deaths has a particular relevance to the digital corpses that I discuss in this study: they created a demand for the images of these deaths that only digital networks – not subject to the rules of traditional media – could supply.

That I label my cases “Western” dead bodies is important to this discussion. Consider, for example, the already mentioned case of Alan Kurdi, whose body washed ashore on a beach near Bodrum, Turkey, on 2 September 2015, and whose corpse-images were freely circulated online and in such major media outlets as *The Independent*, *The New York Times*, as well as the Dutch national newspapers *Trouw* and *NRC*, where I encountered them. Although the images of Kurdi’s corpse were shocking, they were widely reproduced in Western media to emphasize the severity of the European refugee crisis. British new media scholar Yasmin Ibrahim describes how, for more left-leaning news outlets, “Kurdi’s corpse drew on the eroding of Europe’s humanitarian response to the refugee crisis in North Africa and the Middle East,” whereas more right-leaning news outlets “extrapolated [Kurdi’s corpse-image] into racialized hostility [...] which further dehumanized the dead child and other desperate refugees in search of sanctuary” (n. pag.). Kurdi’s “effacement” in the latter media, Ibrahim notes, “was bound through a mythology of cultural carnage by the East, [...] meshing unrelated associations to distort him through a violent politics of expulsion” (n. pag.). While the circulation of Kurdi’s corpse-image, on which I will reflect further in the Afterword, was thus in part an attempt to humanize the victims of the European refugee crisis, the outlets that opposed the immigration from Eastern refugees to the West took Kurdi’s image as a warning against “the Middle Eastern Other” (Ibrahim n. pag.).

The wide media circulation of Kurdi’s images appears to support the claim made by Sontag that “[t]he more remote or exotic the place, the more likely we [in the West] are to have full frontal views of the dead and dying” (2003: 70). The images of Kurdi can be placed in the same tradition of images of dead (or starving) African children in Western media.²⁶ Austrian media scholar Folker Hanusch’s empirical study into media depictions of death from 2008, however, calls for more nuance. Hanusch’s tabulation of the images used to illustrate news reports about deaths in two German newspapers (*Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* and *Süddeutsche Zeitung*) and two Australian ones (*The Australian* and *The Sydney Morning Herald*) shows that, instead of corpse-images, the papers preferred to show images of “destruction” or, in the case of individual deaths, images of that person while they were still alive (306). This was the case regardless of where the death(s) in question had taken place. In addition, interviews with journalists revealed that it was the visual extremeness of corpse-images – their potential to be perceived as an affront to “human dignity” or as dehumanizing

²⁶ For an in-depth discussion of Western depictions of African bodies and the “white gaze,” see Hart; Gabay.

the deceased (Hanusch 315) – that mattered more when it came to making decisions about whether to feature them than whether they were Western or not.

Hanusch's conclusion suggests that the taboo on death is particularly strong when it comes to depictions of "unhappy" and undignified deaths, which are seen to dehumanize the corpse. Hanusch's research is, of course, but one study into the news media depiction of dead bodies with limited scope. However, his analysis does touch on a persisting ethical dilemma for news media, in which the desire to engage in accurate visual news reporting clashes with that of wanting to avoid dehumanizing the dead. In *About to Die: How News Images move the Public* (2010), American media scholar Barbie Zelizer describes a frequently used solution for this dilemma in Western media, namely the "about-to-die" image: a photographic depiction that "represents a range of ambiguous, difficult, and contested public events, which are shown by depicting individuals facing their impending death" (24). Zelizer argues that the about-to-die image "provides an escape hatch for journalism, by which it [the journalist platform] counters its ambivalence about images and images of death [sic] by playing to a suggestive picture" (24). The about-to-die image, in short, spares the journalist platform in question from having to choose between omitting visual coverage of events involving human deaths and shocking their viewers (or readers) with images deemed dehumanizing.

This is not to say, however, that about-to-die images are inherently uncontroversial, as the cases of Princess Diana and the Falling Man show. On 31 August 1997, Princess Diana and her partner Dodi Al-Fayed died in a fatal car crash near Paris after their car was chased by a group of paparazzi, who continued taking pictures of the princess even after the driver lost control of the car and crashed it. Australian media scholar Kim McNamara writes that, as a result of their proximity to the crash, "many were quick to accuse the paparazzi as the primary cause of Diana's death," with "the very visual 'evidence' suggesting that paparazzi on motorcycles were closing in on the princess's car in a dangerous way" (23). However, "French authorities determined that the intoxicated driver of Diana's car was responsible for the high speed crash" (McNamara 23). This did not necessarily improve public opinion about the paparazzi: in a 2017 retrospective on Diana's death, *TIME* magazine's Kate Samuelson recounts how, during the aftermath of the car crash, "[t]he public mood turned against paparazzi and the media, and as a consequence, British tabloids the *Sun* and the *Mirror* recorded their lowest sale figures since 1962."

McNamara describes how "images of the fatally injured Diana" were not published until 2006, when they "were published in some European outlets, such as the Italian *Chi*

magazine, to considerable controversy” (23). At the time of the crash, the paparazzi who had taken pictures immediately “withdrew the images from the market” after they learned that the crash had killed the princess (McNamara 23). This lent the images of Diana’s dying body – or rather, their absence – a mythical status of sorts. Italian philosopher Rosi Braidotti has analyzed how, for the wider public, “Princess Diana’s crushed body acquires semireligious significance, like a collective ritual on wheels, relayed cathodically all over the globe” (46). Diana’s death acquired this significance, Braidotti argues, because it combined “the two dominant fetishes of our culture: consumers’ commodities (the car) and celebrity (the star)” (46). This fetishization was further fed, Braidotti argues, by “[t]he iconic value of Princess Diana’s face as white, imperial, and sacrificial,” a set of features that “requires [Diana’s dead body’s] absence” (23).

If news media would show the image of Diana’s severely wounded, post-accident body, they would shatter the iconic, fetishized status that Braidotti assigns it – just as depictions of genuine corpses would clash with the fetishized, aestheticized female-corpse images studied by Bronfen. By doing so, they would enforce a collision between the sociopolitical value of Diana’s body as that of a white, royal, beautiful victim and the far less attractive reality of Diana’s actual crushed body. The display of Diana’s corpse, in other words, would radically alter the public image of Diana herself. Given the Western privileging of white, upper-class, and physically attractive bodies, this would likely be perceived as a greater attack on the human dignity of that corpse (to reference Hanusch’s findings) than on that of a non-Western body like Kurdi’s.²⁷

A different point is brought in by American media scholar Margaret Schwartz, who refers to dead and dying celebrity bodies such as that of Princess Diana as “tabloid bodies”: “spots of invisibility in [...] otherwise hypervisual lives and legacies” (83). These legacies, Schwartz notes, “involve the ongoing commodification of [the celebrities’] bodies and of their children’s bodies, which requires that the corpse itself be expelled as abject” (83). By placing a taboo on the physical “deadness” of the celebrity in question, and thereby barring the public from witnessing it, the celebrity’s death is rejected; their star can continue shining. “Insofar as

²⁷ In this respect, it is worth noting that, as Dutch cultural scholar Esther Peeren points out, “[Kurdi’s] light-skinned body, clothed in a red t-shirt, blue shorts and trainers, lacked markers of ethnic and religious otherness, making it easy for many Europeans to identify with,” whereas there were “almost no pictures of his mother, Rehan Kurdi, who drowned with [Alan and his brother] and who, in the pictures that can be found of her in the media, is shown wearing a hijab, visibly marking her as Muslim” (Peeren 2018: 86, 95). N.B. The English original of this Italian-language publication was provided to me by the author, Esther Peeren. The page numbers are those of the publication.

we consume tabloid bodies,” Schwartz argues, “the material truth of their corpses must be disavowed” (86).

This “material truth” that Schwartz speaks of is not only eagerly “disavowed” in press coverage of celebrity bodies, but also in media reporting about bodies related to a large-scale social trauma. An example of a traumatic death that featured prominently in news media as a controversial about-to-die image was that of the Falling Man. This iconic photograph, taken by American news photographer Richard Wilbur on the morning of Tuesday 11 September 2001, shows an unidentified man jumping to his death from one of the Twin Towers. The photograph was first featured in *The New York Times* of 12 September 2001, and soon after that, in newspapers from all over the world. The horrific reason for the man’s leap (taken to escape the fate of being burned alive), combined with the man’s striking (and likely involuntary) pose as he jumped to his death (Figure 1.6), shocked viewers, and the publication of the image sparked much controversy within American news media.



Figure 1.6. Detail of Richard Drew’s *Falling Man* image. *The New York Times*, 12 Sept. 2001.²⁸

²⁸ Image source: <https://www.esquire.com/news-politics/a48031/the-falling-man-tom-junod/> (Accessed: 18 Aug. 2020).

American journalist Tom Junod writes how national newspapers that published the photograph “were forced to defend themselves against charges that they exploited a man’s death, stripped him of his dignity, invaded his privacy, [and] turned tragedy into leering pornography” (n. pag.). “In most American newspapers,” he adds, “the photograph that Richard Drew took of the Falling Man ran once and never again” (Junod n. pag.). What made the Falling Man image particularly controversial, was that it explicitly showed the desperate act that many people working at the Twin Towers that day were forced to make: to jump from the building. These “jumpers,” as they were called, were also broadcasted live on news programs that reported on the 9/11 attack, to the shock of viewers. “Each jumper, no matter how many there were,” Junod writes, “brought fresh horror, elicited shock, tested the spirit, struck a lasting blow” (n. pag.). Dutch historian Rob Kroes describes how

[t]elevision images showed many of these individuals [jumpers] until the various channels covering the events stopped broadcasting them. The images were deemed too gruesome, too unmediated a confrontation with the horror of the moment. If the point here was to protect the public, it may also have been the intention to protect the dignity of the jumpers from the unseemly, if not voyeuristic, intrusion into their utter loneliness, seconds away from death. (4)

Images of the 9/11 jumpers thus became a taboo in American print media. At the same time, this taboo status of the images fed into people’s curiosity to see them. Soon after the Falling Man photo and other images of 9/11 jumpers were banned from American print media, the same images started appearing on online shock sites. Junod writes that the shock site Rotten.com created a separate section on their website for these images, under the cynical title “Swan Dive” (n. pag.). This is where the role of digital networks as a haven for corpse imagery in a society that shuns such imagery started to crystalize. In Chapter 2, I will elaborate on how shock sites contribute to the public circulation of images of dead and dying bodies.

In an article for *The New Republic*, published a year after the events of 9/11, American journalist Leon Wieseltier recounts his shock at encountering the Falling Man image in *The New York Times*. “I gasp at the sight of the picture that frightened me almost out of my mind when I saw it in the paper a year ago,” he writes. The fear that Wieseltier describes resembles the fear that Kroes mentions in his discussion of the Falling Man controversy – of the image’s frightening or horrific quality. But Wieseltier’s tone changes as he proceeds to aestheticize the image that shocked him so the year before:

[The Falling Man's] head faces the earth, his feet face the sky, but there is no earth in the picture and no sky, there is only the striped geometry of the "exoskeleton" of the building in the background, still intact in its spurious attitude of invincibility. [...] The tower is half in shadow, half in light, and the man is dropping between the shadow and the light. There is no sign of his velocity. [...] He does not appear to be wounded. He seems composed, a stoic in the air, except for the tails of his white shirt, which hang from his trousers like snapped wings. (n. pag.)

Wieseltier's poetic description of the Falling Man ("a stoic in the air," "snapped wings") is alluring, yet it is important to register that he is describing a human being who was driven to jumping to his own death. After overcoming the shock of the image, it seems as though Wieseltier came to recognize its aesthetic potential, which, in turn, allowed him to bypass the image's tragic historical context. This brings me back to Zelizer's theory of the about-to-die image, of which the Falling Man (irrespective of the controversy it generated) is a textbook example. Zelizer writes that the about-to-die image "works as a vehicle of memory, becoming the central and often iconic image that stands in for complex and contested public events" (26). It is this feature that makes about-to-die images so persistent, because they offer quick, visual summaries of historical events that can be easily reproduced and circulated – *and* because they allow viewers like Wieseltier to avoid the gruesome, disturbing aspects of these events. In addition, Zelizer points out, about-to-die images often "travel to contexts other than the news, appearing widely across educational, political, cultural, commercial, and religious venues" and, sometimes, also "win awards" and "appear in retrospectives" (26). This detachment from news media allows a further distancing from the event of death, as well as an increasing aestheticization of the image.

I have discussed the cases of Princess Diana and the Falling Man as examples of the cultural taboo on circulating images of corpses at some length for a reason: they demonstrate both the persistence of the aestheticization of death and its interrelation with the twentieth-century status of death as a visual taboo. Furthermore, these two cases form a relevant departure point for my discussion of appropriated digital corpses in the next chapter, as the media responses to them – in the form of the absence of Princess Diana's corpse-image and the controversy surrounding the Falling Man's about-to-die image – underline the appeal of digital networks for audiences that want to look at images of corpses, even gruesome ones, and seek to do so without accountability. Unlike the paparazzi in the case of Diana, and Richard Drew and *The New York Times* in the case of the Falling Man, social media users cannot easily be

held accountable for what they do with corpse-images. As I pointed out when, in the Introduction, I discussed Charles Ess's theory on distributed responsibility, it is considerably more difficult to control the trajectory of corpse-images on digital platforms than in traditional media. This limited controllability makes the digital corpse more vulnerable to (re)appropriation – a risk that prompts the ethical problems related to agency, responsibility, and ownership that lie at the heart of this study.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have outlined the cultural chronology of the post-mortem photograph and the various social purposes that the corpse photograph has served in the pre-digital era: as practical *memento mori*, as political instigator, and as aesthetic object. In addition, I have described how contemporary artists have challenged the taboo on death and death imagery that emerged over the course of the twentieth century, and how they have critiqued the fetishization of female corpses in Western visual traditions such as that of the Pre-Raphaelite movement. Through this historical outline, I have demonstrated that attitudes towards images of dead and dying bodies, and towards their circulation within pre-digital media have been subject to change.

The overview that I have presented here serves to provide an historical context for the digital images of dead and dying bodies that I will discuss in the next three chapters. While the bodies depicted in these digital images are subject to the same sociopolitical power structures (gender, race) as bodies in non-digital environments, the intensified accessibility that digital environments put forward makes the corpse-images circulated in such environments *shareable*, *malleable*, and *vulnerable* on a scale, and in ways, that did not exist in the pre-digital era. This shareability, malleability, and vulnerability, American art scholar Heather Warren-Crow (whose work I will discuss at length in Chapter 3) contends, is attributed to the digital image's plasticity. By "plasticity," Warren-Crow refers to the extent to which digital images can adapt to the changing trends within image culture by being "pliable" without being "passive," and by being available to be "alter[ed], upload[ed] [and] share[d]" (2). In general, digital platforms, Warren-Crow argues, exacerbate "the ability to make the embodied self adaptable to [the beholder's] needs, cross-platform compatible, and full of endless morphological potential" (2). The "endless morphological potential" that Warren-Crow describes manifests itself with particularly force in the digital body's versatile potentiality. The digital body and, by extension, the digital corpse, thus becomes a canvas on which the beholder (or user) can project their own

wants and needs with greater freedom than was possible with the non-digital images of dead and dying bodies discussed in this chapter.

The malleability and shareability of the digital corpse-image is further complicated by the user anonymity and, by implication, unaccountability that digital environments allow for. It is with respect to this anonymity and unaccountability that the circulation of digital corpses differs from that of the historical images of dead and dying bodies discussed above. As Ess explains, the distributed responsibility that characterizes digital environments makes them safe havens for users who interact with corpse-images in ways that blur ethical boundaries in terms of agency, responsibility, and ownership. What has not changed, however, are the ways in which interactions with digital corpses are influenced by the cultural and historical conventions regarding how to handle and depict dead and dying bodies that I have outlined in this chapter. Aestheticization and fetishization of (especially female) corpses (as theorized by Bronfen) and social tabooization: each of these conventions still plays a significant role in how and why images of dead and dying bodies are created and (re)appropriated in digital realms, as I will show in the chapters that follow.

Chapter 2 – Appropriating the Digital Corpse:

Nikki Catsouras and Nedā Āghā-Soltān

The dead have migrated from the casket and the embalming table to streaming video feeds.

- Kevin O’Neill in *Mortality* journal (2008)

Introduction

The dead human body occupies a prevalent position in online visual culture. Since the Web 1.0 era, which was characterized by image boards, personal webpages, and forums, images of human corpses have been used as shock fodder to both delight and disgust users, who either actively sought out these images or were tricked into viewing them by others. Websites such as Rotten.com and Stile Project, founded in 1997 and 1999 respectively, were devoted to making extreme visual content accessible to the online community, presenting users with an ongoing stream of bleeding bodies, amateur autopsies, and mutilated corpses, as well as a range of other body horrors such as coprophagic porn²⁹ and bestiality.³⁰ These websites became exemplary of an online genre known as the “shock site,” a digital space that forewent the visual etiquette of most online image platforms, including news sites and search engines, and showed highly explicit images that, as we saw in Chapter 1, other media outlets today often deem unfit to show.³¹

²⁹ The term “coprophagic” means “[i]nvolving or indulging in the eating of excrement” (OED). Arguably the most well-known example of coprophagic porn is *2 Girls 1 Cup*, a video that “shows two women defecating into a cup and taking turns to consume its contents” (Kennedy and Smith 252). The video went viral after its release in 2007, when users started posting “reaction videos” (“videos in which first-time viewers recorded their reactions” to the *2 Girls 1 Cup* video) on YouTube (Kennedy and Smith 252).

³⁰ For archived versions of both sites, see:

<https://web.archive.org/web/20170818111615/http://www.rotten.com/library/> and <https://wayback.archive-it.org/all/20050905193621/http://www.stileproject.com/>.

³¹ American sociologist Jessica M. Fishman argues that mass “[o]nline content aggregators, like Google and Yahoo News” generally omit images that show violence or “fatalities” as these platforms “consolidate[e] content from other news sources that typically avoid this kind of documentation” (24). The reason why these images are omitted is that they are deemed too “graphic”, which, in photojournalism, Fishman argues, “implies that the image’s faithful rendering is a liability” (77). In terms of images of corpses, Fishman’s study demonstrates that “often less than 1 percent of [online] photos and videos reveal the corpse” (24). The cachet of the shock site, then, is that it purposely rejects photojournalism’s censorship of that which is “too graphic.” In this sense, the shock site functions as a counterreaction to the strategy of using about-to-die images of twentieth-century news media that I discussed via the work of Zelizer in Chapter 1. See also Attwood et al.

British media scholar Steven Jones has written amply on the appeal of the shock site, likening it to that of pornography sites, as these, too, “exhibit bodies that are pushed beyond expected corporeal limits” (124). The shock site’s potential for fast, grand-scale shareability, in combination with its wide popularity,³² propelled images of corporeal tragedies into the public realm and helped to make the human corpse a common good of the Internet age. Online, shocking images featuring corpses, such as the aftermaths of car crashes and railroad suicides, formerly confined to forensic files and niche booklets or films with limited reach, are no longer obscured from the spectator’s eye. While the once-biggest shock site Rotten.com is now defunct,³³ sharing images of dead bodies is still a common and controversial online trend. In 2018, for example, the Reddit subforum “WatchPeopleDie” had over 425,000 international subscribers who had signed up to receive “videos and GIFs” of people dying in violent, horrific ways (Dahl).³⁴

Not all digital reproductions of the human corpse are as visually explicit as the ones found on shock sites. Some digital projects, particularly those devoted to progressive politics, deliberately *avoid* showing the corpse, and instead choose to present death in other, less graphic ways. An example of such a project is “Migrant Death Mapping,” the death catalogue project of civic organization Humane Borders.³⁵ This project collects data on all the people who died trying to migrate to the United States, usually from Mexico. The map, facilitated by Arizona OpenGIS, shows the name, sex, age, and location of every identified person whose corpse was found near the US border, as well as their cause of death. Sometimes, the persons in question have been shot or killed through some other form of violence, but usually they die of dehydration, exhaustion, or other “natural causes.” The death map, covering most of Arizona’s greater desert, is punctuated with red dots, marking where the bodies were found. A similar endeavor is news blog FiveThirtyEight’s “Gun Deaths in America” project, which shows the statistics of all gun-related homicides, suicides, and injuries in the United States.³⁶ According to the website’s landing page, the developers created a chart for the statistics of these homicides, suicides, and injuries (the location, the number of people involved, et cetera) to

³² In its heyday, Rotten.com received over 200,000 unique visitors per day (Brown).

³³ The website has been offline since 1 October 2017 (Wofford).

³⁴ The people in these videos and GIFs, Kieran Dahl reports in *The Guardian*, “are beheaded, incinerated, exploded, crushed, electrocuted, drowned, mangled, stoned and disemboweled. And their deaths, horrific and tragic as they are, can be watched by anyone with internet [sic] access, over and over again.”

³⁵ See <https://humaneborders.org/migrant-death-mapping/> for the online catalogue.

³⁶ See <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/gun-deaths/> for the blog.

provide details on “the more than 33,000 annual gun deaths in America” and to make people think about “what it would take to bring that number down” (Casselman et al.).

Besides being deliberately circulated as images for users to ogle or as data intended to mobilize people politically, the dead also “haunt” the digital world in accidental ways. With legal protocols for online ownership still being a work in progress,³⁷ it can be complicated to have someone’s social media presence removed after they die. On social-media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter,³⁸ the online avatars of the dead may continue to interact with the algorithm governing the platform in question. Their presence, American religion scholar Candi K. Cann writes, has “created the notion of a virtual ghost that lingered around the Internet, acting on behalf of the deceased,” for example through the suggestion of a “like” or “friend” to other users (113). While social-media platforms and their regulations are increasingly adept at dealing with the ethical challenges that these Internet ghosts pose, as described by Irish legal scholar Heather Conway (2016) and British sociologists Maggi Savin-Baden and Victoria Mason-Robbie (2020), the digitized human body still often roams the realm of the living for longer than the deceased’s material remains. As American neuroscientist Christopher Mims writes: “On the Internet, you can’t die so much as join the ranks of the undead” (n. pag.).

Rather than ruminating on the particularities of social-media afterlives as such, this chapter will focus, first, on different appropriations of corpse-images that circulate as digitized presences within online contexts; and, second, on the ethical questions that their circulation raises. Just like the historical corpse-images that I discussed in the previous chapter, depictions of dead bodies are circulated online with different intentions and effects. As I will show, users who upload images of dead bodies may have benign personal, political, or pedagogical reasons for wanting to share the images in question. At the same time, users can appropriate a digital corpse for other purposes, including malicious ones, that may be aggrieving to the loved ones of the deceased person pictured. Corpse image circulation can be especially upsetting when it happens online: it is the ability for digital corpses to circulate widely and the difficulty of controlling or stopping this circulation that, I argue, is specific to online contexts. In these contexts, consequently, certain older ethical questions regarding how people (should) engage with dead and dying bodies are asked with renewed or greater urgency.

³⁷ For an in-depth discussion of (respectively) the UK and US legal frameworks and their application to post-mortem social media profiles, see McCallig; Brubaker and Callison-Burch.

³⁸ For a wider discussion of death and dying on Twitter, see Cesare and Branstad.

In what follows, I will analyze two digital corpses whose circulation on social media has been particularly controversial and difficult to control: those of Nikki Catsouras, an American teenager who died in a car accident in 2006, and Nedā Āghā-Soltān, an Iranian woman who was assassinated during anti-governmental protests in 2009. Both young women became notorious examples of the dead body's vulnerability in digital space, but whereas, as we will see, Catsouras's story shows the destructive powers of online sensationalism and trolling, that of Āghā-Soltān illustrates that a digital corpse can also become an object of political activism and international veneration – even if that process can have disturbing effects, too. Different as these two digital corpses' narratives and contexts may seem at first sight, I want to suggest that they both highlight the ethical issues that come into play when a dead body is placed in the hands of the greater online community.

Through a close reading of what happened to the images of Catsouras's and Āghā-Soltān's bodies as they circulated online, and the discussions that their circulation prompted, I will show how, in online environments, the meanings and effects of the digital corpse may be recontextualized according to the purposes and desires of particular online communities. I will demonstrate how this online appropriation works through the concept of the "unwilling avatar," as coined by Marie Anne Franks, and through Griselda Pollock's and Vivian Sobchack's theorizations of the visual depiction of dead and dying bodies. In particular, I will discuss the shifts in agency and in power balances that take place when a human corpse becomes a digital artifact. As I demonstrate below, a closer look at these shifts offers insight into how digital corpses can be instrumentalized and, as a result, reduced to passive objects invested with different meanings by various online communities. In my close reading, I specifically focus on the role that gender plays in such public instrumentalizations, as both case studies concern the digital corpses of young women, and both can be related to the Western tradition of aestheticizing and fetishizing the female corpse discussed in Chapter 1.

In what follows, I will first outline the cases of Catsouras and Āghā-Soltān individually. I will then bring them together in a detailed comparative analysis in which I use Franks's, Pollock's and Sobchack's theorizing to unpack how their corpse images were appropriated online and of the ethical questions about agency, responsibility, and ownership that this digital appropriation raised. While focusing on the two case studies, my analysis will also refer to the circulation of digital corpses on the shock site NowThat'sFuckedUp.com, as an additional example of how the digital corpse may be appropriated, in this case for individual monetary gain.

“Porsche Girl”: The Memeification of Nikki Catsouras

In his 2016 documentary *Lo and Behold: Reveries of the Connected World*, Werner Herzog explores the influence of online connectivity on everyday human existence. One of the film’s most memorable scenes focuses on the Catsouras family, a well-off American household consisting of Christos Catsouras, a real-estate broker, his wife Lesli Catsouras, a thriller novelist, and their three daughters Christiana, Kira, and Danielle. A decade before Herzog made his film, Mrs. Catsouras tells him, there was a fourth daughter: Nikki Catsouras. On October 31, 2006, at the age of eighteen, Nikki snuck out of the house to go for a joyride in one of her father’s luxury cars. Mr. and Mrs. Catsouras heard their daughter leave and called the police immediately, but it was already too late. Nikki had crashed into a tollbooth shortly after leaving the house, and had died as a result of the crash.

The death of Nikki Catsouras was first and foremost a family tragedy. But the reason why Hertzog visited the Catsourases’ home ten years later was that it also became something very different on the Internet. After Nikki’s accident, coroners and criminal investigators photographed the gruesome scene for forensic inspection. A 2009 *Newsweek* article details that the accident’s aftermath was so harrowing that “the coroner wouldn’t allow [the] parents to identify their daughter’s body” (Bennett). Thus, the Catsourases were to be spared the horror of seeing their daughter’s maimed corpse. A few days after the accident, however, the photographs that had been taken of the accident scene were leaked online and quickly spread to gore blogs, body horror forums, and even pornography sites. In the same *Newsweek* article, Jessica Bennett describes how many of the websites that featured the Catsouras images were “dedicated to hard-core pornography and death,” and that some users even set up a fake MySpace profile in Nikki’s name, which amassed hurtful comments ranging from “stupid bitch” to “[w]hat a waste of a Porsche.” Most cruelly of all, online trolls emailed the images to Nikki’s parents, accompanied by galling captions such as “Hey daddy, I’m still alive” (Bennett).

Herzog was interested in the case of the leaked images of Nikki Catsouras’s corpse because it presents such a poignant example of how the Internet - whose conveniences (its easy access, data-sharing speed, and connectivity) were designed to smoothen everyday lives – can also be used *against* human comfort. For the Catsourases, it literally ruined their lives. After being terrorized with images of their late daughter’s mangled body for weeks, the family resigned to a life without accessing social networking sites and took out a second mortgage to pay for the legal battle against the websites hosting the grisly images for all to see and share.

As most of these websites were maintained by anonymous trolls – so Alexandra Shimo reported for Canadian news magazine *Maclean's* – the “real-world identities” of the perpetrators were “extremely hard to track down.” As of 2020, the photographs are still easily findable online.

The Catsouras case shows how some Internet users are willing to mobilize death, corpses, and human suffering to give themselves pleasure or to cause others pain. While users may also grieve over images of the dead or band together on the basis of these images (as happens, for example, in the case of the Black Lives Matters movement discussed in Chapter 1), some users regard such images as a potential source of sadistic entertainment. Visual evidence of war-torn communities, bleeding bodies, and executions have always found their way online, also before social media gained mass popularity,³⁹ and the rapid circulation of these images in social media today testifies to a fascination with them among many users. Although a lot of the more viscerally disturbing images are carefully obscured from most search engine results, a determined user with a pronounced interest can quite easily find and spread them. The crux here is neither that these images exist (they also existed in the pre-Internet age) nor that people share them (this happened previously, too), but that they are now so readily available and spreadable across various online communities. Moreover, Internet users are able to (re)frame them in wildly different ways – ways that raise the pressing ethical questions concerning agency, responsibility, and ownership that interest me throughout this study.

New media sociologist Vince Miller identifies the particular online abuse that the Catsouras family bore the brunt of as “RIP trolling.” In this form of trolling, Miller describes, the occasion of death “become[s] the means to taunt [...] friends and family members through cruel comments about the deceased” (267). Pointing to the Catsouras case, Miller adds that these abuses “sometimes even involve the creation of bespoke images and video clips depicting the deceased in upsetting ways” (267). It is clear that using leaked forensic photographs of corpses for the purpose of an online joke is socially condemnable in a number of ways. For the Catsourases, however, the main injuries lay in the fact that they would never have had to see images of their daughter’s corpse if they had not been maliciously sent to them by email, and in the difficulty of stopping the images circulating online against their wishes.

³⁹ One of the most famous “digital” executions was that of Daniel Pearl, the kidnapped American journalist who was decapitated by Al-Qaeda terrorists on video on February 1, 2002. The Pearl case is identified as the first “beheading video,” a subgenre of the snuff film now associated with Islamic extremists that serves to terrorize or otherwise instill fear in an online audience. See Roger.

In a 2008 interview with *ABC News*, Lesli Catsouras describes the cruel sense of absurdity she felt when her family was denied access to the scene of the accident, only to have to learn that graphic pictures of their daughter's corpse were being viewed and shared by thousands of strangers a few days later. "They didn't even let me see my daughter, and now the whole world is seeing my daughter," she recounts (Avila et al.). The Catsourases did not so much mind that the body had been photographed, but that they were given no control over what happened to the photographs afterwards. As in cases where corpses are prepared for viewing by the deceased's loved ones before a wake, the Catsourases had wanted to be in control of the version of their daughter that the world was given to see. The online leaking of the images took away this possibility.

In a 2014 retrospective for *The New Yorker*, American lawyer Jeffrey Toobin investigates how the images of Nikki Catsouras's body ended up online in the first place. Toobin reports that two California Highway Patrol employees had shared the images of the Catsouras case with friends "for pure shock value." One of the CHP officers, Aaron Reich, later claimed that he had intended the images "as reminders of the dangers of reckless driving" (Andrews 133). The Catsouras family ended up pressing charges against the CHP as well as against Reich and his colleague, Thomas O'Donnell, individually, and after a five-year legal battle, won the case and was awarded a settlement amount of over two million dollars. Journalist Rick Rojas covered the court case for the *Los Angeles Times* and reported that the positive terms of the settlement "might finally allow [the Catsourases] some closure." Though the legal victory was a relief to the Catsouras family, it did not change the fact that images of their daughter's dead body are still widely available in online image databases.

The wide circulation of the Catsouras case file has become a case-in-point for many debates about privacy, intimacy, and online media. In an article on images of "defiled" female bodies, American cultural scholar Amy M. Green uses the Catsouras case as an example of what she calls "anonymous violence," a form of violence in which the viewer "sees only the net results without knowing the victim" or watches a "one-dimensional character get brutalized," as is the case with sadistic horror films like *Saw* (2004), *Hostel* (2005) or *Martyrs* (2008) (22). Green discusses *Martyrs* – a Canadian-French horror film revolving around childhood trauma – in relation to the leaked Catsouras images and concludes that the dehumanized perception of the corpse in both examples "allows for the viewer to enjoy, tolerate, or perhaps be titillated by the imagery" (22).

Similar to the fictional women in the horror films that Green discusses, who are portrayed as hollow canvases onto which viewers can project their desire for visual thrills, Nikki Catsouras's fate exemplifies the *tabula rasa* perception to which many dead bodies are subjected in digital space. Digital platforms, as I will argue in more detail below and in Chapter 3, make it easier for users to detach the identity and individuality of the depicted person from the corpse-images on display. Yet, unlike the women depicted in *Martyrs*, Catsouras is not a stock character from a fictionalized world but a human being who had a life and left behind a family. This vital distinction informs the serious ethical issues that arise when the image of a human corpse is detached from the person it used to be and appropriated in contexts that exceed the control of that person's loved ones. I will come back to this point in my comparative analysis of Catsouras and Āghā-Soltān below.

In a column for the *Columbia Journal of Gender and Law*, American legal scholar Mary Anne Franks evokes Catsouras to address another ethical question. Franks sees the Catsouras case as an example of the “unwilling avatar” – a paradigm that involves the invocation of “individuals’ real bodies for the purposes of threatening, defaming, or sexualizing them without consent” (226-7). The unwilling avatar, Franks contends, is a by-product of what she refers to as “cyberspace idealism,” or “the view of cyberspace as a utopian realm of the mind where all can participate equally, free from social, historical, and physical restraints” (225). To regard digital sites as places “free” from the restraints that Franks mentions is an act of idealism indeed. As the emotional aftermath for Catsouras's relatives demonstrates, digital appropriations of human bodies do not exist separately from such restraints. The unwilling avatar as Franks describes it identifies a form of abusive power and violence that is enacted on digital platforms, but that is not “unreal” and can have harmful social effects. That the avatar in question is “unwilling” signals a lack of consent that may be due to a power imbalance. When an image (of a corpse) is appropriated online for an end that the depicted person or their next of kin never agreed to, what is at stake is a denial of their agency, which may be grounded in structural inequalities of gender, race, class, and age that persist with fervor online.

In this respect, it is not irrelevant that the Catsouras case concerns the dead body of a teenage girl. Although the online abuse of her digital corpse is an extreme example, it is part of a more structural asymmetry in (online) power. There is a persistent pattern of woman-targeted harassment and misogyny in online cultures, as observed by media scholars such as

Eugenia Siapera (2019), Jacqueline Ryan Vickery (2018), and Emma A. Jane (2017).⁴⁰ An illustrative recent example of this pattern is the Gamergate scandal of 2014, in which a number of feminist media scholars were severely harassed online after speaking out about gender discrimination in the videogame business.⁴¹ The misogynist underpinnings of this type of harassment, Franks argues, show that “only certain individuals enjoy the mythic degree of liberty and freedom from physical restraint touted by cyberspace idealists, while others experience a loss of liberty and a re-entrenchment of physical restraints already unequally imposed upon them in the offline world” (246). Franks’s reference to “the offline world” recalls the dualist takes on digital media as sites detached from “real life” that I problematized in the Introduction, but her argument about the social problem of unwilling avatars underlines that, in practice, the opposite is true: Catsouras’s gender (female) and age group (teenager) in “real life” cannot possibly be disentangled from the way in which images of her corpse were instrumentalized online.

In her column, Franks only discusses the concept of the unwilling avatar in the context of deliberate harassment and abuse. But not all mobilizations of digital bodies as unwilling avatars are malignant. Indeed, as the forensic agent’s stated reason for distributing the images of Catsouras’s corpse demonstrates, people who upload and share images of corpses may have a pedagogical or even activist goal in mind. Still, in online realms, the intention of the uploader, it seems, has little influence on the ultimate purposes for which the image may be used. This disconnect between intention and purpose is also evident in my second case study for this chapter, that of the digital corpse of Nedā Āghā-Soltān.

“Angel of Freedom”: The Iconization of Nedā Āghā-Soltān

On June 22, 2009, while on her way to a local activist march in Tehran, 26-year-old philosophy student Nedā Āghā-Soltān was shot by a government sniper. She died shortly after, in the streets, surrounded by a crowd of onlookers and fellow protesters. The protesters, including Āghā-Soltān, had gathered to march against the presidential elections that were being held that month, and that were widely believed to be “rigged” (Sabety 119).⁴² Āghā-Soltān was not a

⁴⁰ A particular characteristic of online misogynist violence is the verbal rape threat. Australian media scholar Emma A. Jane notes that this form of online rhetoric has become so common that it has acquired its own colloquial term: “Rapeglish,” an aggregation of the words “rape” and “English” (7). In addition to her scholarly work, Jane has created an online “Random Rape Threat Generator” to open up a more informal discussion about the misogynist abuse that female-identified users face online. See: <https://www.rapeglish.com/RRTG.html>.

⁴¹ For an in-depth discussion of the Gamergate scandal, see Kidd and Turner.

⁴² For a detailed historical account of the 2009 Iranian presidential election protests, see Kamalipour.

prominent political figure; she had been active in the protests, but did not play a leading role. But whereas she was largely anonymous when she was alive, she soon became world-famous for her death. As it happened, a passerby had started recording Āghā-Soltān with his phone right after she was shot, capturing her last minutes alive. Enraged and horrified by the civilian-targeted violence of the Iranian state, the passerby immediately uploaded the footage to YouTube as a way of spreading the news about the Iranian government's inhumane conduct. And spread, it did: within a few days, major news broadcasters such as BBC and CNN were covering Āghā-Soltān's death. The YouTube video itself, titled "Her name was Neda," garnered close to two million views. Towards the end of 2009, *TIME* magazine writer Krista Mahr described Āghā-Soltān's death as "probably the most widely witnessed death in human history."

Āghā-Soltān's was the first human death to be shared on YouTube. Its coverage is not only a milestone in online media history, but also in new media ethics. Like the Catsouras case, Āghā-Soltān's story demonstrates that the reasons why images of a dead body are put online do not always match the ways in which these images are subsequently appropriated by Internet users. Indeed, although the footage of Āghā-Soltān's death was uploaded as a political complaint against the use of violence by the Iranian government – and although she quickly became an icon of the Iranian activist movement⁴³ – it was soon taken up, spread, and reframed by users from other parts of the world.

Notably, the interpretation of Āghā-Soltān's death and its political significance varied between Middle-Eastern audiences and Western ones. In an article for *ABC News*, for example, German journalist Ulrike Putz compares Āghā-Soltān to Joan of Arc and describes her as "a martyr for the opposition in Iran." The comparison to Joan of Arc helped to make Āghā-Soltān's death resonate with audiences outside of Iran, particularly in Europe and the United States. In an interview with academic magazine *The Source*, American historian Julie Singer criticizes this appropriation by remarking that

the instantaneous ubiquity of the comparison between Neda and Joan is suggestive of a certain process of translation that often takes place when the media consumer attempts to relate to chronologically or geographically distance people or events. [...] Neda

⁴³ Iranian-American sociologist Elham Gheytonchi describes how, after her assassination, Āghā-Soltān "became an instant icon, the symbol of innocence in the face of crude brutality of the state" (258). To highlight the extent of Āghā-Soltān's "iconization" (both in Iran and abroad), Gheytonchi notes, among other examples, how American president Barack Obama mentioned her in his Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech in 2009 and how a street in Sanaa (Yemen) was named after her (258).

Agha-Soltan's [sic] senseless death is imparted a political significance through comparison with a long-dead teenager whose story is but vaguely familiar to most people today. Indeed, such comparison implies a need to bring contemporary Iran's political struggles into the Western symbolic canon in order to valorize or even comprehend them. (n. pag.)

Singer, in short, is critical about the comparison between Āghā-Soltān and Joan of Arc because it reconfigures the Iranian woman's death through a Western, Eurocentric lens. This lens, which is modeled on the European viewer and their expectations, does not take into consideration the specific context of contemporary Iranian politics of which Āghā-Soltān's death was a result.

Middle East scholar Faegheh Shirazy voices a similar criticism. In her article about the case, she opposes Āghā-Soltān's use as a martyr figure because she "died as a bystander, not as a participant, during the political demonstrations" (114). As noted, although Āghā-Soltān did intend to march along during the protests, she did not play a leading or organizational role. On this basis, Shirazy argues that the term "casualty" would be more appropriate to describe Āghā-Soltān's death, also because the Arabic term for martyr (*shahadat*) has a particular religious meaning in the Middle-Eastern context that does not apply to Āghā-Soltān's circumstances (114). In this local form of martyrdom, death is sought by the subject in the name of God (*fi sabil ullah*), which "transforms death into an act of choice and purpose—that which can be remembered, treasured, or even emulated by others" (Shirazy 99-100). The Western online appropriation of Āghā-Soltān's death, in other words, erases the Middle-Eastern cultural framework in which this death occurred and in which it did not have associations with martyrdom.⁴⁴

Like Catsouras, then, Āghā-Soltān can be described as an unwilling avatar: a body that is given a different meaning as a result of its digital circulation. Yet, whereas the digitized corpse of Catsouras, dehumanizingly dubbed "Porsche Girl,"⁴⁵ was appropriated by online users for self-gratifying and abusive purposes, Āghā-Soltān was iconized as a political hero and turned into the face of resistance against the Iranian government as the "Angel of Freedom." This does not mean that other users did not appropriate her corpse for different

⁴⁴ In the Christian context, the meaning of the term "martyr" varies "from a material witness [of God] to an executed Christian," neither of which applies to Āghā-Soltān (Moss 3).

⁴⁵ See Goffard for a discussion of the "Porsche Girl" nickname and the ways it was used to mock Catsouras's leaked corpse-images.

purposes. As one result of her global online veneration, for example, her body was made the subject of online activist art in not only the Middle East, but also the United States and Europe. Āghā-Soltān’s final moments were also reproduced and mourned in commemorative YouTube videos, and her face was included in various online art projects and political blogs. Artists in France, Italy, and the United States used her image as the inspiration for paintings, murals, clay busts, and other sculptures (Figure 2.1). Queen’s College, Oxford – so *The Telegraph*’s Leyla Ferani reports – even set up a scholarship in her name. The scholarship, which is worth 4,000 British pounds and is awarded to philosophy students of Iranian descent, was installed to “hono[r] the whole student body in Iran which has been repressed and tortured by the Islamic Republic.”



Figure 2.1. Two clay busts, one veiled, one not veiled, by American artist Paula Slater, depicting Āghā-Soltān.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Image source: <https://paulaslater.com/sculpture/neda-gha-soltan-angel-of-freedom/> (Accessed: 18 Aug. 2020). On her website, Slater notes that she initially made the version with the veil based on the only “verified” portrait of Āghā-Soltā at the time (which featured the veil), but also made a version without the veil when another photograph became available and people requested a bust based on it. She further comments that “[t]he first sculpture [with the veil] was a historical portrait of Neda ‘Angel of Iran.’ It showed a strong and proud Neda

Āghā-Soltān’s mobilization as an icon of resistance is not only significant because of its cross-cultural appropriation. To understand which other factors impacted on online uses of her corpse image, it helps to remember that she was not the only person to be assassinated in the streets of Tehran that day, yet it was *her* body that was iconized. In a 2009 news item for *Chron*, American journalist Kathleen Parker reports that at least nine other civilians died on the day of Āghā-Soltān’s assassination. “What of all those others?” she asks, questioning why Āghā-Soltān was chosen as the “face” of the resistance rather than the other people murdered by the regime. Somewhat sardonically, Parker adds: “Were they only men? Were they not as beautiful?” These questions refer to the widespread tendency in news media to paint young, attractive women as innocent (and therefore grievable) victims, a tendency that American media scholar Diana York Blaine (1999) has explored in relation to the deaths of American child star JonBenet Ramsey in 1996 and that of Princess Diana (which I also discussed in Chapter 1) in 1997.

Iranian performance scholar Sareh Afshar further argues that Āghā-Soltān’s status as an “almost white, modern Iranian woman” – as commentators were keen to point out, she did not wear a veil in the video of her death – contributed to “the extensive coverage offered her through various media outlets” (246).⁴⁷ According to Afshar, this status helps to explain “the lack of coverage given to others who died during the civil unrest immediately before and after [Āghā-Soltān’s] death, particularly men” (246). The international media’s readiness to iconize Āghā-Soltān can thus be attributed (at least partially) to her gender and age, as well as her physical attractiveness. As Afshar’s reference to Āghā-Soltān’s skin color (“almost white”) infers, race also played a significant role in the media portrayal of the case. The “disproportionate coverage” of violence inflicted on white(-passing) women is so prevalent in news media, in fact, “that it has garnered a label: ‘Missing White Woman Syndrome’” (Behm 800).⁴⁸

In a report for *The New York Times*, Iranian-Canadian journalist Nazila Fathi offers another explanation for Āghā-Soltān’s iconic status, linking it to the specific gender norms enforced by of the Iranian state. Fathi remarks that, “for many Iranians, [...] the death of a

whose spirit could not be broken by an oppressive dictatorship under which she lived and died.” The second bust – without the veil – is described as being “of Neda ‘the Angel of Freedom’ and she is radiating the hope of her people for a free Iran. It is a more intimate portrait in which she [Neda] was free to show her vulnerability and innocence.” This rather problematically implies that the image of a woman in a veil cannot represent “freedom.”

⁴⁷ This “Westernizing” of Āghā-Soltān is similar to that of Alan Kurdi, which I briefly discussed via Peeren (2018) in Chapter 1.

⁴⁸ See also DeSilva.

young woman has special meaning,” as women had become the primary targets of the contested Iranian government after President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad “began to strictly enforce previously loosened restrictions.” According to Fathi, it was not a matter of aesthetic preference that a murdered female body was chosen to represent the Iranian protest movement, but a response to the gender-specific effects of Ahmadinejad’s presidency on the Iranian people. This argument supplements but does not necessarily invalidate Parker’s point about Āghā-Soltān’s gender, attractiveness, and “almost-whiteness” as contributing factors to her iconicity, especially considering that users from outside Iran were unlikely to be aware of the local context that Fathi sketches.

While the global dispersal of the images of Āghā-Soltān’s death – coupled with her youth and femininity – made her a potent symbol for Iranian protestors, the circulation of her image also had inadvertent side effects that, again, raise important ethical questions. At one point, another Iranian woman, Neda Soltani, was incorrectly identified as Āghā-Soltān and her photograph ended up being used for a large number of protest posters, altars, and other tributes erected in Iran to memorialize Āghā-Soltān. The misidentification occurred after international media outlets began seeking a portrait of Āghā-Soltān to accompany the news of her death and ended up using the Facebook picture of the similarly named Soltani by mistake. Austrian media critic Peter Friedl describes how, as a result of “the wrong picture land[ing] in the hands of a hysterical mass media,” Soltani’s image was broadcasted and printed across the world. “Mourning ceremonies for the dead Neda were held in front of this photo and angry demonstrators carried it before them as an icon,” Friedl reports.

The misidentification had severe consequences for Soltani. In an interview with the BBC, she recounts how, after overcoming the initial shock of seeing her portrait used for protest vigils all over the world, agents from the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence visited her house and attempted to coax her into co-operating with them. With her help, the Ministry of Intelligence “wanted to imply that Neda Agha-Soltan’s [sic] death had not taken place but was a piece of propaganda against Iran, [manufactured by] the European Union, the United Kingdom, and of course the US,” Soltani reports. She refused to go along with this plan, but as a result, was no longer safe in her home country. After bribing a security official at Tehran’s airport, she fled to Turkey and later sought and was granted asylum in Germany. In 2012, she published a memoir of her experiences, titled *My Stolen Face*. As of 2020, Soltani is still living in exile.

The story of Soltani’s “stolen face” illustrates the impact that the online circulation of images of unwilling avatars may have on people’s everyday lives. As was the case with

Catsouras's family, the online misidentification of Soltani as Āghā-Soltān greatly impacted the former's life. Although the intention behind the sharing of Āghā-Soltān's image and that of Soltani was not to cause harm, the consequences were nonetheless devastating for the latter. What both the Catsouras and Āghā-Soltān cases show, then, is that the motives behind a particular corpse's digitization and online circulation can vary from benign to downright malicious; and that, because such circulation cannot easily be controlled, others can, willfully or accidentally, use a digital corpse for undesirable purposes. This practice of appropriating corpses online and repurposing them may cause harm both to the deceased's memory and to the lives of people with or without a relation to the deceased.

The Ethics of Appropriating a Digital Corpse

This chapter's epigraph by death scholar Kevin O'Neill declares that "[t]he dead have migrated from the casket and the embalming table to streaming video feeds" (184). To this claim, I want to add that not only have the dead migrated to online spaces, but their digitization has also changed their meanings and effects, and made it harder to control their public appropriation. The two digital corpses that I discuss in this chapter, of Catsouras and Āghā-Soltān, both illustrate this dynamic. Online, their tragic deaths were not just mourned, but their digitized corpses prompted various affective responses as users felt entitled to behold, share, and repurpose them at a scale and speed unprecedented in pre-digital times. It bears repeating that the affective responses found in online communities are not unique to digital environments. As I described in the previous chapter, audiences also looked at images of dead bodies before the Internet existed and their responses, too, ranged from horror to delight. The key difference, however, is that digital corpses allow for an intensified, less controllable, and less accountable circulation, which, I contend, has ethical consequences. On these consequences, which I briefly mentioned earlier, I want to zoom in now.

As I have tried to illustrate using the cases of Catsouras and Āghā-Soltān, the main ethical problem raised by the digital corpse is the lack of control over its online circulation and over the meanings that media users assign to it in the process of this circulation. The California Highway Patrol officers apparently intended for the Catsouras case file to serve as a warning against reckless driving, and Western media spread the Āghā-Soltān (and Soltani) images out of solidarity with Iranian anti-government protesters. In practice, however, the images of both corpses were also appropriated online for wildly different ends. Catsouras became shock fodder

on a myriad of gore blogs and a means for trolls to torment her family; Āghā-Soltān's framing as a martyr in the Western world largely erased the specificities of the Iranian context, while in Iran, her death was placed in a patriarchal frame; and Soltani had to flee her homeland. The ethical issues that surround digital corpses thus do not stop at the question under which circumstances and for which reasons it is right or wrong to circulate images of these corpses. Rather, they extend to questions about responsibility, ownership, and agency. Who (or what entity) is considered to be responsible for digital corpses and who (or what entity) owns them? And who (or what entity) should be allowed to circulate the digital corpse online, to control this circulation, or to prevent certain meanings and effects from being attributed to it? Finally, who is empowered or disempowered by the circulation of the digital corpse?

The cases of Catsouras and Āghā-Soltān exemplify the digital corpse's vulnerability to public appropriation and reappropriation. Once rendered an alterable, malleable, and shareable image, the dead human body is truly up for grabs. The high-level shareability of digital objects, including digital corpses, facilitates an apparently global sense of ownership (or, alternatively, a sense that digital objects have no owner at all) that makes some users of online platforms think they can use such digital objects for their own, sometimes detrimental, ends. This assumption on the part of the user – that digital objects are globally owned or simply ownerless – relates to Charles Ess's notion of distributed responsibility, which I discussed in the Introduction. As Ess explains, digital-media users tend to feel that their "ethical responsibility" is "distributed across a network of actors" (xvi). As a result of this perceived distribution of responsibility, users tend to become less careful in their appropriation of a digital object – in this case, a corpse-image – and less inclined to recognize that object's high-level shareability as potentially vulnerable to misuse or downright violence.

This is where I want to briefly discuss an additional, extreme example of the appropriation of digital corpses that occurred on the shock site NowThat'sFuckedUp (NTFU). NTFU started out as an amateur pornography website in 2004 (Andén-Papadopoulos 926). Chris Wilson, a man in his mid-twenties from Orlando, Florida, and NTFU's administrator, used the website to circulate pornographic images and videos of women sent to the website by these women's boyfriends and husbands, usually without their consent. As it happened, the majority of NTFU's audience consisted of U.S. soldiers stationed in Iraq and Afghanistan for military duty. Because many American credit card companies rejected payments coming from addresses in the Middle East, the soldiers had to find a different way to pay for their porn access. Wilson had a suggestion: prove that you are a U.S. soldier stationed abroad, and gain

free access to the website.⁴⁹ Many soldiers happily accepted the deal. Initially, the visual evidence that Wilson received was rather innocent in nature: photographs of “soldiers relaxing in the barracks,” and other similarly “innocuously mundane moments” (Schudson and Sonnevend n. pag.). After a while, Wilson also started welcoming more offensive content. “Let’s see some tanks, guns... some dead Taliban,” he posted (King 96). A flood of submissions followed, including images of atrocities ranging from a “face sliced off and placed in a bowl with blood” to a group of marines “laugh[ing] and smil[ing] for the camera while pointing at a burned, charcoal-black corpse lying at their feet” (Thompson n. pag.).

In subsequent months, Wilson shared the corpse images he received from U.S. soldiers in a separate section of the site and NTFU’s popularity as a gore blog skyrocketed. Due to their gruesome nature, as well as their visual immediacy (the images made very clear how brutal the U.S.-Iraq war was at that time), the war images made Wilson’s website one of the most controversial blogs on the web. It is hardly surprising, then, that Wilson was arrested for the circulation of obscene content in December 2005, and that his website was shut down altogether a few months later, in early 2006 (Kushner n. pag.).

In terms of intent, Wilson’s gore blog is reminiscent of the Catsouras case, in that it presents images of physical trauma as an occasion for violent voyeurism. According to Swedish media scholar Kari Andén-Papadopoulos, however, submissions to violent image blogs such as NTFU need not necessarily be driven by amoral intentions. Such blogs, in her view, may serve a therapeutic purpose, and their images “should be understood primarily as symptoms of an affective reliving of traumatic war experiences, serving at once to authenticate and cancel out a hurtful reality” (Andén-Papadopoulos 922). By sharing images of their experiences on NTFU, Andén-Papadopoulos contends, soldiers produce visual evidence of their traumas (they “authenticate” them) and then turn this visual evidence into someone else’s perverse entertainment, thereby temporarily “cancelling out” – or displacing – the pain of their present. In his study on soldier photography during the Iraq War, Irish historian Liam Kennedy also questions the assumption that violent image blogs have only harmful effects. He describes NTFU “as a form of ‘bearing witness,’” in the sense that the images featured on the blog force the viewers at home to face the traumatic atrocities happening in war zones (170).

British media scholar Sue Tait proposes to nuance readings of gore blogs for yet another reason. She argues that these blogs’ users tend to be well aware of the moral implications of

⁴⁹ See also Oates; Harkin.

their online behavior. As she writes, they “acknowledge that their desire to look at imagery of death and body horror breaches cultural taboos” and “express their pleasures and anxieties around looking, or attempt to legitimize their looking by drawing on the discourses of access to the ‘real’ and ‘truth-telling’ promoted by the site” (101). The users Tait observed for her study tried to make their gore blog participation justifiable by arguing it was a way for them to stay informed about “reality.” This justification does not necessarily excuse the users’ actions, Tait argues, as “it is not the image itself that bears witness”; instead, the image “underlines [...] that there is cultural labor required to orient viewers to the ethical significance of that which the camera records” (103). In regarding the image as a source of pleasure, the user fails to do the cultural labor that Tait speaks of. This prevents the user from having to acknowledge that the “pleasure” of the gore blog “is derived from the shock of the ‘real’ and from the objectification of the victim as a ‘reality effect,’ rather than a suffering subject with whom one empathizes” (103). The ethical risk of the gore blog, then, lies in the user’s substitution of empathy with shock, a reaction that objectifies the depicted body without acknowledging its “real” context (war, abuse, illness, et cetera) while still being *aware* of this “real” context – as it is the trauma of this reality that gives the gore blog image its shock factor.

When we take into account the research on gore blogs done by Andés-Papadopoulos, Kennedy, and Tait, it seems naïve to assume that a digital corpse’s viewer has no awareness of that body’s non-digital origin. These users know that the depicted bodies they are appropriating and repurposing are linked to a traceable human being. What is significant from an ethical perspective is that a viewer’s awareness of a digital corpse’s original corporeality does not necessarily affect its perception and use as a shareable object. The viewer (or in this case, user) may still favor the image-status of the digital corpse—and all the functions that come with this status, i.e. shareability and moral distance—over its material, bodily status. As seen with Catsouras and Āghā-Soltān, the realization that the image is of a real person who experienced a tragic death does not always pre-empt the new meanings and possibilities that the circulation of a digital corpse generates (for pleasure, pedagogy, or politics) from being taken up and enjoyed. The environment that these bodies are encountered in – a digital environment focused on the spectacle of the image – plays an important role in this dynamic.

In the essay “Dying, Seeing, Feeling,” South-African art historian Griselda Pollock argues that the virtualization of an image, by which she means the rendering digital of that which was previously analogue (what I have called digitization), provides an additional level

of distance between a depicted body's corporeality and its more abstracted state as a visual concept. "[I]n the age of digital fabrication," Pollock contends,

that last tenuous and indexical link has been severed and all reality is in *potential* virtualized. So we swing back from the initial function of the indexical photographic archive as proof, [...] to think about other modes of encounter via an image archive that becomes a transport to and from the suspended historic moment of this and other traumas mediated to us by both public and familial photographic traces. (225, emphasis original)

Pollock's point here is that the virtualization of a body diminishes the boundary between the corporeal and the virtual. In turn, this virtualization diminished the viewer's understanding of the depicted body as a corporeal object. As a result, the material origin of the object that is featured in the image (be it living or dead) is no longer part of the object's perceived meaning. Once digitized, Pollock argues, the depicted object's main asset has become that of its *potential*.

The digitized object, in other words, is less useful to the viewer in terms of what it *is* (and of who owns it) than in terms of what it could *become*. This is evident in the cases of Catsouras and Āghā-Soltān as well. In both cases, the images of the corpses detached these corpses from their sociopolitical contexts and changed or enhanced their original meanings: the body of one dead young woman becomes shock fodder (Catsouras), and the body of another dead young woman becomes a political icon (Āghā-Soltān). It is Pollock's account of the corpse-image's altered meaning when this image is encountered in a digital context that speaks to Tait's theory about the (un)ethical forms of bearing witness on online gore blogs. What I mean when I say this is: the digital corpse demands a degree of cultural labor on the part of the user, but the gore blog's aim to shock rather than generate empathy excuses the user from *doing* this cultural labor, enabling them to detach the digital corpse from "reality" (and thereby objectify it as shock fodder). To view an object that is digital, Pollock asserts, is to invite a medium-specific "mode of encounter" with that object, involving medium-specific expectations about how it is to be engaged with (225). For example, an object that is digital is expected to be available for viewing and possibly sharing, whereas an object that exists outside digital platforms invites other forms of interaction; media users can also duplicate and publicly appropriate a digital image without losing the quality of that image, but non-digital objects are susceptible to different material conditions, and cannot be reappropriated with the same ease. Non-digital objects can be fragile or rare, or it can be socially inappropriate to interact with

them except in tightly circumscribed ways – as, for example, in the case of a human corpse. When that same corpse (or any other object) is made available as a digital image, new, sometimes unanticipated forms of interaction arise.

These new forms of interaction bring about new ethical considerations, as my discussions of *Catsouras* and *Āghā-Soltān* have demonstrated. To understand these ethical considerations, it helps to turn to a last theoretical frame: Vivian Sobchak’s work on the ethics of screened deaths. In her monograph *Carnal Thoughts*, Sobchack investigates the interactions that take place between a body and its viewer when the body in question is encountered on-screen. Zooming in on the visual confrontation with death in fiction films versus documentaries, she writes that the main difference between these two genres is not that one is fictional and the other “embodied,” but that each genre produces a different ethical expectation in the viewer. “When death is represented as real,” she writes, “a visual taboo has been violated, and the representation must find various ways to justify the violation” (242). When a death is presented in a documentary context, as something “lived,” in other words, the viewer has to come to terms with this death as something that truly happened. The viewer of a documentary is confronted with an act that had a consequence—the loss of human life—so the viewer feels implicated. Sobchack argues that this sense of being implicated creates an ethical tension between the viewer and the dead body that is depicted.

Of deaths in fiction films, in contrast, Sobchack writes:

Fiction film [...] only plays with—and as—visual taboo, not only containing death in a range of formal and ritual simulations but also often boldly viewing it with unethical and prurient interest, as if, thus simulated, it really “doesn’t count.” The fiction film audience generally responds in kind. That is, however “grossed out” by death’s excessive particulars, viewers tend to be less ethically squeamish about looking at fictional death and also less stringent in their judgment of the nature of the film’s curiosity about and gaze on the violence and mortification that transforms the lived-body subject into the objective matter of a corpse. (242)

When death is presented as a fiction (a type of presentation to which I return in Chapter 3), then, the viewer does not tend to feel ethically implicated. It is only when the death is presented as “real” that the viewer feels the need to acknowledge what Sobchack calls the death’s “lived-body subject.” To acknowledge a death as such is uncomfortable, because it means having to recognize what made the death happen, which may have been a violent or traumatic event.

When a death is presented as an image without embodied ties to the everyday world, it is easier for the viewer to accept it as something that “doesn’t count” and that, as such, can be subjected to different types of interaction than are considered acceptable in the case of “actual” traumatic or violent events.

It is here that Sobchack’s and Pollock’s observations connect. Pollock argues that digital encounters with objects “sever” the connection between an object’s former corporeal status and its new potential as a virtual object. Sobchack, in turn, allows us to recognize this process of severance between corporeal and virtual as a type of fictionalization. Once digitized, the conditions that brought about the on-screen corpse “don’t count” anymore: they are irrelevant to the image-context that the viewer encounters them in, a context that installs a clear boundary between the viewer and the viewed. It is this boundary that allows the viewer to feel unimplicated and that prevents them from being judged for any pleasure they may take in looking at the image.

As a result, according to Pollock and Sobchack, digital appropriations of corpses are perceived as just that: a reproduction that has no bearing on the feelings and flesh of its corporeal original. Based on what happened to the digitized bodies of Catsouras and Āghā-Soltān, however, I have to take issue with – or, to put it less polemically, want to supplement – Pollock’s and Sobchack’s arguments. In the case of Catsouras, it was not solely the digital images of her corpse that intrigued users, but also the perverse pleasure derived from tormenting her surviving family with these images. And in the case of Āghā-Soltān, the digital documentation of the very moment of her death only emphasized the reality of the violence that brought it about, which further fueled the ongoing protests against the Iranian government. The sociopolitical conditions under which both of these deaths occurred, then, most certainly informed the way in which their digitized corpses were encountered and the meanings that were ascribed to them “in real life.”

Though I disagree with Pollock and Sobchack’s shared argument that the witnessing of a digital corpse as a virtual image necessarily induces a reduced sense of responsibility, this argument does help to explain how it was possible for Catsouras’s and Āghā-Soltān’s corpse-images to be mobilized as they were. In becoming what the viewer experiences as a depiction only, rather than a depiction *of* something, the digital corpse abides more readily by the cultural codes of images than by the cultural codes of human remains. The digital corpse, in other words, is primarily parsed as an image made to be viewed, shared, discussed, and possibly reconfigured to other contexts. This development does not come without ethical risk: when

dealing with an easily reproduceable and shareable image, it becomes significantly harder to trace the responsibility for the digital corpse's reproduction and (objectionable) recontextualization to an identifiable source, as Ess's theory of distributed responsibility underlines. While the theories offered by Pollock and Sobchack (and by Green in her discussion of young female victims in horror films) in part excuse the viewer's rejection of ethical responsibility, this excuse does not hold up in digital contexts where the viewer is almost never "just" a viewer but rather an active agent – one that is complicit in the image's circulation (by sharing, 'liking,' 'retweeting' images, et cetera).

This brings me back to the cases of Catsouras and Āghā-Soltān. What both of these cases illustrate is that the circulation of digital corpses requires an ethical framework that goes beyond those offered by Pollock, Sobchack, and Green, as their theories might excuse viewers from having to take ethical responsibility for the digital images of dead and dying bodies that they choose to view (or *not* view, as the act of looking away is also an ethical one), validate, manipulate, or spread online. The ethical responsibility of viewers who engage with digital corpses, both individually and as part of larger networks, requires our close attention in the face of increasing digitization and, by implication, an increasingly fast and wide circulation of digital corpses – especially as for some media users, as we saw, this intensified online circulation radically detaches digital corpses from the sociopolitical contexts from which they originally emerged. As seen with the harassment and traumatization of surviving relatives in the case of Catsouras, and with the forced exile of Soltani, this contextual detachment might cause damage not just within but also outside digital spheres, illustrating once more how the digital is not separate from everyday life, but an indelible part of it.

Conclusion

The cases of Catsouras and Āghā-Soltān illustrate that the meaning of a human corpse is easily reconfigured by the viewer/user once it is encountered in digital space. Although all bodies are subject to the projections and actions of their beholders, these projections and actions become (even) more ethically fraught when the body's owner is dead and neither the owner nor their loved ones can exert agency over the body's appropriation as a digitized, globally shareable object. Although the reason why images of Catsouras's corpse were uploaded differed significantly from the reason why Āghā-Soltān's dying body was digitized, both cases demonstrate that, once a body is rendered a readily and widely shareable object in digital

platforms, it is easily subjected to recontextualization and prone to becoming uncontrollable. As the shock-site memeification of Catsouras's corpse and the media iconization of Āghā-Soltān (and, related to the latter, the political endangerment of the similarly named Soltani) have shown, the rapid, large-scale online sharing and repurposing of images might invest the digital corpse with unanticipated meanings, intended and unintended, desirable and undesirable, without such meanings being subject to control or public accountability.

Once the image of a corpse has been placed in a digital setting, it is, in short, hard, if not impossible, to control what happens to it, as the image can be infinitely reproduced and circulated. What my case studies have also highlighted, however, is that despite the reconfiguration that takes place once a corpse is digitized, classic power inequalities tied to a corpse's gendering or racialization often continue to determine how the digitized corpse is encountered and interpreted. In the two case studies that I have discussed here, users exchanged and reproduced digital corpses as if they were just sensational objects rather than images of formerly living people. Despite this objectification, however, the way in which the corpses were gendered and racialized was still considered relevant. Catsouras was, for instance, nicknamed "Porsche Girl" in the vernacular of female porn-star pseudonyms, whereas Āghā-Soltān was cast as the "Angel of Freedom," a title that attributes to her a martyr-like, almost saintly status and simultaneously Westernizes her. On the basis of long-standing gender stereotypes (of woman as either a lust object or a saint), each corpse, in other words, ended up dehumanized as either *less* or *more* than human.

In the wider context of this study, my exploration of the cases of Catsouras and Āghā-Soltān through the lenses of Franks's, Pollock's, and Sobchack's theorizing is valuable in showing how the rendering "image" of a corpse in a digital context allows Internet users to appropriate and circulate the corpse on a wide scale and with unprecedented intensity, potentially without having to consider the ethical ramifications of this appropriation, as responsibility is distributed. What my discussion of the digital corpses of Catsouras and Āghā-Soltān also demonstrates is how the appropriation and repurposing of such corpses tends to reproduce classic power relations and inequalities, not least those pertaining to gender and race. A question that follows from these conclusions is how the ethical pitfalls of the appropriation of the digital corpse can be addressed, so as to make Internet users more aware of their responsibility and so as to return ownership and agency to, if not the digital corpse's owner, then their surviving loved ones. I will address this question in the remainder of this study by

shifting the focus from appropriated digital corpses to created and reappropriated digital corpses.

In the next chapter, I will present the creation of digital corpses as a counter reaction to the ethically questionable and materially harmful appropriations discussed in this chapter, while continuing my exploration of the role that gendering and racialization play in the ways in which media users engage with digital corpses. The created digital corpses on which I focus are *fictional* digital corpses – a term that I use to refer to corpses that have no traceable origin in a human body. Such fictional corpses, I argue, further speak to Pollock’s observation about digital fabrication as an act of “severance,” that is, as a disconnect between the image as an index of meaning and the image as an empty container for new interpretations. However, the fictional digital corpses that I examine show that this disconnect does not have to serve to absolve media users of ethical responsibility for their engagement with digital corpses but may, in fact, install a greater awareness of this responsibility.

Chapter 3 – Creating the Digital Corpse:

Patchwork Girl and No Ghost Just a Shell

I am buried here. You can resurrect me, but only piecemeal. If you want to see the whole, you will have to sew me back together yourself.

- from Shelley Jackson's *Patchwork Girl* (1995)

Introduction

This chapter focuses on the creation of fictional corpses within digital spaces, and the purposes these corpses serve. I compare a deliberately created literary digital corpse and a deliberately created artistic digital corpse as they appear, in the form of malleable objects, in American writer Shelley Jackson's electronic novel *Patchwork Girl* (1995) and French artists Pierre Huyghe and Philippe Parreno's multimedia project *No Ghost Just a Shell* (1999-2003). These two *fictional* corpses lack the human origin of previously discussed digital corpses like those of Nikki Catsouras and Nedā Āghā-Soltān; instead, they emerged as fully digital objects. I am interested in these fictional, always-already digital corpses for a reason: despite their lack of a link to a once-lived, human existence, the ways in which they are created and engaged with in the digital realm raises similar questions about agency and ethics as non-fictional corpses that were made digital. As digital bodies created by living, human bodies, fictional digital corpses are affected by the sociocultural and political environment of their creators and, in turn, their online uses can also affect this environment. Fictional digital corpses, in other words, can offer valuable insights into the ways in which vulnerable bodies (be they ill, dying, or dead) are encountered and perceived, both in digital and non-digital realms. In this chapter, I ask how the fictional digital corpse(-to-be) is created in terms of its gendering and racialization. I juxtapose its online creation to that of the non-fictional digital corpse; more pointedly, I ask how users engage with fictional as opposed to nonfictional digital corpses, and which agency they afford to different fictive dead bodies.

In what follows, I argue that, just as the non-fictional human corpses discussed in the previous chapter, fictional digital corpses raise questions concerning agency, responsibility, and ownership. A particular question that these fictional corpses raise concerns the

sociopolitical ramifications of interactions with corpses that have no claim to an existence outside digital realms. As fictional objects, these digital corpses are perceived as available for the user's personal projections in a seemingly unproblematic and unlimited way, since by engaging with them, media users supposedly circumvent the traditional ethical issues surrounding the use and abuse of non-fictional human corpses. Both of the case studies discussed in this chapter challenge this idea and make clear that interactions with fictional digital corpses in fact *do* involve much the same ethical questions as dealing with non-fictional human corpses. Still, at the same time, these digital corpses' fictionality does influence the way in which such ethical questions arise and are dealt with. With this in mind, the notion of digital fabrication discussed by Griselda Pollock – the South-African cultural theorist on whose work I also built in Chapter 2 – in terms of the “severance” between image and index in her account of images of death requires rethinking (225). As I will show, despite lacking a physical index, *digitally created* depictions of dead bodies may be as much subject to dehumanizing practices as their *digitized* counterparts, as both perpetuate the sociopolitical vulnerability of gendered and racialized bodies; however, as these corpses are fictional, the social ramifications of their dehumanization are (perceived as) less severe. Because interactions with digitally created fictional corpses cannot be detached from the sociopolitical tensions surrounding non-fictional corpses, I argue that the fictional digital corpse constitutes a helpful tool for gauging ethical responses to dead bodies in digital environments, without directly affecting the lives (and loved ones) of concrete identifiable, non-fictional people.

Just like Catsouras's and Āghā-Soltān's bodies, the corpses created by Jackson and by Huyghe and Parreno boast exceptionally strongly gendered characteristics, which I explore through the notion of the “girded image,” a term for the gendered repurposing of images that American media scholar Heather Warren-Crow coined in her eponymous book. These characteristics, I argue, influence the fictional digital corpse's beholder in terms of the liberties they feel they can take in their engagements with it, prompting considerations related to the matters of agency, responsibility, and ownership that are central to my overall research. In my analysis, I further make use of American communication scholars Dorothy Howard and Tim Gentles's discussion of the “cartoon body,” a phrase that they use to refer to fictional bodies' “elasticity” and, concomitantly, their capacity to “absorb[b] and recove[r] from violence” (n. pag.). Using this framework, I explore the purposes and effects of the digital corpse's creation and use, and analyze how they challenge – or expand on – the appropriation of non-fictional digital corpses, particularly with regard to the lack of agency of the dead and the ways in which

living users are confronted with the sociopolitical ramifications of exploiting this lack of agency.

This chapter opens with a short survey of the ways in which death is conceptualized in (online) video games as this, for my sources, influential genre offers useful pointers for the analyses that follow. Next, I introduce my two case studies and highlight the key features of the fictional digital corpses created in them: monstrosity in the case of Jackson's *Patchwork Girl*, and the quality of *tabula rasa* (or "clean slate," the absence of an identity) in Huyghe and Parreno's *No Ghost Just a Shell*. These features, which either exaggerate (make into a "monster") or downplay (erase) the human individuality of the corpse, I argue, separate fictional digital corpses from their non-digital counterparts in fundamental ways. In both cases, the fictional origin of the corpses affects the ethical stakes involved. In effect, as my two case studies will demonstrate, fictional digital corpses offer a valuable "testing ground" for ethical experiments concerning the agency, responsibility, and ownership of and towards the dead.

Video Game Corpses and the Possibility of Resurrection

To understand how fictional digital corpses are created and used, it is helpful to start by exploring the role that death plays in a highly popular digital genre: that of the videogame. In digital videogames such as *World of Warcraft*, *Runescape*, and in other digital worlds known as MMORPGS (Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games), it is customary for the player to design an avatar, a two-dimensional likeness that will represent the player in the game's world. In many games, these avatars possess such superhuman skills as magic, flight, and psychokinesis, or the ability to influence people or objects without physically interacting with them. Part of the banal corporeality that unites these avatars with their "real world" counterparts, however, is that they are not immortal. Indeed, their mortality adds a key element of competitiveness to the game worlds: avatars can be killed by other avatars, monsters, and other NPCs (non-playable characters), and, as a result, they lose their digital possessions, experience points, or other in-game currency. An avatar's encounter with death is, in other words, not without consequence.

In their study on videogames and in-game avatar deaths, American literary scholars Stephen Mazzeo and Daniel Schall (2014) differentiate between "regular death," in which the avatar can be brought back to life after an in-game death occurs, and "permadeath," that is, "the permanent loss of a player's character" (197). This latter type of death, Mazzea and Schall

argue, can be experienced by gamers as a “catastrophic loss” similar to the death of a fully fleshed human being, as permadeaths entail the loss of an avatar that usually required considerable player investment in terms of time (always), physical energy (often), and money (sometimes). Indeed, for devoted players, the loss of a digital body can be as troubling as suffering injury to one’s own body or the loss of a pet. Notable videogame studies texts such as Brendan Keough’s *A Play of Bodies* (2018) and Aubrey Anable’s *Playing with Feelings* (2018) detail the intense emotions, including feelings of grief and mourning, that can accompany the loss of an in-game body.

Avatars are not the only form of digital, in-game corporealities that can face death. Continuing Mazzeo and Schall’s discussion of digital death and the loss of a digital embodiment, American sociologist William Sims Bainbridge (2014) notes that digital spaces *themselves*, meaning the data spheres that avatars move through, are equally vulnerable to mortality, given the precariousness of digital content. There are a lot of ways in which data can be lost, after all: the erasure of a hard drive, the bankruptcy of a software development company, the loss of a storage account’s password or access to a computer more generally, to name but a few examples. As data, digital game worlds are eminently susceptible to this form of loss. Over the past twenty years, many MMORPG game worlds have been deleted from online space as a result of social (loss of interest) and economic (loss of money) changes in the online landscape. Bainbridge mentions *Star Wars Galaxies* (2003-2011), *The Matrix Online* (2005-2009) and *City of Heroes* (2004-2012) as notable examples of such “deaths” (219). In short, a digital body can “die” either as a result of their player’s failure to survive in the game, or disappear entirely due to the loss of the game world that it inhabits.

What is particularly significant about the deaths of avatars and game worlds for my analyses is that such deaths are experiences to be avoided. Death is caused either by the failure of the player operating the avatar to make it survive or, as Bainbridge describes, the failure of the company that created the game world to keep it socially and financially viable. Death, in these contexts, is thus explicitly associated with failure. However, this is not to say that the death of a digital body always has a negative connotation or that it simply can serve no positive function.

A poignant, recent example where the death of a digital body is not conceived of as a loss, but as an opportunity for taking pressure off its creator, as well as for superior regeneration – and where this body, in fact, is designed to die from the start and repeatedly – is Canadian recording artist Grimes’s social media avatar “WarNymph” (Figure 3.1). In a February 2020

interview with *The Face* magazine, Grimes emphasizes that the avatar will “start as a baby, age [...], die and come back better (as a new baby: Version 2).” Ironically, the WarNymph avatar was created to take over Grimes’ media presence while she was in the final stage of her pregnancy with her first child. “It’s hard for me to do photoshoots and fit into clothes at the moment,” Grimes quips, “but WarNymph is here in [*The Face*] magazine promoting my album for me.” As soon as Grimes is ready to promote her music herself again after giving birth, the avatar will no longer regenerate, but will “die” forever (Lhoog 2020).



Figure 3.1. Grimes (right) with her digital avatar WarNymph (left). Photo taken by American artist Ryder Ripps, 2020.⁵⁰

Similar to Grimes’s avatar, the two fictional digital bodies that I analyze in this chapter are designed to die. In these cases, death is not an undesirable outcome – as it generally is in the case of videogames – but a productive feature that allows users to experiment with the boundaries of the digital corpse’s malleability. In the next section, I will illustrate how such experimentation is facilitated by *Patchwork Girl* (1995), Shelley Jackson’s radically feminist rendering of Mary Shelley’s classic text *Frankenstein* (1818). In this work, I argue, Jackson

⁵⁰ Image source: <https://www.theverge.com/2020/2/20/21145624/grimes-warnymph-digital-avatar-miss-anthropocene> (Accessed: 18 Aug. 2020).

juxtaposes the horror-like “monstrosity” of a disassembled female corpse with the sexist appropriation of women’s bodies. By doing so, Jackson activates – or, rather, allows readers interacting with the electronic text to activate – a fictional female corpse in a way that challenges the docile, eroticized way in which such corpses are, as I discussed in Chapter 1, traditionally represented in Western visual culture.

Monstrous Malleability in *Patchwork Girl*

In 1995, the American cross-genre author Shelley Jackson created *Patchwork Girl*, a hypertext about a female corpse that has become fragmented and, as a result, requires reassembly. *Patchwork Girl*’s corpse is not just fragmented in a theoretical sense; she is literally in pieces, with her various body parts strewn across the game’s interface for the reader (or user) to drag and drop into a newly reassembled body. It is up to the reader to “stitch” the patchwork girl back together again by interacting with the corpse’s narrative, the details of which are lodged in the corpse’s dispersed body parts. By clicking on the patchwork girl’s body parts, and by dragging and dropping them into place, the patchwork girl’s body – and her story – can be put together anew (Figure 3.2).



Figure 3.2. A screenshot of *Patchwork Girl*’s “graveyard” section.⁵¹

⁵¹ Image source: <https://www.eastgate.com/patterns/Patterns7.html> (Accessed: 18 Aug. 2020).

Jackson's text is widely considered to be a pioneering work of "electronic literature." This format, which emerged in the 1970s but became more widespread from the 1990s onwards, encompasses literary texts made specifically for digital devices. Electronic literature, or, in the words of the Norwegian digitization-and-reading expert Anne Mangen, "hypertext fiction," comprises "novels, short stories, poems or any other literary genre produced in order to be read on a computer" (407). What characterizes works of electronic literature is that "they take advantage of the technological features of digital technology, such as hyperlinks, multi-modality and interactivity, and typically employ these for aesthetic and/or narrative purposes" (Mangen 407).⁵²

A common platform for engaging with and spreading works of electronic literature is, not surprisingly, the Internet.⁵³ Jackson's *Patchwork Girl* can be acquired online, but can be read offline. However, there are also browser-based narratives made specifically for online spaces. Notable examples are French artist Martine Neddam's *Mouchette* (1996), an online labyrinth navigating the dark mind of a young girl, and American game designers Zoë Quinn, Patrick Lindsey and Isaac Schankler's *Depression Quest* (2013), a choose-your-own-adventure type website that simulates everyday life with clinical depression.⁵⁴

In the mid-1990s, when Jackson created her narrative, electronic literature was still considered a relative novelty. Since the early 2000s, however, it has become more common to use software and online platforms as literary sites, owing to the wide availability and accessibility of such digital publishing platforms as blogs, personal homepages, and story-telling apps. In addition, social media platforms like Twitter and YouTube have given rise to new forms of electronic literature. A prominent example is the "Horse_ebooks" Twitter account, a bot run by American performance artist Jacob Bakkila that posted segments from spam emails every hour between August 2010 and September 2013.⁵⁵ The arbitrariness of the lines give the Tweets a poetic quality that Spanish media scholar Miguel Sicart describes as "the perfect example of carnivalesque—dangerous play and playfulness in t[he] age of computing machinery" (4).

⁵² For a helpful introduction to electronic literature, see Tabbi.

⁵³ The first works of electronic literature, however, predate the Web 1.0 era of the Internet, such as American author Michael Joyce's 1987 hypertext *afternoon, a story* [sic]. See Pope.

⁵⁴ For links to these two hypertexts, see: <http://mouchette.org/> and <http://www.depressionquest.com/>.

⁵⁵ Though the bot is no longer active, the Horse_eBooks Twitter page is still live (as of August 2020) and can be viewed as an archive of the bot's activities: https://twitter.com/horse_ebooks.

An example that is more firmly lodged in the category of the digital “girled image” to which, I will argue, *Patchwork Girl* also belongs, is *lonelygirl15* – a YouTube series that ran from June 2006 to August 2008. The narrator of the series, “Bree,” was presented as a fifteen-year-old American girl reporting on the mundanity of her everyday life. Despite the supposed banality of her reports, Bree was a convincing storyteller, and her videos garnered a loyal following of fellow YouTube-users, who thought that Bree was a real person, “a sheltered adolescent [...] homeschooled by her strict, religious father and mother” (Siegel 47). In September 2006, however, Bree “was exposed as a fictional creation” that “was played by nineteen-year-old, New Zealand-born actress Jessica Rose” (Page 170). Bree’s reveal as a fictional character sparked massive outrage in the YouTube community. After it became clear that *lonelygirl15* was a curated production and not a traditional vlog, the writers of the series started experimenting with more dramatic, sensational plot lines involving conspiracies, cults, and kidnappings. But interest in the series gradually started to wane, and the *lonelygirl15* account uploaded its final ‘episode’ on 1 August 2008.

The fictional girl-body created by Jackson has none of the treacherous, hoax-like qualities of *lonelygirl15*, which were regarded as ethically questionable. It is clear from the outset that the reader is dealing with a fictional narrative, an electronic homage to Mary Shelley’s 1818 novel *Frankenstein*. However, what both *lonelygirl15* and *Patchwork Girl* draw on is the so-called “girl culture” – a term coined by American photographer Lauren Greenfield in 2002⁵⁶ – that posits the female body as a malleable object that can be stretched beyond its non-digital boundaries of feasibility: either physically, as is the case with *Patchwork Girl*, or metaphorically, as with *lonelygirl15*. Warren-Crow also employs the notion of “girl culture.” In her hands, this phrase entails a “hypervisibility of girls in the media” that, by virtue of its “pervasiveness,” “obstruct[s]” the viewer’s critical perspective on “the process of gendering and aging” that is at work in these images (53). “Girls are everywhere but nowhere; fetishized but neglected; in our faces yet disappearing from view,” she writes (53). Both *lonelygirl15* and *Patchwork Girl* illustrate the importance of gender to interactions with digital bodies (dead or alive): as I will specify in my discussion of Warren-Crow’s theory of the “girled image” below (which builds on the concept of “girl culture”), their flexibility plays into a particular expectation of the “girled” body.

⁵⁶ In her eponymous book *Girl Culture*, Greenfield documents the “secret rituals of girls” in terms of hair, makeup, and clothing. For the book, Greenfield photographed girls and women between the ages of 6 and 24, and interviewed them about the ways in which they change or enhance their appearance – as well as the (fictional) role-models they base their appearances on.

In the case of *Patchwork Girl*, the expected flexibility of the girled body is illustrated – and simultaneously parodied – by the task that Jackson sets for its reader. *Patchwork Girl* encourages its reader to assemble the story of a female monster who, as the reader learns by engaging with the interface, was created by a woman who wanted a lover: a lover who was female like herself, and fashioned to her own liking. The patchwork girl apparently rejected the role of lover as, soon after her creation, she set out to travel the world in pursuit of adventure. After crossing the ocean from the United Kingdom to the United States, the girl “lives” to become 175 years old and then disintegrates into the American mainland. Her limbs (arms, legs, torso, head) come apart upon her disintegration, and it is up to *Patchwork Girl*’s reader to reassemble them so that her body becomes whole again. Through this process of reassembling the corpse, the reader gradually learns about the patchwork girl’s history described above.

For her narrative, Jackson created an interface with a drag-and-droppable set of female body parts, which the reader can click on and arrange as they wish. Each body part contains a different narrative strand of the patchwork girl’s story. By moving and rearranging the body parts, the reader effectively steers the *Patchwork Girl* narrative, thereby not only “completing” the corpse’s body but also designing their “own” telling of the patchwork girl’s story, based on the order in which the narrative strands are activated. The *Patchwork Girl* interface consists of five “chapters”: a graveyard, a journal, a quilt, a story, and “broken accents” (Figure 3.3). Like the drag-and-droppable body parts, the *Patchwork Girl*’s narrative realm is fragmented into different parts, segmented into chapters. Yet the emphasis on anatomical physicality as subject to gendering is clear throughout. The “broken accents” chapter, for example, takes the reader to a fictionalized phrenology guide through which readers are invited to consider the “genetic flexibility” of female bodies versus that of biologically male ones. The text’s other chapters consist of more traditional narrative constituents: they supply various perspectives on *Patchwork Girl*’s main storyline, detailing the journey of the girl’s body from her homeland to her final resting place.

In the graveyard section, the starting point from which *Patchwork Girl*’s narrative unfolds, the reader is greeted with the following invitation: “I am buried here. You can resurrect me, but only piecemeal. If you want to see the whole, you will have to sew me back together yourself” (n. pag.). This invitation suggests a specific dynamic between the agency assigned to the corpse and that assigned to the reader. The direction of the narrative may be up to the reader (or so *Patchwork Girl*’s hypertext-based premise implies), but its actual *content* is mastered by

the patchwork girl, who lies, dead and in shambles, at the reader’s feet, challenging the reader to put her back together.

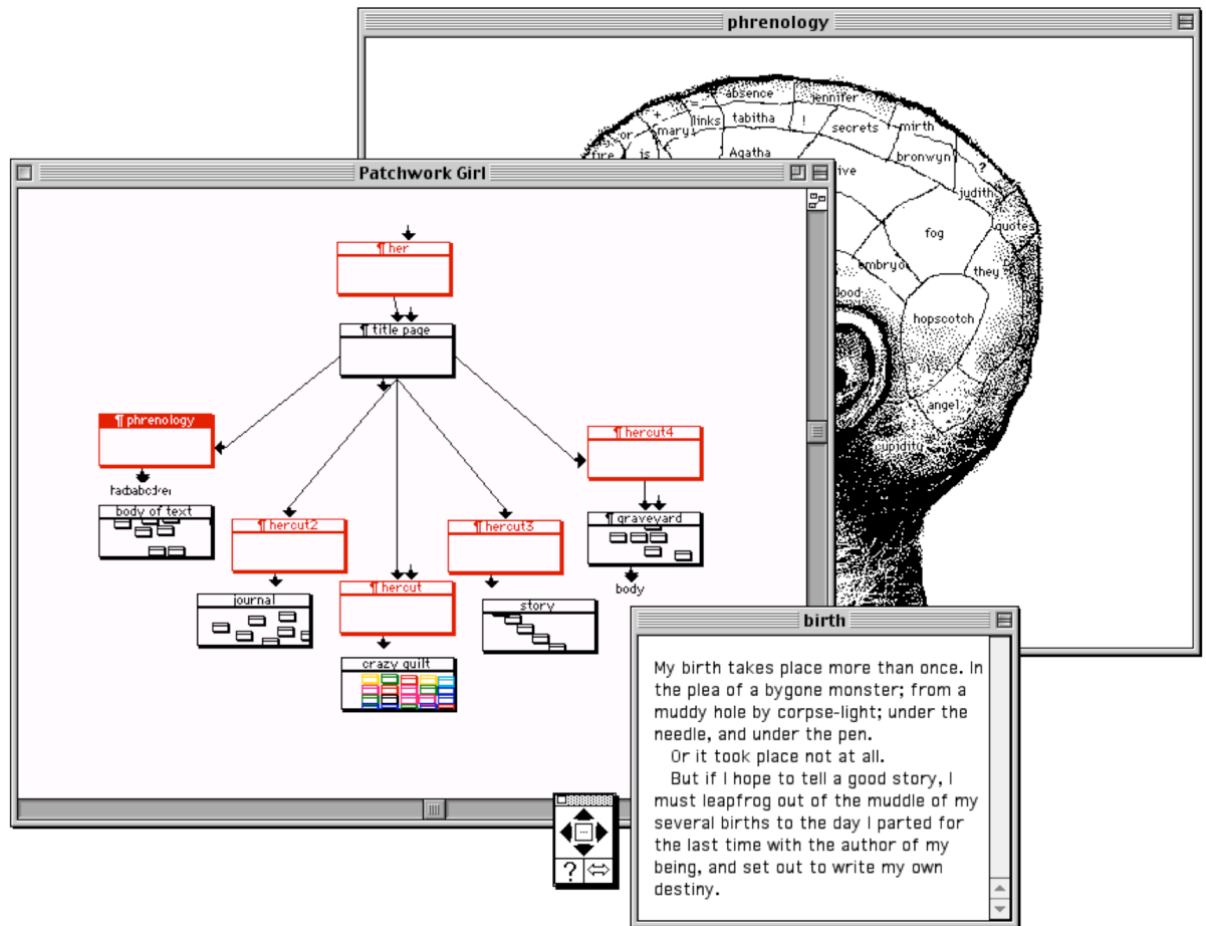


Figure 3.3. The *Patchwork Girl* interface (from top to bottom; left to right): “title page,” “body of text,” “journal,” “crazy quilt,” “story,” and “graveyard,” and six spaces for the patchwork girl’s narrative “body parts” in red: “her,” “phrenology,” and four “hercut” [sic] boxes.⁵⁷

While the reference to Shelley’s *Frankenstein* is obvious in the patchwork girl’s story, which to an extent but not fully parallels that of the novel’s male “monster,”⁵⁸ Jackson’s work also pays homage to L. Frank Baum’s 1913 children’s book *The Patchwork Girl of Oz*. Both

⁵⁷ Image source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Patchwork_Girl_\(hypertext\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Patchwork_Girl_(hypertext)) (Accessed: 18 Aug. 2020).

⁵⁸ In Shelley’s original text, the male monster goes on an international journey and unsuccessfully pursues a romantic relationship. The monster’s quest for love fails because his maker, Victor Frankenstein, is unable to create a female mate for the monster; in Jackson’s counter narrative, the monster is created to fulfill the romantic desires of another (namely Mary Shelley herself), but the monster rejects this purpose by fleeing from the lover that created her.

of these texts' plots significantly rely on animation, that is, the bringing-to-life of non-living objects. In *Frankenstein*, the “monster” is assembled from parts of corpses by Dr. Victor Frankenstein, a scientist who sets out to create new life by animating the reconstituted body with electricity; in *Patchwork Girl of Oz*, a human-sized doll is made of patchwork scraps and animated through the use of a life-giving power concocted by Dr. Pipt, a scientist who resembles Dr. Frankenstein. The shared defining characteristic of these two novels, which Jackson takes up in her homage, is that non-living or no-longer-living materials are transformed into actors that resemble and seek to live as humans.

In the case of *Patchwork Girl*, the material used to evoke the human is digital. Using code, text, and imagery, Jackson asks the reader to “animate” a series of objects (digital limbs) until they compose a human-like form. A key point of distinction from its literary predecessors, both of which also invite their reader to envision a body that is not “whole,” is that the narrative structure of Jackson’s story forces the reader to *interact* with an incomplete, deceased body, thereby making the reader take on the role of Dr. Frankenstein. In Shelley’s text, Dr. Frankenstein is the character whose actions (digging up corpses, assembling their body parts for a creation of his own, reviving it, and then rejecting it as monstrous) are marked as unethical. By putting the reader in his position, Jackson raises ethical questions about what it means to recompose a corpse – even when, in this case, it is the body itself that asks to be put together again. The reader, then, is not just beholding the patchwork girl’s body, or watching the body develop along with the story that supports it, but is actively clicking and dragging the various body parts of the patchwork girl until her story is revealed. More specifically, *Patchwork Girl* demands its reader to “touch” the naked limbs of a female corpse in order to activate – or animate – a narrative. The reader, in other words, is required to instrumentalize a dead woman’s body as a practical means towards generating a satisfying literary experience. In this way, Jackson implicitly poses questions to her reader about agency, ownership, and responsibility in relation to the digital corpse. These questions, which I will further specify below, concern not only the agency of the reader, but also that of the corpse of a girl. To what extent is such a gendered corpse “owned” by its environment and the actors that move through this environment, for instance? And where to place responsibility for what happened to the girl and what is happening to her corpse?

The alternative title of Jackson’s hypertext is “A Modern Monster.” This title is a play on the alternative title for Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, “A Modern Prometheus.” The patchwork girl is also explicitly described as a monster on Eastgate’s product page for the game. These

references to monstrosity are not coincidental: indeed, in her narrative, Jackson mobilizes the notion of the monstrous in a twofold way. On the one hand, the term “monster” refers to the grotesque, disassembled body of the patchwork girl that needs to be stitched together. On the other hand, the term “monstrous” also applies to *Patchwork Girl*’s reader, who agrees to indulge in the morbid act of corpse-assembly. What is significant about Jackson’s exploration of the monstrous, then, is that she imposes on her reader a gruesome task – the reassembly of a dead, female body – thereby making the reader complicit in an act that jeopardizes the dignity (as well as the sense of agency and self-ownership) of that dead female body *and* the dignity and decency of the reader.

To understand Jackson’s references to monstrosity, it helps to contextualize them within a broader cultural preoccupation with monsters as social metaphors. In a reading of Robin Wood’s influential 1979 study on American horror, film scholar Mathias Clasen notes that the monstrous is evoked in visual culture as an “embodiment[t] of whatever a culture oppresses or represses” (15). Examples of such repressed categories that have no agency in society and are cast away as unnatural, supernatural, or not “human” enough are “homosexuality, women, and/or the proletariat”; in the horror genre in particular, Clasen contends, “[t]hese repressed concepts are ... transcoded into monstrous agents” (15).

In literary texts from the sixteenth century onwards, as the American historians of science Katharine Park and Lorraine Daston point out, the term “monstrous” was similarly used to refer to beings that “cast doubt on the stability” of the natural and the social (214). By the late seventeenth century, Park and Daston write, “[m]onsters inspired repugnance because they violated the standards of regularity and decorum not only in nature, but also in society and the arts” (202). Similar to Clasen, Park and Daston liken the experience of the monstrous to that of horror, although they use the term “horror” to designate the affect and not the genre. American cultural scholar Eugenie Brinkema, who has written amply about horror, differentiates between horror as an *affect*, or “embodied experience, [...] *horrore* – hairs bristling on the back of the neck” and horror as an *affective genre*, “a fundamentally transmedial affect bound up with design and composition, with componentry and interactivity, with worlds and events in place of a stable, locatable roster of nasty epistemologies, returned repressions, monstrous ontologies, or disgusting tropes” (Anger and Jirsa 75; Brinkema 265). It is this latter definition of “horror” that I use in my discussion of the monstrous in *Patchwork Girl*. In the analyses of Clasen and of Park and Daston, the monstrous is experienced as horrific because it deviates from that which is considered stable and regulated: the ordinary. That the

‘extraordinary’ is used to invoke a repressed category of being makes the designation of the monstrous an ethical one, raising the question: who is entitled to an “ordinary” (stable, regulated) human experience?

In *Patchwork Girl*, Jackson addresses this ethical question by using a dead female body as a focalizer. It is already difficult to imagine a category of being that has less agency than the dead (they cannot move or speak, after all), but the gendering of Jackson’s fictional corpse places it in a long lineage of docile, female bodies – one that ranges from Shakespeare’s Ophelia (in *Hamlet*, from 1609) to Hitchcock’s Carlotta Valdes (in *Vertigo*, from 1958), as Bronfen famously describes in *Over Her Dead Body*. Jackson, however, corrupts and questions this tradition by turning the female corpse from a docile object into the narrator of her own story. The corpse in *Patchwork Girl*, instead of being dehumanized, is empowered as part of Jackson’s feminist politics.

This brings me back to the category of the monstrous. As I described above, the reader of Jackson’s hypertext has to face the somewhat morbid requirement to interact with a corpse in order to glean its narrative. Who, then, is the grotesque one (the “monstrous”) in this interaction? Is it the dead body that is on display or the beholder that dares to stir this body? This question illustrates why the interactive element of *Patchwork Girl* makes the text so significant from an ethical perspective. Other than with a traditional narrative read in print from a book, the reader cannot remain at a distance. Instead, Jackson’s reader is made complicit in digging up the patchwork girl’s body parts, in rearranging them, and in touching them until they tell their story. The reader, in other words, cannot maintain the stable, regulated position that the category of being “ordinary” requires of them, but is forced to co-create an “extraordinary” creature, like a modern-day Dr. Frankenstein.

In her reading of Jackson’s narrative, N. Katherine Hayles (2005) offers this reading of the interactive element of *Patchwork Girl*:

Through the complex enactment of linking structures, both within the text and within the distributed cognitive environment in which the text is read, *Patchwork Girl* brings into view what was suppressed in eighteenth-century debates over copyright.⁵⁹ *Instead*

⁵⁹ In her article, Hayles reads Jackson’s *Patchwork Girl* as a critique of eighteenth-century copyright laws, which sought to make “the literary work an immaterial intellectual property” of “the autonomous creator,” rather than to acknowledge “the materiality of the medium, the print technologies and economic networks that produced the work as a commodity, [and] the collaborative nature of many literary works,” among other aspects (160). Jackson’s hypertext subverts this debate, Hayles argues, because she uses the patchwork – a form that is inherently collaborative and communal – as the basis for her feminist exploration of Shelley’s text.

of an immaterial work, it foregrounds the materiality of fictional bodies, authorial bodies, users' [readers'] bodies, and the writing technologies that produce and connect them. Instead of valorizing originality, it produces itself and its characters through acts of appropriation and transformation that imply that writing and subjectivity are always patchworks of reinscription and innovation. (161, emphasis added)

For Hayles, the unstable materiality of Jackson's patchwork girl (as a digitally created figure that can be "appropriated" and "transformed" by a user) emphasizes how this digital figure operates as a material body that is an embodied whole yet also newly inscribable and distributable: all the components are there, but it is up to the viewer (or user) to assemble these components into a form of their liking. Hayles' reading of *Patchwork Girl* as a deviating text within the larger, literary tradition of print literature (and eighteenth-century legal debates about literary ownership in particular) helps to unpack how embodiment and agency function in Jackson's work: as Hayles points out, the novel consistently builds on text-reader interaction, or "body-beholder" interaction, in terms of appropriative acts. In addition, Hayles's discussion of copyright, and her categorization of digitally created bodies (such as Jackson's patchwork girl) as "authorial bodies," addresses issues of responsibility and ownership, ethical matters that – in addition to agency – play an important role in the appropriation of digital corpses, as I argue throughout this study.

The suggestion of materiality that Hayles points to is also taken up by Paul Hackman (2011), who comments on the way Jackson's in-text depiction of the patchwork girl – in the image with which the novel's interface opens (Figure 3.4) – "invokes the materiality of paper" (101). In Hackman's words,

the image looks hand-drawn with pencil, [...] the edges appear frayed or torn, spots of white appear against the black background as if the image has been through a photocopier or scanner, and the dotted lines that slice across the entire picture turn into a wrinkle at one edge, as if the page had been folded in half. (101)

Considering Jackson's choice to tell the *Patchwork Girl* story through hypertext, it is indeed striking that she emphasizes the tactility of the paper so tangibly. Despite the patchwork girl's digital presence, her hand-drawn, frayed, and wrinkled representation implies a former state, one in which she had not yet been photocopied or scanned, as Hackman suggests, and possibly not yet torn apart either. In this case, the act of drawing that rendered the patchwork girl a two-dimensional object paradoxically also rendered her an object with a possible future of virtual

three-dimensional redemption – a future, that is, in which a generous reader accepts the invitation to “resurrect” the girl, taking her beyond the limited animation of a hand-drawn illustration on paper.

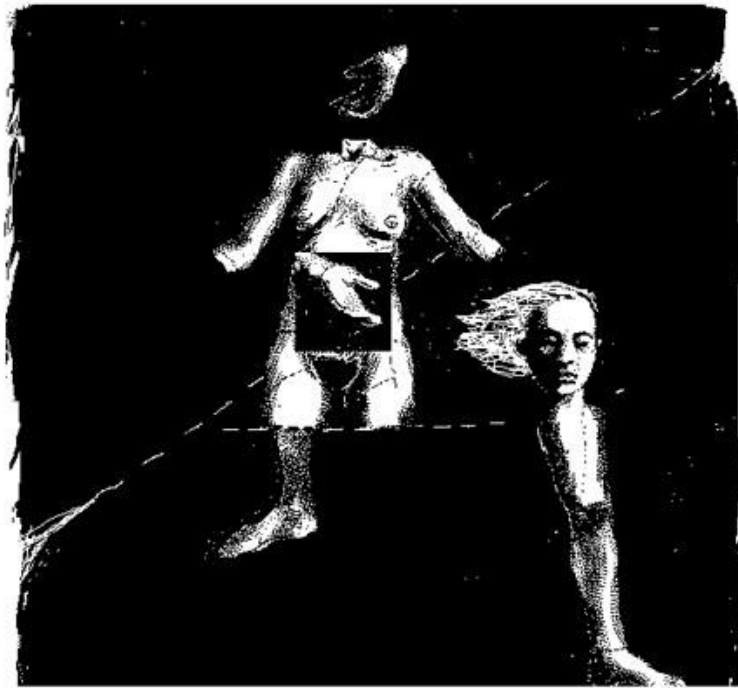


Figure 3.4. Image of the patchwork girl and its drag-and-droppable body parts.⁶⁰

If the patchwork girl’s potential to be “resurrected,” to use Hackman’s term, depends on the desires of the reader, then this implies a power dynamic between the patchwork girl (as object) and the reader (as the one who can bring the object back to life) that differs from that in non-electronic literature: contrary to the destiny of many print equivalents, *this* heroine’s fate is not fully determined by its author. Of course, Jackson exerts authorial power over the narrative in the sense that she demarcates the number of possible plot directions (there are no infinite links in a hypertext, after all), but readers control the order of *Patchwork Girl*’s story through their rearrangement of the limbs in the graveyard and their selection of narrative strands. Literary scholar Hyewon Shin (2017) has made a case for this flexibility of Jackson’s heroine, as a digital material object that is manipulated by both author and reader. Shin points to the (lack of) power that the patchwork girl holds as a result:

⁶⁰ Image source: <http://www.dichtung-digital.org/2010/vincler/vincler.htm> (Accessed: 18 Aug. 2020).

Reversible, divergent, and multilateral, the patchwork girl as both figure and text *expresses the idea of a fluid body assembled and reassembled from matter*. [...] The story emerges from the manual, tactile labor of manipulating keyboard and the mouse to weave an electronic textile—a product of virtual stitching that is a collaboration between author and reader. (549-50, emphasis added)

The collaborative “weaving” and “stitching” of the patchwork girl’s body, Shin suggests, redefines the dead body’s materiality as “reversible, divergent, and multilateral.” It represents the digital corpse as *fluid* and easy to manipulate; and its straightforward digital corporeality (the fact that the body parts are readily offered up through the interface) enables the reader to put the patchwork girl back together with minimal effort. This ease of manipulation is significant for my study’s broader focus on matters of agency, responsibility, and ownership, as it emphasizes how vulnerable digital corpses (fictional or non-fictional) are to the actions, desires, and projections of their viewers.

So far, I have argued that the distribution of power (and, by association, agency) between *Patchwork Girl*’s digital corpse, its reader, and its author is mediated through the form of the patchwork, a collaborative material that is handed from author to reader and that, in turn, *requires* this collaboration between author-reader to become “whole.” The patchwork, in this case, is the digital corpse that Jackson invokes in her adaption of Shelley’s classic text. The fact that the text *is* a digital, interactive artifact adds an ethical layer to the author-reader-corpse⁶¹ exchange: the reader is asked to work with the semantically loaded image of a (female) corpse; through its “speaking” body parts, this corpse confronts the reader with its personal, individualized history, while that same reader tries to “stitch” the patchwork girl’s corpse into a shape and order of their liking. In doing so, I argue, Jackson’s digital text invites the reader to rethink the category of the “monster”: in interacting with the patchwork girl, readers need to reevaluate if the *material* they are working with (the body parts of a dead girl) is monstrous or, rather, if they *themselves* are monstrous, in choosing to comply with the prompt to put her back together. It is here that Jackson’s text implicitly asks readers to assess their own ethical dealings with a digital corpse that is not just any corpse, but explicitly gendered as female.

The observations made by Hayles, Hackman, and Shin have helped me to highlight how Jackson stages this ethical conundrum through her text. As I have shown, the text prompts an

⁶¹ This corpse does not only refer to the patchwork girl as a dead body, but also as a body that was once alive – after all, in interacting with the patchwork girl’s body parts, the reader gradually uncovers her history as a living woman and is, in turn, confronted with the “humanness” of the corpse with which they are interacting.

important question about the female corporeality of the patchwork girl: how does the gendering of the digital corpse inform its perceived malleability, its (lack of) agency, and its status as an object that, in being made and remade, is “owned” by different actors? To answer this question – and to make clear why *Patchwork Girl* can be read as a prime example of Warren-Crow’s concept of the “girded image” – I will first examine a second case study of a fictional, female digital corpse: Annlee, the video-avatar “resurrected” by Pierre Huyghe and Philippe Parreno.

The Corpse as Clean Slate in *No Ghost Just a Shell*

In 1999, French artist duo Pierre Huyghe and Philippe Parreno acquired a female manga character from K-Works, a Japanese design company that provides character templates for animations, comics, and other graphic narratives. The character of the two artists’ choosing was a rather cheap template, a one-dimensional girl without any distinctive characteristics, lacking the details of more expensive templates for protagonists. Within the anime series industry, art historian Tom McDonough notes, a template like this “would have been used as a background character in a few frames, then been set aside forever” (111). Huyghe and Parreno, however, acquired the character with a far more ambitious goal in mind: to give it life.

The artists’ mission was to animate the character, in both senses of the word: as a moving image and as a living actor. They also sought to give her a history, identity, and unique personality. As if the template were a(nother) digital monster of Frankenstein, the artists set out to elevate its status from that of an image to that of a body. The first step of this vivification process was to give the character a name: Annlee. The next step was to make the digital template mortal: a vital part of the project, Huyghe and Parreno decided, was that Annlee eventually had to die, like any other living being.

But first, Annlee had to live. And so, in order to give her a “life,” Huyghe and Parreno offered the character as a canvas to other prominent artists, commissioning them to make an offline artwork with Annlee at its center. All contributing artists were given the same instructions:

Work with her, in a real story,⁶² translate her capabilities into psychological traits, lend her a character, a text, a denunciation and address to the court in her defense. Do all that

⁶² The phrase “in a real story” indicates that, as opposed to the fictional *anime* series she was originally designed for, Huyghe and Parreno wanted Annlee to have a more “real” – i.e. more human-like – existence.

you can so that this character lives different stories and experiences. So that she can act as a sign, as a live logo. (cited in Warren-Crow 49)

Huyghe's and Parreno's instructions offer a rich insight into the perception and distribution of agency, responsibility, and ownership on which the Annlee project is based. First, it is significant to point out that artists were not asked to *give* her a character, but to *lend* her one, as if this character could later be revoked. Second, the phrase "in her defense" suggests that the "end product" of Annlee, while attributed with "character," would not have to ability to defend herself. While the artists were asked to give Annlee life, in other words, this life was supposedly restricted to a docile existence, in which Annlee would not be able to manifest herself as an autonomous being with agency, capable of standing up for her rights, or to assert herself in any legal sense of personhood (this latter part is important to the final phase of the Annlee project, to which I turn later). Thirdly, Huyghe and Parreno did not explicitly ask the artists to make Annlee a "person" (or a digital approximation of one): instead, they commissioned "a sign, a live logo." The life that was to be given to Annlee was thus a life that was available to be appropriated and instrumentalized. It was conceived not as an individual existence, but as a "sign" – for the artists' purposes, or for the viewers', but not for the individual that Annlee herself was (or should be). The character *was*, in other words, granted an ability to act and to take responsibility for her own life; however, from the outset of Huyghe and Parreno's project, this ability was meant to serve not herself as an autonomous fictional creature, but rather to gratify her viewers and co-creators.

This contrast between the project's purported insistence on enlivening a template and the actual design instructions makes itself felt with force in the resulting art works. By the time Huyghe and Parreno ceased their commission period, in 2001, almost two years after their initial acquisition, Annlee had become the focal point of twenty-eight artworks by different artists, most of them digital or lens-based. The bulk of the resulting artworks were animated video pieces, designed to be projected on a screen, in which Annlee was given a distinct voice, walk, posture, and fashion style. However, those artists who made use of sound and body animation in their works – an option that most participants employed – each lent Annlee a detached, robot-like way of speaking and moving. This approach indicates that, despite Huyghe and Parreno's desire to bestow on Annlee such qualities as a complex personality and a human identity, the majority of the participating artists trapped her in the same type of animated, artificial digital environments for which she was originally created. While these animated cartoons are different from the *anime* shows that Annlee would have appeared in if Huyghe

and Parreno had not purchased her, it is still telling that she was “given life” mainly through lens-based artworks, rather than through paintings, sculptures, or other non-lens-based media. As the artists involved in *No Ghost Just a Shell* are not strictly video artists (Liam Gillick is mainly known for his aluminum sculptures, for example), it is significant that most of them chose to highlight Annlee’s digital status, rather than to make her as life-like as possible. Even Huyghe and Parreno themselves did this: for one of the project’s first “beta” animations, *Two Minutes Out of Time* (2000), Huyghe gave Annlee a strange, staccato-like voice, hollow eyes, and unnaturally purple-colored hair.

The artworks in which Annlee appeared did, however, move away from the lighthearted, romantic *shoujo* anime genre productions – featuring dramatic love stories targeted at young women – for which K-Works usually provides templates. The artistic renditions of Annlee were darkly sinister and showed a strong awareness of the character’s mortal status: contributors put her in scenes that, to the average viewer, would seem dangerous and physically threatening; they placed her in settings inhospitable to human beings; or they presented her in distinctly non-human guises. In his own contribution – a six-minute digital animation titled *One Million Kingdoms* (2001) – for example, Huyghe transported Annlee to the moon. The video shows Annlee roaming around a desolate, pockmarked landscape, exploring the moon’s craters in complete isolation. In *Annlee You Proposes* (2001), a video by British artist Liam Gillick, Annlee is depicted in a long, black mourning gown, interacting with such horror-esque objects as a fiery-eyed deer’s head and a buzzing swarm of drone bombs, in an abstract setting free of other human characters. The eerie piece features a soundtrack of ominous clicking sounds and halted breaths that makes it seem as if Annlee is choking. And in *Annlee in Anzen Zone* (2000) – a contribution by French artist Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster – Annlee is shown in a dark void with only a clone of herself to keep her company. Gonzalez-Foerster’s video appears to suggest that, in the digital realms in which her existence unfolds, Annlee lives an isolated existence, with only other versions of herself to keep her company.

Gonzalez-Foerster’s work could be interpreted as a criticism of Huyghe and Parreno’s request (as curators enabling the unlimited use of Annlee) in their project invitation to “do all that you can so that this character lives different stories and experiences”: this invitation implies a desire to invest Annlee with agency – but in the actual videos the request to create various versions of Annlee fails, one could say, to enable her to truly “live” varying experiences. At the same time, as said, the invitation instructions, which ask artists to make Annlee a “live

logo”, already suggest that Huyghe and Parreno did not intend for Annlee to become an active person with her own “stories and experiences” in the first place.

It is only Parreno’s own contribution to the project, a video titled *Anywhere Out in the World* (2000), that appears to contradict the collaborative premise of his and Huyghe’s assignment to the participating artists. In this video, a stark-faced Annlee poses against a solid blue background as she narrates her birth story to the viewer. She explains how she was once a cheap template from a catalogue, “drop-dead in a comic book,”⁶³ but no longer “belongs to anybody” now (Figure 3.5). Contrary to Huyghe and Parreno’s invitation to the artists, this statement suggests that Annlee ultimately “owns” herself: a significant detail considering her eventual trajectory, as I will discuss below.



Figure 3.5. Still from Philippe Parreno’s *Anywhere Out in the World* (2000), in which an animated Annlee shows her picture in the K-Works catalogue to the viewer.⁶⁴

The Annlee videos are collectively known as *No Ghost Just a Shell*. The title is an obvious reference to *Ghost in the Shell*, a 1995 anime film by Masamune Shirow in which the

⁶³ I take Parreno to be using the term “drop-dead” as a synonym for “lifeless,” to designate an object that cannot be animated or resurrected.

⁶⁴ Image source: https://www.stretcher.org/features/no_ghost_just_a_shell/ (Accessed: 18 Aug. 2020).

cyborg Motoko Kusanagi is ordered to hunt down an AI-life form. This AI-life form, called The Puppet Master, is hacking the souls (“ghosts”) of people as a means of destroying humankind. Huyghe and Parreno make no reference to Shirow’s film in any published press releases or interviews, but it is hard to overlook the film’s and the exhibition’s shared consideration of humanoid life and its relation to human existence.

To grasp how the character of Annlee relates to the other digital corpses in this study, it helps to look at the framing of the work’s public exhibition. *No Ghost Just a Shell* had its inaugural exhibition at the Kunsthalle in Zürich in 2002. The exhibition descriptions asked the viewer to consider Annlee simultaneously as a corporeal incarnation (through the resurrective approach of Huyghe and Parreno’s project) and a digital projection (through the many video depictions). *No Ghost Just a Shell*, in other words, was described as a limbo of sorts, in which the object (Annlee) existed somewhere in between digital realms and “lived” life. In the liminal settings in which this object is placed in the video artworks discussed above, Annlee’s body indexes both life and death: it can be infinitely repurposed into new forms, but is also removed from the realm of human life in which other living things (such as animals, or people) exist.

In a 2002 review of the *No Ghost Just a Shell* exhibition, cultural critic Marcia Tanner refers to this ambivalence when she describes Annlee as a “female tabula rasa,” an “exquisite corpse,”⁶⁵ and a figure “whose only distinguishing characteristic is her undeveloped potential.” The merit of Annlee, Tanner argues, is that she is a blank slate. One could argue that this implies that Annlee lacks agency; however, as Tanner explains, it also suggests that she grants the viewer – as well as the artists who contributed to the project – only a limited sense of agency in terms of her interpretation. After all, her bland character resists all viewer projections by default: there is simply nothing for these projections to link to. In a passage that hints at Robert Musil’s illustrious tale of a *Man Without Qualities* (1943), Tanner writes:

Annlee’s ambiguous status as a girl without qualities invites the viewer to project his/her [sic] own fantasies on her, yet she resists those projections by virtue of her utter lack of any captivating traits. No matter what they [the viewer] do to Annlee, she will never be real. (n. pag.)

As Tanner makes clear in her argument, Annlee retains a paradoxical agency through her very featurelessness: it is this featurelessness that prevents the spaces in which the artists put her

⁶⁵ “Exquisite corpse,” or “cadavre exquis” in French, refers to a collaging game in which two or more people contribute to a single image or text, without seeing the contributions of their fellow players. As a result, the final image or text usually consists of wildly different styles and shapes, which is part of the fun of the game.

and the fantasies that viewers project on her from sticking to her. Annlee's being "without qualities," then, becomes its own form of agency – one that is owned by the character rather than by her viewers or the participating artists.

The *No Ghost Just a Shell* exhibition can thus be regarded as a celebration of the dead female body's paradoxical potential as a malleable, aesthetic object. On the one hand, in Huyghe's and Parreno's project this body is, as Tanner describes it, an "empty vessel ripe for exploitation" (n. pag.). In this sense, the exhibition is reminiscent of the Nikki Catsouras case that I discussed in the previous chapter: in both instances, the body of a young woman is staged as a public plaything. What is different, however, is, first, that Annlee was never a corporeal human being to begin with, which means that no living individuals are implicated in the circulation of her corpse(-to-be); and second, that if we follow Tanner's logic, Annlee's malleability works in an empowering rather than a disenfranchising way.

Yet, one could also look at the "tabula rasa" from a different angle. To explain how, I turn to the final stages of Huyghe and Parreno's project. At first sight, the way the project ended was a full-fledged celebration of female autonomy. After the initial exhibition at the Kunsthalle in Zürich, *No Ghost Just a Shell* was displayed at the Museum of Modern Art in San Francisco until the spring of 2003. In between the two exhibitions, Huyghe and Parreno made the pivotal decision to sell the legal rights to Annlee's image they had acquired from K-Works, to Annlee herself. Huyghe elaborates on this decision in an interview with *Sloan Science and Film* from 2016. "When you buy [a] character," he notes, "you become the owner of an object." He continues:

We didn't want to be the owner of that character, and so we went through a long discussion with lawyers. We decided that the character should belong to itself. We had to create an association, which was called [the] Annlee [Company], and so if [...] anyone uses Annlee there would be a trial. She gained back her identity in that legal sense. (n. pag.)

In terms of agency, it is significant that Huyghe has shifted from referring to Annlee as "it" (as when she was still his and Parreno's legal property), to calling her "she" once she had gained ownership of herself. It seems that, for Huyghe, Annlee only graduated from being an object to being a person when she became a legal entity. Dutch art historian Vivian van Saaze similarly highlights the significance of Annlee's legal status for Huyghe and Parreno's project by noting

that “the acquisition of the rights to use Annlee marked the beginning of the project” and “the transference of the rights to Annlee in 2002 marked the ending of the project” (155).⁶⁶



Figure 3.6. The final manifestation of Annlee: *A Smile Without a Cat (Celebration of Annlee's Vanishing)* by Pierre Huyghe and Philippe Parreno (Art Basel Miami Beach in Miami, FL, on December 4, 2002).⁶⁷

Van Saaze further notes how, after “an intellectual property lawyer was hired [by Huyghe and Parreno] to draw up a contract transferring the rights back to Annlee,” the artists “celebrated” her “vanishing [...] by means of a staged fireworks display during the inaugural night of Art Basel Miami Beach” in 2002 (155) (Figure 3.6). On this occasion, Huyghe was cited as saying: “This will be her last manifestation as her silhouette sparkles and dissipates [...] over the skies of Miami Beach as she is finally disappearing from the kingdom of representation” (155). Through this dramatic exit, it became apparent that Huyghe and Parreno truly intended the transfer of rights to Annlee to mark the end of her circulation as a digital image.

⁶⁶ In her study of *No Ghost Just a Shell*, Van Saaze elaborates on the curatorial difficulties that the exhibition posed to the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven after they acquired all of the Annlee works.

⁶⁷ Image source: <http://www.transmag.org/annlee/> (Accessed: 18 Aug. 2020).

Annlee's self-acquisition meant that her image could no longer be reproduced. If an artist were to craft a new rendition of Annlee, it would now be a breach of copyright law.⁶⁸ The already planned *No Ghost Just a Shell* exhibition in San Francisco would be both the first and last presentation of Annlee as an entity with self-agency, the finale of Huyghe and Parreno's experiment. Once the exhibition ended, so would Annlee's "life."

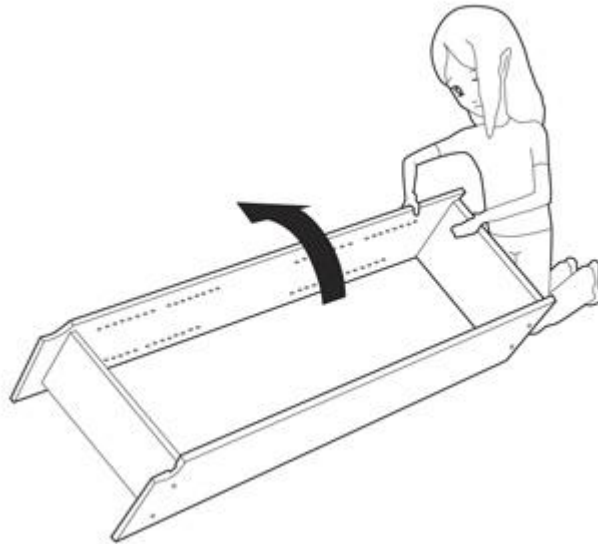


Figure 3.7. Image showing Annlee assembling her own coffin from Joe Scanlan's *DIY or How to Kill Yourself Anywhere in the World for \$399* (2003), co-designed by Miko McGinty.⁶⁹

Benjamin Weil, the curator of the San Francisco *No Ghost Just a Shell* exhibition, was keen to accentuate the mortal weight that underpinned Annlee's final showcase at the Museum of Modern Art. In reference to Annlee's impending "death," he stylized the exhibition space as a funeral parlor and lowered the room temperature to suggest a morgue. The legal contract detailing Huyghe and Parreno's transfer of the rights to Annlee was framed and hung at the center of the gallery. Death was also formative to a new artwork that was added to the exhibition: American artist Joe Scanlan's *DIY, or How to Kill Yourself Anywhere in the World for \$399* (2003). A dark take on IKEA's ready-to-assemble furniture packages, Scanlan's piece

⁶⁸ This development brings to mind Hayles's reading of *Patchwork Girl*, as discussed in the previous section, in which she posits Jackson's text as a radical critique of such copyright laws. Huyghe and Parreno's (re)establishment of Annlee as her own legal owner could be interpreted as a similarly radical act, in this regard.

⁶⁹ Image source: <https://joescanlan.biz/store/diy/> (Accessed: 18 Aug. 2020).

is an instruction manual for the construction of a coffin. The gentle-looking cartoon figure that is usually featured in IKEA's manuals is replaced by a sullen-looking Annlee, who is seen building her own coffin, in preparation, as the work's title suggests, for her suicide (Figure 3.7). The "How to Kill Yourself-" part of the title is dubious, of course: Annlee (as a non-autonomous actor) never possessed the power, let alone the faculty of decision-making, required to call her "death" a suicide; that choice was made entirely by Huyghe and Parreno, who, in all but the legal sense, remained her owners.

Huyghe's and Parreno's executive decision to terminate Annlee also revived the question regarding Annlee's agency and responsibility for her own "life" in other ways. In an essay for *ArtAsiaPacific*, Chinese film director Chin-Chin Yap questioned the artists' decision, and rightly asked: "Did Annlee really wish to disappear? Might she not have desired to own her copyright while she was alive rather than dead?" (n. pag.). One could add to this that Huyghe and Parreno could have considered the ethical implications of Annlee's visual exploitation *before* extending their invitation for collaboration to other artists; they might as well have given the rights to Annlee straight after they acquired them from K-Works. Besides the problem of ownership, Yap also addressed the racist and sexist stereotyping at work in *No Ghost Just a Shell*. In her words, ultimately, the installation boiled down to a "narrative of a young, powerless Asian female who is given form and then silenced by a pair of white Frenchmen" (n. pag.). Yap's critique highlights that Annlee – just like the other digital corpses that I discuss in this study – is not exempt from traditional sociopolitical power dynamics, despite her fictional and exclusively digital state. Even as a fictional character, Annlee is not the "clean slate" as which Huyghe and Parreno marketed her to their fellow artists.

Other critics overlook this problem, most notably Tanner, whom I cited above, and who describes Annlee as "featureless," thereby ignoring her unmistakable racialization as an Asian woman – Annlee originates from a Japanese manga catalogue, after all.⁷⁰ While Tanner rightly points to a sense of agency that the character's "being without qualities" paradoxically grants her, she ignores how, as a gendered and racialized depiction, Annlee's cartoon body is essentially an intersection of power relations. Although Huyghe and Parreno question their power over Annlee by eventually "giving" her the rights to her own body, it is *they* who make that choice; moreover, their project would be unthinkable outside the premise that a digital body inherently has no agency. Yap aptly rejects this premise, as well as the idea that Annlee

⁷⁰ Although it must be noted that Japanese manga has been seen as "raceless" (i.e. "white") by some critics, which in itself gives expression to racialized power structures. See Antononoka.

was ever a “clean slate” by highlighting that fictional digital bodies, too, are marked in terms of gender and race, and by underlining that these markers influence how viewers will perceive and engage with these bodies.

What both the case of Annlee and that of Jackson’s *Patchwork Girl* demonstrates, then, is that fictional digital corpses are not exempt from the power dynamics of the non-digital, corporeal world. In addition, the two cases offer valuable insights into the critical potential of fictional digital corpses: indeed, such corpses can act as a “testing ground” for how established power dynamics operate in relation to gendered and racialized corpses, and for how these dynamics might be shifted, without the extra ethical complications of engaging with non-fictional digital corpses. What this critical potential concretely entails is a question that I answer in more detail in the next section of this chapter.

The Fictional Digital Corpse as an Experiment in Agency

The bodies in *Patchwork Girl* and *No Ghost Just a Shell* are dead female bodies – a gendering that matters greatly for the ways in which they were shaped and appropriated by their makers and audiences. Both Annlee and the patchwork girl were “created” by human artists with an interest in the ethical boundaries of engaging with the dead human body, so that they might explore these boundaries without damaging or otherwise appropriating someone’s corpse. However, as with actual human corpses, the conditions for what an “available” fictional body (that is, to quote Tanner again, a body “ripe for exploitation”) looks like are firmly grounded in existing power structures. In this section, I take a closer look at these fictional digital corpses’ social, cultural, and corporeal markers in order to explore the question of how these markers, especially those of gender and race, inform the ways in which their creators and audiences engage with Annlee and the patchwork girl as malleable objects. I further ask to what extent these fictional digital corpses constitute experiments in agency – or in a lack thereof.

In *Girlhood and the Plastic Image*, Heather Warren-Crow connects *No Ghost Just a Shell* to the concept of “girlification.” This concept, Warren-Crow asserts, is strongly linked to her idea of the “plastic image,” which I discussed in Chapter 1. With the term “girlification,” Warren-Crow refers to imagery that produces its object as something “to-be-looked-at, should-be-shared, and can-be-altered” (92). To “girl” an object, in other words, is to make that object available for the desires of other actors. Like Warren-Crow’s concept of the plastic image, which denotes the particular malleable quality of digital images, the “girled” image indicates

an image that is attributed with malleability through its gendering as female. Because the image of the girl is so pervasive in Western image culture, as Warren-Crow makes clear in her definition of “girl culture,” discussed earlier in relation to *Patchwork Girl* and *lonelygirl15*, the viewer is inclined to naturally perceive a “girded” image as an “available” image.

The making-available of girded images in the way that Warren-Crow describes is not dissimilar to the pliability of digital images that I discussed in Chapter 2. What Warren-Crow’s theorizing adds is the insight that an object’s girlification is brought about by “a collective performance of appropriation, dissemination, and alteration” – and that, in turn, “the girded image is produced as that which needs to be bought, rescued, possessed, exported, passed around, and transformed” (55). The girded image, in short, appears to not only be *available* for external appropriation, but to actually *require* it. This requirement is clearly demonstrated in *Patchwork Girl*, where the reader needs to manipulate the fragmented digital corpse in order to make it speak.

Warren-Crow posits Huyghe and Parreno’s *No Ghost Just a Shell* as a prime example of the girded image. She writes:

As a mail order bride or abused daughter, Annlee corresponds to an image of girlhood that dominates popular discourse: the girl as innocent victim. As a product of globalized commercial culture, she functions as a feminized commodity adopted, transformed, and allegedly elevated by a masculinized artistic gesture. And as a digital image that changes form as it changes hands, Annlee offers girlhood as *No Ghost Just a Shell*’s formal condition. (51)

The formal fluidity that Warren-Crow observes points to *No Ghost Just a Shell*’s starting premise of “girl” as a *tabula rasa* that is in need of external interpretation or, as Warren-Crow’s victim metaphor suggests, rescue. To a degree, this same premise applies to Jackson’s *Patchwork Girl*. But whereas the latter text twists the power dynamic around (the digital corpse holds all knowledge; it is up to her beholder to unearth it through her body), Annlee needs an external body to create a narrative *for* her. One significant difference between Annlee and the patchwork girl, then, is that their “girded” state is deployed for different purposes: a subversion of patriarchal power structures in the case of *Patchwork Girl*, and an affirmation of those same power structures in the case of Annlee.

In addition to Annlee and the patchwork girl’s status as “girded” images, however, it is important to re-emphasize the fictional nature of these images, particularly when it comes to

their perceived malleability. The fact that these bodies are instantly recognizable as digitally created images (and not digitized versions of bodies made of flesh and blood, such as the ones I described in Chapter 1) is not irrelevant to the way the bodies are dealt with in terms of agency, responsibility, and ownership. For the next part of my analysis, therefore, I will zoom in on the fictional, cartoon-like quality that Annlee and the patchwork girl both possess. In their article “Cartooning the Body,” American media scholar Dorothy Howard and New Zealand art historian Tim Gentles discuss the political implications of rendering the human body “image” and, more specifically, “cartoon.” According to Howard and Gentles, the state of being “cartoon” speaks to the physical and existential malleability that capitalism demands from the bodies that exist under it. They write:

The cartoon reflects ways in which human bodies are configured to serve capital, undermining the body’s all-too-human limitations and driving it to impossible forms of immaterial excess. Cartoons depict exaggerated, porous organisms that readily seep into and sponge from their surroundings. Cartoons don’t depict bodies *within* environments, but bodies pollinating and knotting with their surroundings, both feeling and being felt. (n. pag., emphasis original)

Similar to Warren-Crow’s discussion of malleability, Howard and Gentles highlight the porosity of the cartoon body and the non-human (or superhuman) possibilities that it is afforded by virtue of this porousness. There appears to be a violent element to the cartoon-ized body’s endless morphological potential or, to quote Howard and Gentles, its ability to “seep into and sponge from” pretty much anything. The two scholars put it this way:

Due to their elasticity, cartoonized bodies are prone to acts of violence, massively capable of absorbing and recovering from violence, and are subject to inhuman, bottomless appetites. This is literalized most obviously in the desperate and violent shenanigans of Warner Brothers’ *Looney Tunes* cartoons. The Road Runner and W.E. Coyote, for example, farcically enact skits in which *they constantly give or receive painful blows but somehow always manage to avoid death*. Allegorizing the worker’s body under capitalism, these cartoon figures toil ever onward yet absorb endless amounts of pain in the process. (n. pag., emphasis added)

As this passage illustrates, Howard and Gentles use a framework of capitalist critique: to cartoon a body, they assert, is to make that body inexhaustible, and inexhaustible bodies are useful capitalist tools, as they are endlessly productive. The cartoon-body, in this sense, bears

a similarity to Warren-Crow's notion of the girlred image (as well as the plastic image) in that both appear to be endlessly malleable and are therefore attractive canvases for a viewer (or creator) to project their desires onto without harming the body in question.

Although *Patchwork Girl* and *No Ghost Just a Shell* explore the malleability of the fictional digital corpse in similar ways, I wish to conclude here by expanding on the differences between the bodies presented in these works. The key difference – which I already mentioned above – could be summarized as follows: Jackson's use of the digital corpse in *Patchwork Girl* actively speaks to feminist issues related to agency and to the role of digital culture in the reproduction *and* undermining of existing patriarchal structures of power, while *No Ghost Just a Shell* is less sensitive to the implications of the gendering of Annlee's body. Put more pointedly, whereas Jackson's digital exploration of the dead female body mounts a feminist critique of that same body's cultural exploitation, Huyghe and Parreno reproduce such exploitation in their appropriation and, later, "killing" of a girl's body. Ultimately, the artists' comments on providing Annlee with agency notwithstanding, they do not challenge the sociopolitical structures that underlie the exploitation of images of (dead) young women.

In her study *Tactics of the Human*, American media scholar Laura Shackelford links the feminist critique presented in *Patchwork Girl* to the practice of patchwork quilting as traditional "women's work." Drawing on British philosopher Sadie Plant's cyberfeminist theorizing – and the latter's definition of weaving as "the exemplary case of a denigrated female craft which now turns out to be intimately connected to the history of computing and digital technologies" (Plant 332) – Shackelford argues that "*Patchwork Girl* pursues the question of how digital technics productively and differently enter into the ongoing process of subject formation through which gendered and racialized subjectivities emerge" (78). With regard to the latter, the fact that the body that is at stake in *Patchwork Girl* is that of a white woman cannot be overlooked, especially considering the damsel in distress "treatment" that, as American cultural critic Eugene Robinson writes, is predominantly applied to white women who are believed to be (or have been) in life-threatening danger. "[A] woman of color," Robinson adds, "can generate a brief flurry, but never the full damsel treatment" (n. pag.).⁷¹ As a white and female body placed in a Western, patriarchal context, then, the body of the patchwork girl is easily parsed as a body in need of help by the reader. While Shackelford does not refer to the white damsel-in-distress trope in her analysis, she persuasively argues that

⁷¹ For a further discussion of the stakes of race in digital representations of human bodies (particularly in video games), see Murray; Philipps. See also my reference to the "Missing White Woman Syndrome" in Chapter 2.

Jackson's text highlights and thereby opens up to critique the assumption of the young white female body as requiring (and deserving) rescue. In her words, the work's

refiguration of instrumental subject-object distinctions as enactive relations of nonidentity modeled on stitching in sewing and quilting and digital hypertext linking, suggests how digital hypertext writing might help elaborate upon and extend feminist critiques of [...] dualisms and of the masculinist logics of possession and mastery they often sustain. (78).

Here, Shackelford points to the historical feminization of stitching, sewing, and quilting⁷² – practices that she links to the feminization of “connecting” roles. The “refiguration of instrumental subject-object distinctions” that Shackelford ascribes to *Patchwork Girl* is based in Jackson's subversive transformation of the fragmented corpse from Shelley's *Frankenstein* (as a body requiring activation by others in order to manifest itself as “monster”) into that of a body with an agenda of its own, one that asks the reader (the supposed “possessor” or “master”) to question the “masculinist logics” – and logics of white privilege – that they evoke in claiming ownership of and “saving” the female dead body on their screen.

Shackelford's analysis flags another important contrast between *Patchwork Girl* and *No Ghost Just a Shell*. Her reading highlights that, by urging readers to revert to the historically feminized practice of sewing in order to reanimate the patchwork girl, Jackson playfully inverts the notion of this practice as inferior (because: feminine). Other than Huyghe and Parreno, in whose work the act of animation emphasizes Annlee's dependence on more powerful (male) actors, Jackson genders the pre-requisites for the corpse's animation as female, like the corpse itself. In this sense, Jackson's critique evokes Bronfen's argument about the traditional aestheticization of the female corpse (as discussed in Chapter 1), according to which the female body, once a corpse, “becomes the site where the gazed-at-object and the object desired by the gazing subject merge perfectly into indistinction” (98). Jackson uses digital tools to undermine the aestheticization that Bronfen describes by making readers interact with the patchwork girl's female corpse – an approach that prevents them from reducing it to an aesthetic object that can only be “gazed” at. The fact that the patchwork girl's corpse is not whole but in pieces further complicates the act of gazing.

A critical reader might argue that objectification still remains an issue in *Patchwork Girl* despite its female corpse's apparent rejection of the gaze. Because isn't it, ultimately, the

⁷² For an in-depth analysis of the identity politics of stitching and its history, see Amos and Binkley; Kim.

reader, rather than the corpse, who is granted agency, and who takes responsibility for the story's outlines? And, related to this question, is it therefore not the reader who becomes the "author" of the patchwork girl's story and who, by extension, asserts ownership of her? A juxtaposition with *No Ghost Just a Shell* helps, however, to see that the reader-character interaction in *Patchwork Girl* is more complex than this. In contrast to Jackson's patchwork girl, who personally asks the reader to "sew her back together," the request to "work with" Annlee is made by Huyghe and Parreno in their invitation to the project's contributing artists. Unlike the patchwork girl, then, Annlee never gets to *ask* anything: it is Huyghe and Parreno who asked others to work with her in a way that is not really collaborative, but appropriative. In the case of Annlee, then, the act of appropriation is a direct result of what Warren-Crow would call her status as a "girlled image," that is, an image that "needs to be bought, rescued, possessed, exported, passes around, and transformed" (55). It is in this regard that *Patchwork Girl* does, in fact, reject the objectification of the female corpse: by allowing the female corpse itself to set the terms for the reader-character interaction, the reader's engagements with her become a collaboration, rather than a one-sided act of appropriation. Crucially, the patchwork girl also challenges the objectification of the *white* female corpse as inspiring intensified attempts at rescue or recovery by issuing a calm invitation to the reader rather than voicing a desperate plea for help.

What my comparison of Jackson's *Patchwork Girl* and Huyghe and Parreno's *No Ghost Just a Shell* makes clear, in short, is that fictional digital corpses are shaped in accordance with traditional sociopolitical norms in terms of their gendering and racialization, and that these norms also impact how fictional digital corpses are treated. As I have shown, stories of fictional digital corpses *do* raise similar ethical concerns to non-fictional digital corpses in terms of agency and, by extension, responsibility and ownership. But, even if these stories can truly offend, hurt, and reaffirm and perpetuate oppressive power structures, because they do not involve any actual deceased people, unlike the appropriations of the digital corpses of Nikki Catsouras and Neda Āghā-Soltān, they have no ramifications for surviving loved ones. What makes the fictional digital corpse a helpful ethical tool is precisely its fictionality: because of that fictionality, different ethical scenarios can be played out and reflected upon, with more freedom and creativity than in a non-fictional setting.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that fictional digital corpses like those of Jackson's patchwork girl and Annlee provide a means of asking ethical questions about how corpses – and specifically female-gendered ones – are and should be interacted with, and thus, in a sense, a response to the appropriations of digital corpses discussed in Chapter 2. A way of pushing such questions even further would be to get a non-human actor, such as Artificial Intelligence, to engender a corpse for personal use by that AI. This is not as far-fetched as it might sound at first, given that, as my discussion of video games, Grimes's WarNymph avatar, and Sicart's observation of "dangerous play" in the computer age earlier in this chapter pointed out, death and how to deal with it is already a 'lively' subject within the realm of machines.

Returning to the created fictional digital corpse as facilitating an experiment in ethics, particularly with regard to the corpse's agency, it is important to register that such a corpse is an *imagining* of the human body in one of its least active capacities: dead, but, in the case of the patchwork girl and Annlee, also without the immortal strengths with which some fictional dead creatures (such as vampires) have historically been endowed. The fictionality of these digital corpses, then, is not used to make them superhuman, but rather to underline their humanity (and therefore vulnerability) as a way of thinking through the ethical implications of appropriating non-fictional digital corpses like the ones that I discussed in the previous chapter. Annlee and the patchwork girl can teach us much about digital corpses and their uses in contemporary image cultures precisely because their fictional bodies are tangibly gendered and racialized; as such, they have the potential to reveal long-standing racist and misogynist structures, and to make readers and viewers reflect on their complicity with these structures. Notably, as my analysis has demonstrated, the sheer "girlhood" of these digital corpses' fictional depictions can both perpetuate (in the case of *No Shell Just Ghost*) and problematize (*Patchwork Girl*) the cliché of "the female body as docile" that more traditional depictions of the female corpse put forward, as described by Elisabeth Bronfen and others.

The fictional status of these dead bodies – the fact that they are "not for real" – does not, then, preclude but allows for an active engagement with the ethical questions concerning agency, responsibility, and ownership that arises when a non-fictional corpse is digitally appropriated for the purposes of the living. Digitally created fictional corpses, in other words, are a viable "testing ground" for the expectations, feelings, and desires that come into play when interacting with the dead in digital spaces. Without crossing into the offensive terrain of poking through someone's actual ashes – or body parts – they allow for an imagining of death,

commemoration, and the questions: what agency does or should a dead body have? Who owns a dead body, and who decides upon that ownership? And who is (or should be) allowed responsibility for its afterlife?

In the next and final chapter, I continue my exploration of these ethical questions by analyzing how they are answered in the case of terminally ill bloggers that digitize *their own* dying bodies (or, in other words, their own corpses-to-be). For these bloggers, so I argue, such digitization can facilitate a reappropriation in the form of a claim to agency that the digital corpses I discussed in the preceding two chapters, and also in part those in this chapter, were unable to make.

Chapter 4 – Reappropriating the Digital Corpse:

Tom Mandel and Kathy Brandt

The wounded storyteller, ending silences, speaking truths, creating communities, becomes the wounded healer.

- Arthur W. Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller* (xvii)

Introduction

Throughout this study, I have asked what happens when dying or dead bodies are made available, in digital form, to the online user for engagement and interaction on a global scale. So far, I have talked about digital corpses as dead bodies that have been created and appropriated in digital spaces, historically and in the present, for pleasure-oriented, political, or aesthetic and artistic reasons. In one way or another, all the cases of digital corpses that I have discussed speak to the loss of agency on the part of the “owners” of a certain body (or a certain image of the body) – and to the lowered sense of moral responsibility among those engaging with it – that may occur once the corpse is made available in the digital domain.

On the basis of the previous chapters, it might seem as though I am arguing that all except a marginal few digitizations of the dead (online, or in video art) ultimately serve to dehumanize the dead and to disempower those who care about them. In this chapter, I make clear that the story is, in fact, more complex: the digital representation of dead and dying bodies may also empower those who died or are dying, as well as their loved ones. To prove this point, I will look at two case studies: the online narratives about terminal illness by Tom Mandel (1994) and Katherine E. Brandt (2019), with the first dating from the age of early Internet cultures and the second from a later stage dominated by widespread social media usage. By discussing the sociopolitical specificities of each case, I highlight the changes that online terminal-illness blogging, as an online genre, has undergone since its first popularization in the mid-1990s, and I explain how this practice has adapted to the new affordances and trends of the web as an increasingly global, shareable, political, and also lucrative medium. I will do so in an analysis that builds on Arthur W. Frank’s and Carsten Stage’s work on (online) illness writing, which I will introduce in more detail towards the end of this introductory section.

Before I continue, it is important to note that, while the term “weblog” was not coined until 1997 (when the American Jorn Barger used it to describe his *Robot Wisdom* blog), “[t]he existence of blogs predates the coining of the term” (Andrejevic 33). One example of such a proto-blog is *Links from Underground*, a site “authored by [American] college student Justin Hall in 1994 [...] that shared assembled links with online visitors” (Andrejevic 33). In line with Andrejevic’s argument, even though the first of my case studies, the online illness story of Tom Mandel (1994-1995), predates the emergence of the term “blog” and was shared on a forum, I will refer to it as a terminal illness blog. This allows me to maintain a uniform terminology for the two case studies discussed in this chapter.

I will start by briefly describing what online terminal-illness blogging entails, and outlining what existing scholarship reveals about how terminal illness bloggers reappropriate their imminent death by reclaiming agency and ownership over their dying bodies with the help of digital tools. A terminal illness blog is an online diary in which a person with a terminal illness documents their everyday experiences and, in some cases, their final days and death. The terminal illness blog is not an archive of death but one of dying, as a physical and psychological process. What makes terminal illness blogs significant with regard to how death is reported on in Western society, Swedish media scholar Yvonne Andersson argues, is that their “stories are told by the ill and eventually dying themselves” (397). Unlike outlets for “news media,” where “stories about death are told by survivors, witnesses, relatives to the deceased, policemen, and [...] journalists,” terminal illness blogs place the dying themselves in the role of the focalizer (Andersson 396-7). In enabling the dying to make their own voices heard, Australian sociologists Anthony McCosker and Raya Darcy add, terminal illness blogs “offer their users (authors and readers) a continually renewable capacity to produce, express and connect with others, while also undertaking the often all-encompassing and highly intimate emotional, physical and relational management associated with their illness” (1267).

As McCosker and Darcy point out, terminal illness blogs are highly intimate records of the thoughts and feelings of the dying, and it is this same intimate quality that makes the writings valuable public monuments to the dead. American medical scholars Jessica Keim-Malpass and her co-authors note that the online sharing of terminal illness experiences plays an important role in the dying’s own “legacy making,” that is, “the effort to preserve memories and confirm that they will be remembered” (209). One of the psychological benefits of this practice, Keim-Malpass et al. add, is that it “facilitate[s] a form of life review and emotional processing during the [author’s] illness” (209).

Most importantly for my purposes here, terminal illness blogging is a way for the dying to assert agency over the memorialization of their lives, including their bodies. Andersson and Swedish media scholar Amanda Lagerkvist emphasize that “the surreal experience of receiving a cancer diagnosis or news of death” is dominated by “[a] sense of lack of control” (557). Through documenting their experiences with illness and death in an interactive, online environment, patients of terminal illness are enabled to “sen[d] a message to the world—‘look what’s happening to me’—while simultaneously situating [themselves] in the world” (Lagerkvist and Andersson 558). In this regard, Lagerkvist and Andersson invest digital technology with “a *vital* role—for mourners, the sick, and for others” in that it offers them an opportunity to own and reclaim their stories – stories told, crucially, from “the vantage point of the hurting, dying, and vulnerable existers [sic]” (560, emphasis original).

Those who share their terminal illness stories online, for the reasons that Lagerkvist and Andersson describe, have little in common with the appropriated digital corpses that I discussed previously. In using a public, online space to share their experience of dying, they make death an accessible experience – one over whom the dying can exert some level of narrative control – within the fabric of everyday social networks. This practice resonates with Lagerkvist’s notion that, rather than rendering death “a thing of the past,” the Internet, particularly from the Web 2.0 stage onwards, has “returned [death] to everyday life” (*Digital Existence* xii). She specifically sees this occurring

in the support groups for the bereaved online, on online memorials, in blogging about terminal illness, in suicide groups and [suicide] prevention on the internet, and within the digital inheritance area. (*Digital Existence* xii)

The online terminal illness testimony, as a public document of impending death, confirms Lagerkvist’s observation that the Internet has made death more visible in everyday life, and that it can grant users more agency in relation to the story of their impending death. In this particular case, however, it is not the *dead* body, but specifically the *dying* body that is made visible by its owner. In witnessing these dying bodies, users are confronted with intimate requests for empathy – requests that, as I will demonstrate below, may forge new networks of care, may be abused for personal gain (money, power), may do both at the same time – or, indeed, may do something altogether different.

In what follows, I will illustrate the different possible functions of online terminal-illness storytelling and the various effects that this practice has had in its short history. I will

do so via the cases of Mandel and Brandt. Their cases demonstrate, first, how the sociopolitical usages of online illness-storytelling have developed across the Internet's move from Web 1.0 to a platform for social media, and, second, how the increasing public visibility and accessibility of online content has impacted in what ways and with what aims terminal patients can exercise agency, responsibility, and ownership over their own dying bodies online.

In my analysis, I will distinguish between four functions of terminal-illness blogs. These blogs can serve to create a support network, to empower their author, to inform or educate other sick people and their caretakers, and to break taboos. These functions have not been overlooked in recent media scholarship. McCosker and Darcy, for example, outline how terminal illness blogs offer a platform for “shared traumatic experiences” and “networked help” (1268). Similarly, British cultural scholar Elena Gonzalez-Polledo and British sociologist Jen Tarr have explored the benefits of “pain communications” on blog platforms such as Tumblr (1456). And in his book *Networked Cancer*, Danish communication scholar Carsten Stage argues that terminal illness blogs “are not only about connecting past, present, and future, but also about creating a device to mobilize, convince, and activate followers” (2017: 13). All of these functions play a role, albeit to different extents, in my two case studies.

It is through the content and form of the narratives told that the different functions of terminal illness blogs are realized. To understand how, it is important to turn to the categorization of illness narratives posited by American sociologist Arthur Frank in his germinal text *The Wounded Storyteller* (1995). Frank argues that illness narratives can be categorized as tales of “restitution,” “quest narratives,” or “chaos narratives” (75). Out of these three, the “restitution narrative” is arguably the happiest one. It is the story in which the narrator falls ill, visits a medical professional, and is restored back to health. The “chaos narrative,” as its name foreshadows, is less hopeful in outlook. Chaos narratives, Frank writes, are the ones that speak about what he refers to as “deep illness”: illnesses that are “critical or chronic, immediately life-threatening or long term” (75). Indeed, the illness in question may never quite go away, or may even become fatal. The third and final type that Frank describes, the “quest narrative,” is the one that potentially emerges from the chaos narrative. It is the story that the narrator tells after moving beyond the chaos of their illness, once they begin to find meaning for their new life as a person with a serious or terminal health condition. Through the quest narrative, Frank argues, “[t]he wounded storyteller, ending silences, speaking truths, creating communities, becomes the wounded healer” (xvii).

Building on Frank's work, Dutch philosophers Marjolein de Boer and Jenny Slatman identify further categories within the narration of terminal illness, and within *online* narration in particular (2014). They describe the roles of "The Estranged Cancer Patient," "The Transient," "The Heroic Survivor," and "The Disfigured," that bloggers have to navigate as the protagonist of their illness retellings (2014: 17).⁷³ De Boer and Slatman conclude that while online writing "offers space to affirm stereotypes and conventions" surrounding illness – and breast cancer in particular – it also, as a medium, "reinforces greater freedom of self-narration" (2014: 17). Despite the possible limitations imposed by the standardized roles, then, the act of online storytelling and -sharing gives cancer patients (as well as patients of other terminal illnesses) a degree of agency over their story.

Similar to De Boer and Slatman, I argue that the act of online illness narration is a way for terminally ill people to assert agency over what happens to their bodies when they are digitized. Through the practice of blogging, I contend, the dying can claim agency, as well as responsibility for and ownership over online images of their dying bodies. However, besides being a potential source of empowerment, their online writings are also a potential target for ethical abuse, as I will demonstrate in the final section of this chapter. In terms of the ethical questions concerning the agency, responsibility, and ownership of (engagements with) digital corpses that are central to this study, terminal-illness blogging thus poses an ambivalent object: it both allows users with a terminal illness to reappropriate their digital corpses-to-be in an act of self-assertion, and it enables fraudulent and hurtful uses of the affective power that it generates.

As a first demonstration of how online writing about terminal illness can serve to reclaim control over dying bodies in a digital environment – or, to maintain the general terminology of this study, digital corpses-to-be – and of how this writing can be used to build a support network for the terminally ill, I will now turn to the case of Tom Mandel and his "accidental" terminal illness writings on the so-called WELL forum in 1994.

⁷³ For an alternative categorization of those engaging in online illness storytelling – and the agency that this practice can allow patients – see the dissertation *Illness Online* (2020), in which Colombian-Dutch media scholar Natalia Sánchez-Querubín differentiates between "popular bodies" (patients who gain mass popularity in sharing their stories online), "tagged bodies" (stories of disenfranchised patients who use social media to create communities around pain or loss), and "ranked bodies" (stories of patients whose precarious conditions lead them to compete for resources on illness-crowdfunding platforms).

Terminal Illness and Online Support Networks: Tom Mandel and The WELL

On September 18, 1994, Tom Mandel, an American futurologist⁷⁴ working at Stanford, opened a new thread on the electronic community WELL. Jokingly titled “Local Bug Report,” Mandel started the thread to inquire about some unpleasant physical symptoms he had been experiencing, mainly a “mild sore throat” (3). Over the next seven months, Mandel discussed his symptoms with other WELL users. The thread details Mandel’s doctor’s visits, the discovery that his symptoms signaled the onset of an untreatable form of lung cancer, and the emotional aftermath of having to come to terms with his impending death. While Mandel’s illness narrative can no longer be accessed online, the complete forum thread – from its opening in September 1994 to April 5, 1995, the day of Mandel’s death – is anthologized in *@heaven*, a book composed and edited by Kim Hastreiter, an American fashion editor and self-proclaimed “lurker” of The WELL. Besides a brief foreword, a note on permissions and an obituary of Mandel by *American Digest* blogger Gerard Van Der Leun, the book contains the full archive of Mandel’s blog, including comments from other WELL users.

The book’s title is derived from the last post in Mandel’s forum thread, made not by himself but by a user named “flash” [sic]. In the post, dated 5 April 1995, flash reported that Mandel had died. He instructed the thread’s fellow participants to reach out to Mandel in the afterlife, noting that “email may be sent to mandel@heaven.com [...] Or maybe that’s heaven.org...” (222). After flash’s statement, Mandel’s forum thread was frozen, and so the remark that Mandel can now be reached “@heaven” is the story’s finale. The title of Hastreiter’s anthology references this digitized version of Mandel’s final resting place.

A precursor to the forum culture of the late 1990s and early 2000s, The WELL (Whole Earth ’Lectronic Link) is one of the oldest digital communities. It was launched in February 1985 by American authors Stewart Brand and Larry Brilliant, and was used to discuss web development-technologies (still a novelty at the time) as well as such everyday, non-Internet-related topics as cooking and sports. As American communications scholar Fred Turner describes in a retrospective article on the platform, “the WELL became a forum within which information exchange, community building and economic activity took place simultaneously” (491). The WELL’s community equally used the forum to discuss business-related matters,

⁷⁴ Futurology, or future studies, is a “field of inquiry that involves systematic and explicit thinking about alternative futures” and that “aims to demystify the future, to make possibilities for the future more known to us, and to increase human control over the future” (Bell 2). See Bell for a detailed study on the purposes, assumptions, and epistemologies of future studies.

such as job opportunities, and to talk about more intimate matters, such as family life and illness.

It is important to note that Mandel's quest for health advice was not an uncommon occurrence on The WELL. The forum was often used as a source for quick medical information, as can be inferred from a reference to the platform by American cultural critic Howard Rheingold:

In the summer of 1986, my then-two-year-old daughter picked up a tick. There was this blood-bloated *thing* sucked on our baby's scalp, and we weren't quite sure how to go about getting it off. My wife, Judy, called the pediatrician. It was eleven o'clock in the evening. I logged onto the WELL. I got my answer online within minutes from a fellow with an improbable but genuine name of Flash Gordon, M.D. I had removed the tick by the time Judy got the callback from the pediatrician's office. (1, emphasis original)

Similarly, in an article from 1997, American sociologist Faith McLellan described how parents often turned to The WELL to discuss their sick children's symptoms, highlighting the "many discussion groups, bulletin boards, and e-mail lists devoted to specific diseases" (88). What made Mandel's case stand out, however, was that his illness turned out to not be one of many trivial health scares, but an incurable disease, turning his thread into one of the Internet's first interactive terminal illness writings.

American technology journalist Katie Hafner, in an overview article from 2001, describes Mandel's online documentation as constituting "a very public way to die" (2001: 52). According to Hafner, Mandel's illness narrative is a poignant piece of Internet history as it was one of the first pieces of public, online communication that showed the empathic potential of the web-based inquiry. While at first, Hafner notes, The WELL was "a harbinger of both the excitement and the concerns that over time would arise on the Net—debates over appropriate uses of electronic networks and virtual dialogues, free speech, privacy, anonymity" (2001: 53), what the responses to Mandel's illness narrative showed was that it could also be a platform for more intimate, emotionally charged discussions about illness, dying, and death.

Mandel himself was no stranger to sharing physical intimacies online. In *Technological Visions*, Hafner reports that "he [Mandel] had once been stricken by a tuberculosis-like illness, and then there was the back surgery that laid him up for weeks and brought him to the WELL." Mandel apparently also "spent a lot of time in the Health conference complaining about this sore throat or that head cold" (2004: 299). When he opened his "Local Bug Report" thread on

18 September 1994, therefore, Mandel's fellow WELL-members were not immediately worried by his description of his symptoms, or his decision to be so open about his physical complaints. After Mandel posted his symptom description, ("Upper Respiratory Infection. Lungs-to-sinuses clogged up with gunk, which fortunately has not yet turned green⁷⁵"), they wrote light-hearted and humorous responses such as:

Just stay away from me. I don't want your bugs.⁷⁶

and

hope you haven't been kissing mandel...⁷⁷

Over the following days, the discussion remained light as Mandel kept posting updates on his illness's development. His tone was largely optimistic. He noted, for instance, that he had not "had a cigarette for 6 days now, so something good will come out of this."⁷⁸ The other forum members responded in kind, reporting on their own flu symptoms and the bugs that were going around in their environments. People also chimed in with homemade remedies for dissolving phlegm in the nose and throat, as well as recommendations for antibiotics and medical treatments. A medical professional user called "flash," who had also advised Rheingold when his daughter picked up a tick in 1986, was particularly detailed in his recommendations to Mandel:

if you have heartburn, or wake up with a sore throat, try:

- nothing by mouth (including water) for 3 hours before bed
- elevate the head of your bed (blocks/books/brick under legs) by 3 or 4 inches
- if persistent, see your doc about an H2 blocker, like Tagamet, acid, zantac etc. for bedtime

of course, morning cough can be a sign of asthma/allergies, too.⁷⁹

All of his fellow posters' helpful suggestions notwithstanding, Mandel returned to the forum thread on 26 October 1994 with unfortunate news. He had undergone a sputum test at his local hospital and the lab results showed that he had "adenocarcinoma, [...] one of the four major types of lung cancer."⁸⁰ From that point on, the tone of the thread posts changed. The

⁷⁵ Post #3, Sun Sept 18 '94 (17:10) by Mandel in "Local Bug Report."

⁷⁶ Post #9, Mon Sept 19 '94 (09:17) by user nana, *ibid.*

⁷⁷ Post #13, Mon Sept 19 '94 (09:50) by user flash, *ibid.*

⁷⁸ Post #39, Mon Sept 26, '94 (12:16) by Mandel, *ibid.*

⁷⁹ Post #132, Mon Oct 17 '94 (10:56) by user flash, *ibid.*

⁸⁰ Post #163, Wed Oct 26 '94 (09:26) by Mandel, *ibid.*

users who had been following the developments around Mandel's health expressed their sympathy and the thread was filled with an outpouring of good wishes and "beams and prayers."⁸¹ Over the weeks that followed, Mandel remained uncertain about his treatment as he waited for additional tests and scans to be scheduled, while other users of The WELL kept sending him motivational messages and expressing their support. Then, on 9 November, Mandel acknowledged that his once-innocent forum thread had become something more serious than what it had started out as, writing:

I guess this became my "cancer topic" when the local bug turned out to be that, so I'll just continue because I'm too lazy to start another topic, and frankly, well, what the hell...⁸²

It is at this point that Mandel's thread morphed into an *avant la lettre* terminal illness blog. From here on, Mandel reported on his doctor's visits, his radiation therapy and subsequent chemotherapy, the side effects of both of these treatments, and his changed outlook on the future. The prognosis for his lung cancer was not good from the outset. After a doctor's visit on 14 December, Mandel reported:

Ah, well... this morning one of my oncologists told me, after I pushed him a bit, that it now looks like my cancer is more advanced than it had seemed at first...shit...lots hinges on this first round of chemo, I'm afraid.⁸³

Between December and March, Mandel shared his emotional ups and downs during cancer treatment on the forum. Like before, his fellow users kept encouraging him with good wishes and potential remedies, anecdotes of personal acquaintances who had survived cancer, and research articles on different chemotherapy treatments and their respective success rates.

In between all the medical information, Mandel also shared other personal developments, such as his marriage to user "nana" (his partner).⁸⁴ Since it was still not known how his illness would progress, but the signs were not good, Mandel noted that he wanted to "bite as deeply into life as is humanly possible."⁸⁵ As with his doctor visits and test result meetings, the WELL's community remained with him for the full course of his illness,

⁸¹ Post #168, Wed 26 Oct '94 (11:29) by user doctore, *ibid.*

⁸² Post #345, Wed 9 Nov '94 (18:54) by Mandel, *ibid.*

⁸³ Post #611, Wed 14 Dec '94 (15:37) by Mandel, *ibid.*

⁸⁴ Post #1161, Thu 23 Mar '95 (18:23) by Mandel, *ibid.*

⁸⁵ Post #1163, Thu 23 Mar '95 (18:31) by Mandel, *ibid.*

including the happier moments such as his wedding, cheering him on and congratulating him when things seemed to change for the better.

But Mandel did not get better. Only two days after his wedding announcement, he opened a new thread titled “My Turn,” in which he announced that his cancer treatment had been stopped and that he had now moved onto palliative care. In the opening post, in which he details his short remaining time alive, he writes his thanks and goodbyes to his fellow WELL users:

For better and for worse [...] it has been the time of my life and especially a great comfort during these difficult past six months. I’m sad, terribly sad, I cannot tell you how sad and griefstricken [sic] I am that I cannot stay to play and argue with you much longer. [...] So, thank you all, my best wishes and prayers to each and everyone [sic] of you. It’s been a fabulous life and it wouldn’t have been the same without you.⁸⁶

A couple of days later, Mandel was taken to hospital, where it was assumed that he would die. A user called “tbarreca,” who knew Mandel and his wife personally, offered to print out the well wishes of Mandel’s online friends and to share them with Mandel during his daily visiting hours at the hospital.⁸⁷ In this way, Mandel remained connected to his digital community even when he could no longer be digitally present in it.

Mandel died on 5 April, 1995. His wife requested for both the “Local Bug Report” and the “My Turn” threads to be closed. The post by user “flash” that designated Mandel’s new address as “@heaven” was the final post on the “My Turn” topic. But even though Mandel’s illness was not discussed further on The WELL, his online friends issued a compilation of comments to Mandel’s terminal illness posts in *Technological Forecasting and Social Change*, a future-studies journal that covered topics close to Mandel’s interests as a futurologist. One of them, by Tom Kuntz, highlights how Mandel was “one of the first (if not the first) to share online, with a wide audience, his own experience of dying” and that the archive of his two forum threads makes for “a striking illustration of computers’ potential for fostering community and intimacy” (325). This comment is significant, as it prefigures but far predates the perspectives on social media as community-building and sympathy- and awareness-raising tools that I will discuss in this chapter’s second case study.

⁸⁶ Post #0, Sat 25 Mar ’95 (08:57) by Mandel, “My Turn.”

⁸⁷ Post #1230, Sun 2 Apr ’95 (21:31) by user tbarreca, “Local Bug Report.”

Mandel's Web 1.0 terminal illness "blog," then, showed the digital community's potential as a support system during times of physical turmoil. In contrast to the tendency to re-appropriate corpse images in exploitative ways (discussed in detail in Chapters 2 and 3), online experiences such as Mandel's underline that online media do not only feature abusive interactions with dead or dying bodies. Indeed, as Mandel's case shows, giving your body an online presence can be a great source of comfort during the process of dying, and can empower the dying during their final days. To demonstrate how such support systems came to function in a more recent stage in Internet history – that of social-media connectivity – and to illustrate how the empathic function of online terminal-illness storytelling and -sharing can be amplified to less individualized and more political levels, I now turn to my second case study: the terminal illness blog of American hospice worker and activist Katherine E. Brandt.

The Terminal Illness Blog as Political Campaign: Kathy Brandt

In January 2019, hospice industry leader Katherine Brandt was diagnosed with "stage 3 ovarian clear cell carcinoma," a highly aggressive form of ovarian cancer (Aleccia). Choosing palliative care over further treatment, Brandt knew she would only have a couple of months to live. Together with her long-term partner Kimberly Acquaviva, a nursing professor, Brandt decided to make the most of their remaining time together by continuing to do what they had been doing for years: educating people on the everyday practicalities of life under palliative care. Only this time, the educative case study was not one of Brandt's or Acquaviva's patients, but the dying body of Brandt herself.

Upon receiving her diagnosis, Brandt consented to her everyday life being shared on social media by Acquaviva, in order to confront, as one journalist later put it, "her academic assumptions about what it is like to watch a loved one slowly die" (Stripling). Brandt and Acquaviva's terminal illness blog, posted across Twitter, Facebook, and the couple's page on the illness-crowdfund website GoFundMe, soon garnered a large following, consisting of both local friends and faraway strangers, many of the latter having experienced illness or loss through illness themselves. The couple's project showed that, despite the digital distance between the ill body and the online user, in the blogosphere confrontations with explicit accounts of death, illness, and mortality remained a sensitive affair. Acquaviva's deeply intimate blog posts about Brandt's physical decline, ranging from descriptions of Brandt's

bowel movements to pictures of her sleeping, prompted widespread support as well as criticism.

The digitization of Brandt's road to death, some users felt, crossed the line of what is appropriate for public social media, particularly since Brandt chose to refuse chemotherapy treatment. As, from her expertise as a hospice professional, she knew she had a type of cancer that was very unlikely to be cured, Brandt decided to let her illness run its course so that she did not have to suffer the side effects of chemotherapy – a decision that some of her relatives found difficult to deal with. In an interview with *NBC*, Acquaviva shared an anecdote of a distant cousin messaging Brandt: “You don't realize it, but you're strong enough to do chemo.” In the same interview, Acquaviva recounted how one “acquaintance showed up with fresh carrot juice, insisting that drinking 5 pounds of the juice daily would cure Brandt's disease” (Aleccia 15 May). In her professional life, too, Brandt faced some resistance to her choice to forego chemotherapy treatment. “Everyone initially was just shocked,” Brandt's colleague Jon Radulovic, the vice president of the National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization (NHPCO) told *NBC News*, but he also noted that “[t]he fact that she [Brandt] and Kim [Acquaviva] are sharing this experience really openly is making a difference” (Aleccia 15 May). Brandt's medical caretakers, too, initially had some issues with her choice: “I can't just let her kill herself,” her oncologist reportedly told Acquaviva (Aleccia 15 May). In response to these concerns, Acquaviva stated: “The default is, you're going to fight with chemo. [...] I would love to see clinicians and oncologists presenting patients with choices” (Aleccia 15 May).

As a way of meeting the costs of Brandt's at-home palliative care treatment, Brandt and Acquaviva started their GoFundMe campaign, titled “For Quality at the End of Life.” This campaign had both a practical and a political function. Because the couple were in a same-sex relationship in the heart of Washington D.C., where the notoriously homophobic president Donald Trump had taken office in 2016, they did not trust that they would have access to humane, safe treatment in a public hospice. In an update on the couple's GoFundMe page, Acquaviva referred to a “survey of almost 900 hospice professionals” that revealed that “[m]ost providers surveyed said LGBT people received discriminatory care” (15 July 2019). Though Acquaviva noted that she and Brandt were “sure” that, as a well-known palliative care professional in their local area, they would “get the best care in the world,” they refused to opt for an in-hospice palliative care treatment unless “ALL [sic] LGBTQ+ people [...] have access to hospice care provided by professionals who will treat them with dignity, respect, and clinical

competence” (15 July 2019). The money that Brandt and Acquaviva raised through the campaign was not only used to cover Brandt’s medical expenses, but also to raise awareness of LGBTQ+ discrimination in the American health care system. “There is no room in hospice care for homophobia or transphobia or biphobia [...] heterosexism or cissexism,” Acquaviva wrote (15 July 2019). For Brandt and Acquaviva, the GoFundMe campaign thus served both as a medium for Acquaviva’s reports about her partner’s illness *and* as a tool in their activist agenda for a more inclusive palliative care system in the United States.

When Brandt died on 4 August 2019, Acquaviva sent Brandt’s obituary (which Brandt had partially written herself) to the *New York Times*. Politics loomed large over this text, too. The obituary, which was published on 9 August 2019, was not just a report on Brandt’s death, but also a political manifesto: Brandt explicitly asked for her “cause of death” to be listed as “the Trump Presidency.” The final line of the text read: “In lieu of flowers, the family asks that donations be sent to whichever candidate secures the Democratic nomination even if you really wish someone better were running” (*New York Times*). The activist intention behind this statement was unmistakable. And it had an effect: even after Brandt’s passing, many people continued to donate money to Acquaviva’s GoFundMe page as a way of honoring her deceased partner, and new donations kept trickling in on a regular basis.⁸⁸ By 18 August 2020 the campaign had raised \$84,780. The campaign’s success and Brandt’s choice to make a political point (and in such a polemical way) in her obituary sparked public admiration as well: on the Facebook page for *Outside Voice*, a popular online community of activists and writers, the image of Brandt’s printed obituary in *The New York Times* garnered over two thousand “likes” and over a hundred supportive comments.⁸⁹

The political message in the obituary probably did not come as a surprise to those aware of Brandt’s terminal illness blog, as the political underpinnings of this blog were clear from the outset. In the introduction to the couple’s GoFundMe page, Acquaviva describes her family’s decision to document their journey as follows:

With her family, Kathy made the profound decision to forego chemotherapy or other treatment that might have prolonged her life but would have drastically diminished the

⁸⁸ When reviewing the campaign’s donation history, which is set to ‘public,’ it becomes evident that at least one (anonymous) donation has been made every month since the campaign’s start on 13 February 2019. As of the time of writing (August 2020), however, the monthly donations seem to have stopped in March 2020. See: <https://www.gofundme.com/f/for-quality-of-life-at-the-end-of-life> (Accessed: 18 Aug. 2020).

⁸⁹ See: <https://www.facebook.com/outsidevoicesunite/photos/a.1822288068002628/2460093530888742> (Accessed: 18 Aug. 2020).

quality of the time she had remaining. With this decision, she “walked the walk and talked the talk” of everything she contributed during her career in the hospice and palliative care world. With this decision, she also gifted us with an example of courage and how we too can face the end of our lives when it is inevitably our turn. (Acquaviva 13 February 2019)

More than just a practical means of raising money for medical expenses, then, “For Quality at the End of Life” also had an outspokenly activist dimension: Brandt and Acquaviva hoped to raise awareness both of the value of palliative care, as well as of the need for LGBTQ+ equality in American healthcare. In the GoFundMe project updates, Acquaviva shared pictures and descriptions of Brandt’s deteriorating physical state at least once a week. Alongside honest reports about Brandt’s pain and decreasing consciousness due to her palliative medications, Brandt and Acquaviva also shared accounts of pleasant, intimate moments together in their family home, to underscore that palliative care may offer a higher quality of life than continuing treatment of terminal patients.

In a medical context, “quality of life” (or QOL for short) is closely linked to pleas for patient agency and to the concept of “normality,” as Norwegian oncologists Stein Kaasa and Jon Håvard Loge point out (11). Quality of life, Kaasa and Loge describe, is generally defined “as fulfillment of life and the possibilities to live a normal life,” which includes “[the] mental capacity to think clearly, to see, to love and be loved, to make decisions for oneself, to maintain contact with family and friends, to live at home and/or be physically active” (11). Through their GoFundMe updates, Brandt and Acquaviva actively advocated for at-home palliative care, most notably by demonstrating how this type of care enabled Brandt to die under circumstances that fit the ideals of normality and independency that quality-of-life advocates propagate.

One example of such QOL-advocacy can be found in a post from 3 June 2019, in which Brandt voiced her pleasure at re-watching “the entire *Battlestar Galactica* series,” and detailed how she and her partner embarked on a weekend trip to Maine, despite her “pain [and] constipation.” Through these candid updates, Brandt and Acquaviva emphasized that life does not stop the moment one becomes terminally ill, and that those with little time left can have agency and control over the quality of their lives, if they manage to embed themselves in a proper palliative care network. In their practice as terminal illness bloggers, then, Brandt and Acquaviva advocated for the vital importance of proper caregiving at the end of life as much as they advocated for LBTGQ+ rights in the United States medical system.

As Acquaviva was relentlessly open about her partner's experiences as a terminally ill cancer patient, she was likewise open about the days that Brandt felt depressed, weak, or full of despair. In these moments, Brandt could not offer – to use a popular term for the feel-good instrumentalization of the sick – the “inspiration porn” that some of her followers expected. In disability studies, the term “inspiration porn” is used to refer to content that turns “the disabled [or ill] subject into an object of inspiration, whose struggles against systemic barriers is converted into a moment of reflection and encouragement for the non-disabled to better themselves” (Haller and Preston 53). The key problem with inspiration porn, Norwegian medical scholar Jan Grue points out, is that “it ignores disability's status as a predicament, glosses over complex embodiment, and precludes understanding of the interactions between disability, impairment, and chronic illness” (845). In allocating a prominent space to Brandt's moments of weakness alongside her moments of strength in the journey towards death, Acquaviva prevented followers from exclusively instrumentalizing her dying partner as feel-good material.

Followers occasionally critiqued Brandt and Acquaviva for their brutal honesty about terminal illness. Approximately a month before she died, Brandt reported on Twitter that she and her family felt “blue,” and that her son felt like “living in a prison of sadness.” A hospice chaplain responded that her son's feelings were inappropriate, and that death is only a prison “if you live like you are in prison.” Brandt and Acquaviva publicly called out the chaplain, tweeting that he had “pissed [them] off” and sparking an online discussion about how one should be allowed to feel, or present oneself, while dying in front of one's family. When the chaplain, who also received a volley of angered responses from Brandt and Acquaviva's followers, voiced his anger at Brandt for calling out his initial comment, Brandt responded: “If you can't fake empathy, say nothing.” While the chaplain did not react to this statement, it revealed a clear expectation on Brandt's behalf: that followers respond to her blog with empathy, whether it be in earnest or not. Besides viewing it as a platform for their political activism, then, Brandt and Acquaviva clearly also wanted the blog to offer support, in a similar way as Mandel did. In addition, what may have influenced Brandt's response – and particularly her lack of concern about whether the empathy should be genuine – is the fact that the generation of empathy is crucial to the success of medical crowdfunding campaigns, as I will discuss in more detail in the next section.

On 4 August 2019, Brandt died in the arms of Acquaviva, in their bedroom. “She sighed deeply and that was it – she was gone,” Acquaviva wrote in the final blog post on the couple's

GoFundMe page.⁹⁰ While the connections fostered and the money raised through their crowdfunding campaign did not change anything about Brandt's predicament and her inevitable death, the act of terminal-illness blogging did provide Brandt with emotional support and a clear political legacy: it gained her broad media attention as an active advocate against Trump's medical policies and for at-home palliative care. Brandt, in short, used her terminal illness blog to personally reclaim and reappropriate her digital corpse-to-be for concrete emotional, educational, and political aims, as a source of support for herself and her partner, a font of health-care information for others, and as an oppositional political tool.

Now that I have presented both of my case studies, I will use the last part of this chapter for a more in-depth discussion of the forms of empowerment that online platforms offer terminal illness bloggers. Rather than shunning their status as digital corpses-to-be, authors of online illness writing actively own and use this status – in some cases with concrete social and political aims in mind. This empowerment lends them a sense of agency, responsibility, and ownership that the digital corpses I have discussed so far do not have access to. There is a downside to this form of empowerment, however, as it can make the position of the terminal illness blogger desirable in terms of both financial and affective capital, and as a result vulnerable to abuse by fraudulent bloggers and insensitive users.

The Digital Corpse-to-Be: Empowerment and Risks of Abuse

From the two case studies that I have described above, it is evident that terminal illness blogs can have at least four personal and sociopolitical functions: the creation and mobilization of a support network, such as that offered by Mandel's online circle of friends on The WELL and by Brandt's followers and donators on GoFundMe; the empowerment of the blog's author, who gets to tell their illness story on their own terms; the education of other sick people and their caretakers; and the breaking of public taboos surrounding death and dying (as discussed in detail in my engagement with the work of Philippe Ariès in Chapter 1). These functions invest the authors of terminal illness blogs with a strong sense of agency in the face of severe illness and impending death. The digital corpses-to-be created by those who share terminal illness stories online, in what I argue is an act of reappropriation, allow the dying, first, to assert themselves as people with first-hand experience of facing imminent death and, second, to give

⁹⁰ While this post concluded the GoFundMe page's use as a terminal illness blog, Acquaviva did eventually post another entry on the campaign's page, on 26 February 2020, in which she told the page's followers about how she and her family had been coping with Brandt's death.

their dying bodies, in the way Keim-Malpass and her co-authors describe, a “legacy” of their own making. This does not mean, however, that the digital corpse-to-be cannot be exploited in ways similar to the digital corpses that I have discussed before, since an act of reappropriation can itself be reappropriated in turn. In what follows, I will outline the ethical risks associated with online terminal-illness storytelling, before concluding with a discussion of how Mandel and Brandt, despite these risks, managed to mobilize their digital corpses-to-be as counter responses to the appropriated digital corpses discussed in previous chapters.

But first, I revisit Frank’s genres of illness narration as described in this chapter’s introduction, as they are useful conceptual tools for my discussion of the terminal illness narrative’s exploitative potential. Both the stories of Mandel and Brandt can, if one adopts Frank’s categorization, be framed as quest narratives, as they are “stories [that] meet suffering head on, then accept illness and seek to *use* it” (Frank 115, emphasis original). Unlike “restitution narratives” and “chaos narratives,” the other two genres of illness writing that Frank identifies, “the quest narrative speaks from the ill person’s perspective and holds chaos at bay” (115). Frank explains the quest element of the narrative as follows:

Illness of the occasion of a journey that becomes a quest. What is quested for may never be wholly clear, but the quest is defined by the ill person’s belief that is something is to be gained through the experience. The quest narrative affords the ill person a voice as teller of her own story, because only in quest narratives does the *teller* have a story to tell. (115, emphasis original)

What defines the quest narrative, then, is that its narrator uses their experience to reach a certain goal. It is in this regard that Mandel’s and Brandt’s terminal illness blogs can both be categorized as quest narratives, yet with a crucial difference: each narrative is informed by a different goal, informed by the different eras of Internet history in which the writing took shape. The specific historical context affects the way in which each of the two authors – one writing in 1994, the other in 2019 – exercises agency in relation to and takes responsibility for their digital corpse-to-be.

When Mandel was writing his forum posts, in 1994, asking strangers for financial assistance during times of deep illness was not yet an established online practice. The GoFundMe platform that Brandt and Acquaviva used, for example, was not formed until May 2010 (Jones 304). Andersson notes that for terminal illness bloggers, the coupling of illness story-sharing to fundraising – “for cancer research or for purchasing items sold for the benefit

of research” – is now a common practice as a way of exercising *sensed* agency in the face of terminal illness, both for the blog authors and their followers (403). She writes:

The individual life stories described by the bloggers [...] become personifications of abstract statistics. While the disease [in question] might seem even more intimidating—it can affect anyone, any time—we all have an opportunity to at least contribute to its elimination. The cancer, the problem, can thus be manageable (at least for the readers), as its potential solution comes in a recognizable form: We pay for it, as for so much else. Although we know that many cannot prevent death, the measuring and collecting might give some comfort or sense of confidence, as it at least offers an opportunity to do *something* to take action. (403, emphasis original)

As Andersson argues here, the suggestion of a potential solution for the terminal illness (and its uncomfortable reality of impending death) through the practical means of donating money can provide bloggers and readers alike with a sense of comfort. In addition, the act of attaching terminal illness blogs to a fundraiser – particularly when that fundraiser is not intended to help the individual blogger, but to support medical research more generally – may contribute to their authors’ online “legacy making,” to bring back the term offered by Keim-Malpass and her co-authors: this act allows them, after all, to associate themselves with the “virtuous” act of being “charitable” (rather than exclusively being a charity *case*) as described by American bio-ethician Bryanna Moore in her account of medical crowdfunding and the virtue-based ethics involved in it (241).

The terminal illness blog’s increasingly common connection to fundraising is, however, no problem-free connection. It has, for one, caused certain users to abuse the digital community’s willingness to support. To demonstrate how the *sensed* agency that fundraising through a terminal illness blog affords can be instrumentalized in an abusive way, I will briefly introduce the case of Belle Gibson (2015). In 2015, Australian blogger Belle Gibson faked having cancer to boost sales of her wellness app *The Whole Pantry*. According to Gibson’s narrative, she had been diagnosed with a seemingly fatal brain tumor, but was miraculously healed after she “turned to oxygen therapy, craniosacral treatments and colonic irrigation” (Montague n. pag.). While Gibson herself blogged about her medical ‘journey,’ other terminal illness bloggers “were inspired” to use her app and copy her way of living, believing that “[i]f Belle could make it, maybe they could too” (Montague n. pag.). The revelation that Gibson had never had cancer received a lot of publicity and caused great anger. As of August 2020, she is

still facing a possible jail sentence after “fail[ing] to pay a \$410,000 penalty for duping” her blog’s followers (Australian Associated Press n. pag.).⁹¹

With regard to the Gibson case, British sociologists Stephanie Alice Baker and Chris Rojek observe that “[i]n hindsight, there were numerous indicators that Gibson’s persona was a façade” (2). “The selfies [Gibson] displayed on Instagram,” for example, “portrayed a remarkably healthy woman for someone said to have survived terminal cancer,” Baker and Rojek note (2). As a way of inspiring her followers to buy her app, Gibson made use of what Frank describes as the “retribution narrative” or, in the words of Baker and Rojek, “the archetypal myth of the hero’s journey” (3). In this sense, Baker and Rojek further add, Gibson’s story is typical of that of the “21st century lifestyle guru,” predicated upon “a journey of self-discovery from illness to recovery, triumph in the face of adversity” (3). The power of the online illness guru lies in the way in which the story of their experience with terminal illness and death becomes a form of “attention capital” (akin to the affective capital that I mentioned earlier), with the blogger becoming a symbol for “self-improvement, social integration and reintegration” (Baker and Rojek 3).

What the case of Gibson shows is that the “attention capital” that Baker and Rojek describe confers a form of power upon the terminal illness blogger, not only when the blog tells a retribution narrative, but also when, as in Mandel’s and Brandt’s cases, it presents a quest narrative and ends in death. This power is open to abuse. When the terminal illness blog is coupled with a fundraiser, moreover, not just attention capital but also financial capital is at stake. As a result, terminal illness blogs are susceptible to different forms of exploitation. Significantly, the potential for financial exploitation is aided by the business models of crowdfunding platforms themselves, as Qatari economics scholars Mokter Hossain and Gospel Onyema Oparaocha note. According to them, “[o]n many occasions, crowdfunding websites are reluctant to intervene [against the] fraudulent because their revenues depend on the successful fundraising” (n. pag.). Although not linked to such a platform, the “health fraud” committed by Gibson aptly demonstrates, as British sociologists Anita Lavorgna and Lisa Sugiura put it, “how the Web has created a new space for potentially deviant behavior to occur and enables justifications and management of performances [of ill health]” (1046).

⁹¹ After the local Sheriff’s Office “raided” her house “in a bid to recoup [the] outstanding fines and penalties” in January 2020, this amount was still not fully paid (*ABC News* 22 Jan. 2020). A spokesperson for the local Sheriff’s Office “confirmed they would continue to pursue Gibson until her now \$500,000 debt [due to mounting interest] was repaid in full” (Zagon).

While monetary fraud is a particularly blatant ethical risk of terminal-illness blogging and medical crowdfunding, another, subtler risk that is relevant to my study's focus on the implications of gendering and racialization for the digital appropriation of images of corpses(-to-be) is that of the perceived "deservingness" of online terminal illness storytellers in the eyes of their followers. American sociologists Lauren S. Berliner and Nora J. Kenworthy's study into medical crowdfunding campaigns points out that in such campaigns traditional sociopolitical power dynamics play a seminal role. Some bodies, Berliner and Kenworthy argue, are deemed more "deserving" of sympathy, attention, and in the context of medical fundraisers, donations (240). Such "dimensions of deservingness," Berliner and Kenworthy add, include "gender, ethnic and racial disparities as well as stigmatized health conditions" (240). As examples of "social categories of undeservingness," on the other hand, Berliner and Kenworthy list "communities of color, single mothers, immigrants, drug users, [and] the formerly incarcerated," among others (235). Considering Berliner and Kenworthy's findings in the context of Brandt's and Mandel's terminal illness blogs, it is important to point out that both of these bloggers were privileged (or "deserving") subjects in many respects, as they were both white and highly educated. Mandel, in addition, had access to the Internet in the early 1990s, a time when many people (even financially privileged and educated ones) did not. The agency that Brandt and Mandel were able to derive from their blogs, in other words, was (and is) not available to everyone.

The success of a medical crowdfunding campaign thus hinges (at least in part) on the perceived "deservingness" of the fundraiser, as Berliner and Kenworthy note. It is important to add here that crowdfunding platforms themselves actively encourage fundraisers to present themselves and their (illness) stories in such a way that they come across as deserving. Canadian bio-ethics scholar Jeremy Snyder writes that "[w]hile crowdfunding sites do not encourage their users to mislead potential donors and typically forbid misinformation in their terms of use, they do encourage users to employ language that generates 'empathy' among potential donors and to 'inspire' persons viewing their campaign page" (38). The way in which empathy has become commodified is also evident in Brandt and Acquaviva's GoFundMe campaign: regardless of whether this was a conscious strategy or not, they inevitably advanced their campaign whenever they emphasized the pleasant, "human" moments that were made possible by Brandt's at-home palliative care treatment, as when Brandt and Acquaviva watched *Battlestar Galactica* together in the comfort of their home. In being dependent on the empathy-as-commodity dynamic that Snyder describes, a terminal illness blogger hoping to raise money

through a crowdfunding platform has to commit themselves to generating empathy in their audience, which, because of established discourses of deservingness and undeservingness, may be much harder for some people than for others.

The empathy-based nature of the medical crowdfunding platform poses a downside to the terminal illness blogger (or medical fundraiser more generally) in that the stakes involved in generating empathy and being perceived as “deserving” might limit the blogger, even when they belong to a group generally seen as “deserving,” in their agency and self-ownership. If the success of their campaign is dependent on audience approval of their story, the blogger might decide to diminish – or, conversely, exaggerate – the taxing reality of their experiences. And while a dying blogger might not have to be as interested in the long-term size or loyalty of their audience as, for example, a blogger with a chronic illness, including or excluding certain experiences likely to be valued or devalued by potential donors in the blog – or the medical fundraiser attached to it – will still be tempting, and might take their “legacy making” in unanticipated and unwanted directions. Thus, as Colombian-Dutch media scholar Natalia Sánchez-Querubín argues, by rendering “the illness story [...] transactional” and, as a result, putting “those who lack online storytelling skills [...] at a disadvantage, [...] medical crowdfunding offers a different view on the voice-enabling and therapeutic aspects of illness storytelling” (130).

This brings me back to the cases of Mandel and Brandt, and their different repurposing of the quest narrative as a form of exercising agency (and, by association, ownership) over their digital corpses-to-be. With regard to the practice of digitizing and narrativizing dying bodies, Carsten Stage argues that the authors of online terminal illness narratives use “their bodies as mobilizing transmitters of affect” (2015: 174). The body is used to evoke empathy, horror, or a combination of similar affects, as a means of sparking reader (or, in this case, follower) involvement in the narrative at hand. The body, in a word, acts as a narrative tool or, as in the quote from Stage that I used earlier, which pertains specifically to online terminal illness story-sharing, “a device to mobilize, convince, and activate followers” (2017: 13).

It is the *mobilization* part of the terminal illness blog’s purpose where the strategies of Mandel and Brandt diverge. For Mandel, the emphasis of his terminal illness posts was on their potential for fostering a community around his journey towards death that would be able to act as a source of emotional support. In the case of Brandt and Acquaviva’s GoFundMe-mediated blog, the aim of creating a supportive community was also present, but this community was also mobilized towards sociopolitical ends (fundraising for palliative care organizations,

promoting LGBTQ+ equality in healthcare, and opposing Trump's presidency). As a result, their blog had a less individualized outlook and purpose than Mandel's blog. Though Mandel and Brandt both used similar tools for mobilizing their audience (sharing health updates and the "highs" and "lows" of their terminal illness experiences), their aims in reappropriating their digital corpse-to-be were not identical. This can partly be attributed to the different time periods in which their online terminal illness narratives were written: as platforms such as GoFundMe did not yet exist in Mandel's time, the linking of a terminal illness blog to a public fundraiser had not yet been standardized, and no fake (terminal) illness blogs existed.

In the more than two decades that have passed since the time of Mandel's blog, when the sharing illness stories online was still a novelty and mainly served the purpose of generating emotional support, illness storytelling has proven, as Brandt's and Acquaviva's blog underscores, its potential both as an online vehicle for raising money and drawing attention (the "attention capital" that Baker and Rojek describe), and as a tool for political mobilization. At the same time, the terminal illness blog's status as attention capital also poses a potential disadvantage when such a blog is paired with a medical fundraiser. After all, the patient then becomes dependent on their audience's approval – a situation that potentially limits the sense of agency, self-ownership, and self-responsibility that their blogging practice offers them in relation to their corpse-to-be.

Conclusion

As my discussion of Mandel's and Brandt's stories has shown, online stories of terminal illness are multifold in both purpose and meaning: they can be geared towards more personal goals such as the creation of an emotional support network or the collection of money for one's treatment, but also towards more public, or explicitly political, ends, such as the raising of awareness and fundraising for medical research. Through this multiplicity of purposes and meaning, the practice of online illness storytelling can endow authors with a sense of autonomy and agency that, due to their illness, may have become inaccessible for them via other routes. Put differently, they can reclaim a portion of their former autonomy through narrative agency on a connective, public platform. In maintaining a digital presence and controlling what images and narratives they put online, moreover, they can reappropriate and re-"own" their dying bodies in response to the widespread appropriation of dead and dying bodies by others that I illustrated in the previous chapters. Yet, as the example of Belle Gibson shows, the terminal

illness blog's empowering potential might also be abused by users seeking the sympathy and money that the terminal illness blog, as a medium capable of generating affective and financial capital, promises to provide. What this risk of abuse demonstrates is that the digital corpses-to-be featured on terminal illness blogs are themselves not immune to hurtful or fraudulent reappropriation. Like all online images, moreover, these corpses-to-be can end up circulating far beyond the blogs on which they were originally posted and, like the corpse-images of Catsouras and Āghā-Soltān, be made to serve unanticipated aims wholly unrelated to those intended by the terminal illness bloggers.

An important feature of the terminal illness blog, as Berliner and Kenworthy point out, is that long-standing gendered, racial, and economic biases towards certain groups of people can form a barrier to the terminal illness blogger's effort of legacy-making, especially when the blog is coupled to a medical fundraiser. The need to provide proof of "deservingness," which is easier for some than for others, and to hold followers' attention by posting regularly, even in periods of severe illness, can become a burdensome task – one that interferes with the terminal illness blogger's digital self-actualization.⁹² What the digital corpse-to-be of the terminal illness blog emphasizes once more, then, is that digitized dead and dying bodies remain vulnerable to long-standing systemic sociopolitical inequalities and social insensitivities.

In the afterword that follows, I will not only recapitulate the disempowering effects of sociopolitical power structures on digital corpses(-to-be) that I have charted in my chapters, but also demonstrate how digital corpses can act as activist tools in times of global sociopolitical transitions. In examining this last counter-response to the appropriation of digital corpses in more detail, by returning to the cases of Alan Kurdi and George Floyd, I will show how, today, the ethical questions concerning the agency, responsibility, and ownership that I have dealt with throughout this study continue to feed into social and political dealings with dead and dying bodies taking place both on- and offline.

⁹² This particular aspect of terminal-illness blogging is discussed in detail by Sánchez-Querubín.

Afterword:

Recapitulating the Digital Corpse

It is quite a peaceful picture and in some ways quite respectful, but it makes you think immediately: what could have precipitated this? Why is a toddler dead on the beach?

- Will Wintercross commenting on Alan Kurdi's corpse-image (2015)

It is strange to be finishing this study during the COVID-19 crisis. In August 2020, daily reports of mass death and dying bodies have become a standard feature of the news. The number of deaths as a result of the virus keeps climbing, and it has become so high, even, that it has become difficult to conceptualize. I can still imagine 200 dead bodies, but over 700 thousand?⁹³ The volume of these deaths, about which I learn via online news websites that I visit on a daily basis, have prompted me, while finalizing this dissertation, to reconsider my perception of digital corpses as human bodies that feel distant and unreal. I noticed that, as so many updates on other people's deaths are making their way into my life and home through my laptop and smartphone, I have become used to these updates as a part of my daily routine. After researching the ethical responses to digital depictions of dead and dying bodies for four years, it is confrontational to feel how easy it is to become disconnected from other people's suffering once that suffering becomes too abstract to visualize.

I started this afterword with the dead and dying bodies described in COVID-19 news updates because they loomed large and undoubtedly impacted my thinking while conceptualizing my analyses; but also to flag the need for future research into digital corpses, as numbers and images, as an indelible part of the COVID-19 crisis – a crisis that more than one expert sees as 'the world's digital pandemic' (Okano-Heijmans 2020; Davis and Matsoso 2020). In the remainder of my conclusions, I will first summarize the key aims and findings of my research. Then, I turn to two influential digital corpses briefly mentioned before in Chapter 1 that "emerged" while I was writing this study and that, just as the COVID-19 death reporting

⁹³ As of 18 August 2020, over 775,000 people "have died [...] from the coronavirus COVID-19 outbreak" across the world. Source: <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/coronavirus-death-toll/> (see also "Corona Virus Death Toll").

would later on, affected my thinking about the purposes and meanings of corpse-image circulation in a digital environment, as well as the ethical questions that such circulation raises.

The digital corpses I revisit are those of three-year old Syrian refugee Alan Kurdi, which went viral on social media in 2015 and thereby contributed to Western audiences' growing awareness of the severity of the European refugee crisis, and George Floyd, which prompted global Black Lives Matter protests in 2020. These two recent and particularly resonant public cases allow me to emphasize that, to this day, digital corpses carry the legacy of the sociopolitical and artistic traditions of dealing with corpses in Western society described in Chapter 1, while simultaneously showing how the analysis of digital corpses as I have pursued it in this study offers us tools to think through the impact that digitally mediated deaths continue to have on social power relations.

Let me start with a brief summary of what I have done in this study. Most importantly, I have analyzed three ways in which images of dead and dying bodies are mobilized in digital environments: through their *appropriation* by social media users (Chapter 2); through their *creation* in digital fiction and an art project, as counter responses to such appropriation (Chapter 3); and through their *reappropriation* by terminal illness bloggers who reclaim agency over and ownership of their own dying bodies online (Chapter 4). In order to situate these three forms of digital mobilization within a broader context, I have prefaced my analyses with a historical outline of Western traditions of dealing with images of dead and dying bodies since the invention of photography in the mid-nineteenth century (Chapter 1). My focus throughout all four chapters has been on the ethical questions that mobilizations of digital corpses(-to-be) evoke, particularly with regard to agency, responsibility, and ownership. For my analyses, I built on existing research in the fields of media studies, digital death studies, and cultural analysis. Most notably, I relied on Charles Ess's notion of distributed responsibility, Heather Warren-Crow's theory on the plastic image, and Elisabeth Bronfen's work on the cultural depictions of the female corpse.

I used six case studies to examine, first, how human corpses can be appropriated and repurposed, including in sadistic or misleading ways, once their image starts circulating within globally accessible, highly interactive digital environments (by looking at the digital corpses of Nikki Catsouras, who died in a car crash, and Nedā Āghā-Soltān, who was shot during protests in Iran); second, how fictional digital corpses are created to satisfy and question the tendency to repurpose and appropriate images of corpses without exploiting or hurting actual human beings (by analyzing Shelley Jackson's electronic novel *Patchwork Girl* and Pierre

Huyghe's and Philippe Parreno's multimedia installation *No Ghost Just a Shell*); and, third, how terminally ill people document their journey towards death as a way of reclaiming the agency, responsibility, and ownership over their bodies that appropriated digital corpses tend to lack (by exploring Tom Mandel's and Kathy Brandt's online illness narratives).

With the exception of the case of Kathy Brandt – who died in 2019 and for whose case I mainly studied events that preceded that moment – all my case studies date from before 2014. The reason for this choice is that my research question – about digital mobilizations of images of dead and dying bodies, and their impact on bodily agency, responsibility, and ownership – implied that time was needed for these images to circulate, and for ethical debates to arise around them. “Newer” objects were risky to include in this regard, as it was likely that the public conversations about these objects would still be ongoing, or that there would simply not be many documented responses to these objects yet. The choice to limit the research time span in this way did not mean, however, that I was not intrigued (or shocked) by digital corpses that emerged after I had begun writing about this subject.

The image of the washed-up body of Alan Kurdi (which I already briefly referenced in Chapter 1) is an example of a digital-corpse image whose online circulation had a strong sociopolitical impact. What it made palpable to Western audiences were both the dire circumstances of those seeking refuge from the Syrian civil war of the 2010s and the desperate measure that these refugees had to resort to: crossing unsafe waters in dingy boats in the hope of reaching the European mainland. In an interview with *BBC News*, Turkish press photographer Nilufer Demir, who took the pictures of Kurdi, states that she decided to photograph his small corpse in order “to make his outcry heard” (Gunter n. pag.). The picture's impact, British photographer Will Wintercross comments in the same interview, can be attributed to “the composition of the image, terrible but not gory as many of the worst war photographs inevitably are” (Gunter n. pag.). “It is quite a peaceful picture and in some ways quite respectful,” Wintercross notes, “but it makes you think immediately: what could have precipitated this? Why is a toddler dead on a beach?” (Gunter n. pag.). The strong affect that Kurdi's photo generated in viewers led to its wide online circulation, which, as Greek sociologists Anna Carastathis and Myrto Tsilimpounidi state, “sparked a social movement to ‘welcome refugees’ in Europe” (158). Carastathis and Tsilimpounidi note how “the photograph of the three-year old went viral on social media with the hashtags #humanitywashedashore and #refugeeswelcome” (157). This widespread public confrontation with Kurdi's image, British

race scholar Liz Fekete further argues, “momentarily shock[ed] the global media out of its complacency” about the European refugee crisis (1).



Figure 5.1. A sand sculpture by Indian artist Sudarsan Pattnaik that recreates the image of Kurdi’s washed-up body (2015).⁹⁴ The accompanying phrase, “Humanity Washed Ashore,” references the hashtag under which Kurdi’s image was circulated on social media (#humanitywashedashore).

Similar to the case of Āghā-Soltān that I discussed in Chapter 2, then, the online circulation of Kurdi’s corpse-image raised global audiences’ awareness of political crises happening outside their direct surroundings and stirred both artists and social activists to action (Figure 5.1). Particularly in Canada, the country that Kurdi and his family were trying to reach, Kurdi’s photograph rekindled the refugee immigration debate after “the discovery that the boy’s family had been unable to obtain immigration visas,” forcing them to try and escape Syria by sea (Austen). After Kurdi’s corpse-image had gone viral, Prime Minister Stephen J. Harper (of the Canadian conservative government between 2004 and 2015) announced that “Canada would immediately accept more refugees” (Austen).

⁹⁴ Image source: GettyImages, via <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34150419> (Accessed: 18 August 2020).

A second, more recent example of an online corpse-image that sparked international political protests – and one that, at the time of writing, remains a story unfinished – is that of George Floyd, the African-American former security guard who was killed by three white police officers in Minneapolis on May 25, 2020. A day later, footage of Floyd’s murder in which white police officer Derek Chauvin is seen pressing down his knee on Floyd’s throat for 8 minutes and 46 seconds while ignoring Floyd’s protestations that he could not breathe was posted and went viral on Facebook; in response, “tens of thousands of people [...] swarmed the streets to express their outrage and sorrow” in cities across the United States and, later, in Amsterdam, Berlin, and London, and other urban centers outside North America as well (Furber et al.; Taylor *NYT*). The attack on Floyd, *The Chicago Tribune* reports, started after an employee at a local grocery store called the police on Floyd when he allegedly tried to buy cigarettes with a counterfeit \$20 bill (Richmond). On the day that the footage of Floyd’s murder went viral, Chauvin, two other officers who pinned Floyd down, and an officer who stood by were fired and, one day later, Chauvin was criminally charged for his acts by the local mayor (Richmond). Meanwhile, hundreds of protestors responding to Floyd’s murder flooded into the Minneapolis streets and, as a way of expressing their outrage, started vandalizing and looting local stores – most notably, the city’s massive Target food store (Taylor; Peterson). In an article for *The Guardian*, American humanitarian and director of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People⁹⁵ Derrick Johnson writes how the footage of Floyd’s death “has ignited an incandescent social movement”:

An astonishing amount has changed in the few weeks since Floyd’s murder. The chokehold that killed him has been banned in 20 cities and counting. Confederate monuments have toppled, pulled down by protestors or (finally) removed by officials. Around the country, communities are pushing police out of schools, and considering how to slash law enforcement budgets and reinvest the funds to address the root problems that police are so ill-equipped to handle. (n. pag.)

In addition to the changes that Johnson mentions, on 25 June 2020, the so-called George Floyd Justice in Policing Act was passed by the U.S. House of Representatives. If accorded by the Senate, this act, so *The New York Times* reported that same day, will “[p]rohibi[t] federal, state, and local law enforcement from racial, religious, and discriminatory profiling” and “mak[e]

⁹⁵ The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) is an American activist group that was founded in Springfield, Illinois, in 1908, and that played a large role in the American Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s, which I mentioned in the context of the Emmett Till case in Chapter 1.

lynching a federal hate crime,” among other significant changes in American policing law (Edmondson).

As the above reveals, the sociopolitical effects of George Floyd’s death – triggered by the circulation of his corpse-image on global social media platforms – are still taking shape. What both the Floyd case and the Kurdi case make clear, however, is that digital corpses can play a significant role in the uncovering of social injustice on a global scale and, in this way, serve as potential instigators for political change. By saying that I do not mean to gloss over the darker sides of most of the stories that I have analyzed and compared in this dissertation – Floyd’s and Kurdi’s stories included. The images of their corpses may have become catalyzers for social change, but they suffered horrible deaths and their corpse-images were actively reappropriated and re-“owned” by media users who invoked racial hate speech and xenophobia rather than pleas for equality and inclusion. Journalists of the French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo*, for example, released, as recounted by British new media scholar Yasmin Ibrahim, “an animation suggesting that Alan Kurdi, had he not died, would have grown up to be a lascivious predator of women” (n. pag.). In digital mediatizations of death, systemic racial and gender inequality have anything but disappeared, as my case studies have also demonstrated. Such inequality makes it easier for certain digital corpses to be dehumanized, as my discussion of Nikki Catsouras’s story in Chapter 2 and that of Annlee in Chapter 3 underscored. The shadow side of digital corpse imagery notwithstanding, cases such as Floyd’s and Kurdi’s, as well as those of Jackson’s patchwork girl (Chapter 3) and Mandel and Brandt (Chapter 4), show that digital corpses may, at the same time, allow for a counter response to the exploitative appropriation of image-corpses, and provoke living users to stand up for the empowerment of the dead or dying person or the community that they belong to. In this way, digital corpse-images can help to retain or restore for that person or community a sense of agency, responsibility, and ownership, even in the face of death.

I hope that this study has shown that, unlike the very first digital corpse-image that I encountered against my will in a primary school classroom, images of dead and dying bodies in digital environments are not exclusively the domain of sadistic trolls and online thrill-seekers. The large-scale shareability, malleability, and vulnerability of these images do pose ethical risk, as my analyses have revealed, to the person depicted and their loved ones, but also to other users who may have no desire to be confronted with them, and this risk merits serious attention. At the same time, in digital platforms, appropriative abuse exists alongside situations in which corpse-images turn into tools for empowerment, or in which the vulnerability of the

digital corpse is explored as an experiment in sociopolitical critique, as illustrated most clearly by Shelley Jackson and her feminist deployment of the fictional digital corpse in *Patchwork Girl*. As the stories of Tom Mandel and Kathy Brandt have shown, the digital corpse's potential for legacy-making may even serve a downright therapeutic purpose for those who are dying and wish to archive and share their experiences through interactive media. Despite their vulnerability, then, digital corpses are not only of interest to users seeking to exploit or sensationalize the dead online; digital corpses can also provide activist instruments, objects for (and of) sociopolitical criticism, and possibilities for social and individual agency, connection, and empowerment.

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Summary

Digital Corpses: Creation, Appropriation, and Reappropriation

This study takes as its departure point a twofold media-related shift: the increasing ubiquity of what I call digital corpses, defined as digital images of dead and dying bodies, and the increasing lack of control over such images. With this twofold shift in mind, I will ask: With what motivations and effects are digital corpses created, appropriated, and reappropriated online? What are the ethical stakes involved when media users (re)produce a human corpse or dying body on a digital platform? And what role do social constructions of gender and race play in the creation, appropriation, and reappropriation of such digital dead and dying bodies? To address these questions, I analyze a number of case studies involving three different types of digital corpses: (1) images of *offline corpses* that circulate online; (2) *fictional dead and dying bodies* that were *created online* or in contemporary digital video art and photography; and (3) images of *offline dying bodies* that circulate online.

Now that everyday human life, including dying, is increasingly intertwined with digital technologies and online cultures, it is important to understand how this entanglement affects existing social norms, including those that relate to death. The ethical questions that my case studies pose are all related to the large-scale shareability, malleability, and vulnerability of dead or dying human bodies as digital images. Though my study is not a comparison between the ethics of engaging with digital corpses and those ethics of engaging with non-digital corpses, I do explore the consequences of digitizing the human corpse in a global, highly interactive environment (the Internet), and ask what these consequences reveal about the power dynamics between living and dead bodies. More specifically, I look at how these power dynamics are influenced by the perceived distance between the viewer (the user) and the viewed (the dying person or corpse), and I ask how this perceived distance informs the mobilizations that the digital corpse is subjected to in a digital environment. With regard to the latter, I distinguish between the *creation*, *appropriation*, and *reappropriation* of digital corpses.

The ethical questions that I see arising around the creation, appropriation, and reappropriation of the digital corpse revolve around agency, responsibility, and ownership. The perceived distance between a digital corpse and its creator, viewer, or disseminator, and the fact that digital corpses circulate as public, shareable objects, makes it unclear who has (or should have) *agency* in relation to the digital corpse, who is (or should be) held *responsible* for

the meanings and functions acquired by the digital corpse over the course of its circulation, and who can (or should be able to) claim *ownership* of the digital corpse. It seems to be the case that the more distance there is perceived to exist to a digital corpse, the more extreme and less accountable the uses to which it is put become. In addition, the increasing scale and intensity of the circulation of digital corpses makes it harder and harder to identify which actors are involved in this circulation and who can consequently be held to account for the various meanings and functions imposed upon digital corpses.

To unpack the ethical questions that interest me, I analyze and compare six case studies in three chapters. In Chapter 1, “Historicizing the Digital Corpse,” I present a historical overview of dead and dying bodies in Western visual media, specifically photography, in order to discuss the changing attitudes towards images of dead and dying bodies that, to various extents, remain relevant in the digital age. In this chapter, I am especially interested in the different purposes that the visually mediated corpse or corpse-to-be – as a corpse-image – has traditionally served, which range from acting as private mementos to being used as political tools. I also outline the ethical questions that have historically arisen around such images, and that still play a role in the digital environments on which the rest of this study focuses. Through this historical overview, I demonstrate that the circulation of images of corpses and corpses-to-be is not unique to the digital age, but that digital media have radically *expanded* their accessibility and shareability.

For this chapter’s theoretical framework, I primarily make use of French historian Philippe Ariès’s germinal *The Hour of Our Death: The Classic History of Western Attitudes Towards Death Over the Last One Thousand Years* (1977), particularly his description of the gradual twentieth-century shift towards conceptions and depictions of death as “ugly and dirty” (569). I illustrate how – in response to this new perspective on death, which replaced the nineteenth-century emphasis on its beauty – images of death acquired a new political potential as incentives to shock people into action. I explore this potential by discussing the case of Emmett Till – a 14-year-old African-American child whose lynching in 1955 attracted worldwide attention after an open-coffin public funeral – as well as performances and happenings that mobilized the human corpse in overtly political ways, such as the “Ashes Action” movement of the 1980s AIDS crisis. Next, I move to a discussion of how certain (gendered, racialized) corpses have historically been “fetishized” in Western image culture, a discussion that I mediate via Elisabeth Bronfen’s *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic* (1992), and how contemporary artists (most notably American artist Hannah

Wilke in her *Intra-Venus* series) have subverted this fetishizing tradition by using images of corpses as a form of sociopolitical critique. I conclude the chapter with an analysis of the controversies around photographs of Princess Diana Spencer's death (1995) and the 9/11 Falling Man (2001). Both, I argue, exemplify the persistence of the aestheticization of death that accompanied its twentieth-century status as a visual taboo.

In Chapter 2, I begin my empirical inquiry by focusing on the *appropriation* of digital corpses. In this chapter, titled "Appropriating the Digital Corpse," I analyze two images of corpses that were distributed widely on social media by various actors, and whose public visibility was significantly impacted by the global accessibility, large-scale shareability, and memeification that typify social media platforms. The first corpse-image I discuss is that of Nikki Catsouras (2006), an American teenager whose lethal car crash was photographed and actively shared online, and the second that of Iranian activist Nedā Āghā-Soltān (2009), whose assassination by a government sniper was the first human death to be uploaded onto YouTube. These cases allow me to reflect on the ethical consequences of a corpse's visual availability for widespread appropriation on social media. I argue that, in different ways, both case studies illustrate how, and to what effects, the image of a digital corpse may become detached from its original sociopolitical context. The specificities of the case studies prompt me to examine two particular motivations for appropriating images of digital corpses – (sadistic) pleasure and political activism – and to pay specific attention to how the gender of the person whose corpse-image was appropriated affected the functions and meanings it acquired and how (in)appropriate those functions and meanings were considered to be.

Through the controversies that arose around them, the two case studies poignantly illustrate the ethical tensions that may arise when images of a human corpse become highly shareable objects in a digital environment, and the risk of ethical detachment that such digital appropriation, as a result of its participation in a system of distributed responsibility, poses. I address these tensions through, among others, American media theorist Vivian Sobchack's notion of the "lived-body subject" as a visual reproduction of a single, human life (242); and South African art historian Griselda Pollock's critique of digital images and the ethical "severance" that digital environments, as a "mode of encounter," enable (225).

In Chapter 3, "Creating the Digital Corpse," I focus on the fictional digital corpses created by American author Shelley Jackson in her hypertext work *Patchwork Girl* (1995) and by the French artists Pierre Huyghe and Philippe Parreno in their video exhibition *No Ghost Just a Shell* (1999-2002). I examine these two digital art objects – which both revolve around

a fictional, dead or dying female protagonist in a digital environment – to address how the *creation* of digital corpses allows a further investigation of their appropriation and of the ethical issues that arise in its wake with regard to agency, responsibility, and ownership. Specifically, I examine how these two fictional corpses were constructed by their creators, and then read and appropriated by readers (in the case of *Patchwork Girl*) and viewers (in the case of *No Ghost Just a Shell*). I argue that these fictional corpses bring similar ethical questions to the fore as the non-fictional corpses discussed in Chapter 2, but do so in a less controversial and thus more freely experimental manner, since these corpse-images are not based on ‘real-life’ bodies. Unlike the photos of Catsouras and Āghā-Soltān, both of which depict what were once actual living bodies, the corpse-images created for *Patchwork Girl* and *No Ghost Just a Shell* never lived outside the digital realm. This, however, does not mean that these fictional digital corpses can be separated from the frameworks of oppression (sexism, racism) that have long dominated many everyday lives, non-digital and digital alike. The digital corpses created by Jackson and Huyghe and Parreno offer valuable insights into the questions of how people engage with dead body imagery and how social constructions of gender and race impact this engagement. I use American media scholar Heather Warren-Crow’s notion of malleability and the “girded image” (that is, the image as a “viewable, shareable, alterable” object) to explore how the gendering of the fictional digital corpse influences the way it is encountered and subsequently appropriated by readers and viewers (92). I also refer to American media scholar Dorothy Howard and New Zealand art historian Tim Gentles’s notion of the “cartoon body,” which allows me to further consider the extent to which image-based bodies (such as digital corpses) reproduce the political – and particularly the labor-oriented – narratives of the corporeal world and the extent to which they may be able to critique such narratives (n. pag.).

In Chapter 4, “Reappropriating the Digital Corpse,” I focus on the digitization of corpses-to-be – dying bodies, that is – through an analysis of two American terminal illness stories that were shared online. Tom Mandel (1994) and Katherine E. Brandt (2019) both produced extensive online writings about their terminal experience with cancer. In a comparative study of these writings, I explore how online illness narration can serve as a tool for reappropriating the image of the dying body, in order to reclaim control over the function and meaning assigned to one’s digital corpse(to-be). I illustrate how Mandel and Brandt mobilized their experiences of dying as a way to foster a support network online, and how their respective online illness narratives helped them to assert themselves in a more personal (Mandel) and a more political (Brandt) manner. I also show the flipside of this practice, by

highlighting how the online illness story's interactive features may be (ab)used by others to put pressure on or critique the author. This risk of exploitation, which constitutes the appropriation of a reappropriation, I contend, adds another twist to the ethical questions raised by the circulation of digital corpses by suggesting that even the presence of their owner cannot guarantee full agency or control over such corpses.

As a theoretical framework for my discussion in this chapter, I make use of American sociologist Arthur W. Frank's notion of the illness narrative, particularly the "quest narrative" as a form of storytelling that "affords the ill person a voice as teller of her own story" (115). I also refer to Carsten Stage's analysis of terminal illness blogs as "transmitters of affect" (2015: 174) and American medical scholars Jessica Keim-Malpass et al.'s discussion of online terminal illness writings as ways of "legacy making" (209). By relating these texts to Mandel's and Brandt's online illness writings, I unpack how the narrativization of a digital corpse-to-be contributes to its potential to serve as a tool for the dying to reclaim a sense of agency in digital space, allowing the digital corpse-to-be to become a political instrument wielded by the dying. However, my reading of the two case studies also challenges overly optimistic accounts of the degree of empowerment that online illness storytelling affords. Through the work of British sociologists Stephanie Alice Baker and Chris Rojek, I demonstrate how terminal illness blogs can function as "attention capital" – and how their status as such precludes certain users (with certain bodies) from benefiting from the social and economic empowerment that terminal illness blogs potentially offer.

Finally, in the afterword, titled "Recapitulating the Digital Corpse," I summarize my findings and offer a critical reflection on my account of digital corpses in light of two social crises that dominated the news at different stages of this study's writing. The first is the European refugee crisis, to the severity and human cost of which European audiences were alerted in 2015 by the corpse-image of Alan Kurdi, a three-year old Syrian boy who drowned while his family attempted to flee to Europe. The second concerns the transnational protests and riots following the murder by police officers of George Floyd in Minneapolis on May 25, 2020; just like Kurdi's viral photograph, photos and videos of Floyd's murder prompted a broad transnational protest against systemic racism. Both cases demonstrate the profound, global social and political impact that images of digital corpses can have.

The findings in this study, I conclude, offer tools to think through current events in which lives and bodies are at stake, and to reflect on the roles that digital corpses play – or can play – in these events: they can damage and hurt, they can reinstate *and* undermine existing

power relations, they can serve therapeutic purposes, and they can uncover local instances of social injustice on a global scale, and thereby serve as potential instigators for political change.

Samenvatting

Digitale dode lichamen: Creatie, appropriatie en re-appropriatie

Dit onderzoek neemt twee media-georiënteerde ontwikkelingen als uitgangspunt: de groeiende publieke zichtbaarheid van *dode digitale lichamen*, door mij gedefinieerd als digitale afbeeldingen van dode en stervende lichamen, en het groeiende gebrek aan controle over dergelijke afbeeldingen. Met deze twee ontwikkelingen in gedachten vraag ik: Met welke motivaties en effecten worden digitale dode lichamen gecreëerd, geappropriëerd en gereappropriëerd? Welke ethische vraagstukken spelen bij de (her)productie van het dode of stervende menselijk lichaam door mediagebruikers van digitale platformen? En welke rol spelen sociale constructies zoals gender en ras in de creatie, appropriatie en re-appropriatie van deze digitale dode en stervende lichamen? Om deze vragen te beantwoorden, analyseer ik een selectie van case studies die betrekking hebben op drie verschillende types digitale dode lichamen: (1) afbeeldingen van *offline dode lichamen* die online circuleren; (2) *fictieve dode en stervende lichamen* die ofwel *online* of in hedendaagse *digitale video's en foto's* werden gecreëerd; en (3) afbeeldingen van *offline stervende lichamen* die online circuleren.

Nu ons alledaagse leven, inclusief het sterfproces, steeds meer verweven raakt met digitale technologieën en online culturen, is het belangrijk om te begrijpen hoe deze verwevenheid bestaande sociale normen beïnvloedt. Dat geldt ook voor normen die met de dood te maken hebben. De ethische vragen die mijn case studies oproepen zijn allemaal gerelateerd aan de grootschalige deelbaarheid, maakbaarheid en kwetsbaarheid van dode of stervende lichamen als digitale afbeeldingen. Hoewel mijn onderzoek geen vergelijking is tussen de ethiek van onze omgang met digitale dode lichamen versus die met non-digitale dode lichamen, verken ik wel de gevolgen van de digitalisering van het dode menselijk lichaam in een mondiaal, sterk interactief milieu (het internet). Ik bevraag wat deze gevolgen onthullen over de machtsdynamiek tussen levende en dode lichamen. In het bijzonder onderzoek ik hoe deze machtsdynamiek wordt beïnvloed door de afstand tussen gebruikers (zij die kijken) en dode of stervende personen (zij die bekeken worden). Mij interesseert de vraag: hoe kleurt deze afstand de manier waarop het digitale dode lichaam in een digitaal milieu wordt gebruikt? Wat dat laatste betreft, maak ik onderscheid tussen de *creatie*, *appropriatie* en *re-appropriatie* van digitale dode lichamen.

De ethische vragen die ik zie ontstaan rondom de creatie, appropriatie en re-appropriatie van het digitale dode lichaam hebben te maken met macht, verantwoordelijkheid en eigenaarschap. De afstand die we ervaren tussen een digitaal dood lichaam en diens maker, kijker of verspreider – en het feit dat digitale dode lichamen als openbare, deelbare objecten circuleren – zorgt dat onduidelijk is wie de *macht* heeft (of zou moeten hebben) over een digitaal dood lichaam, wie er *verantwoordelijk* is (of zou moeten zijn) voor de betekenis en functie die het digitale dode lichaam krijgt als gevolg van diens circulatie, en wie *eigenaarschap* heeft (of zou moeten hebben) over een digitaal dood lichaam. Het lijkt zo te zijn dat, hoe meer afstand mediagebruikers ervaren tot het digitale dode lichaam, hoe extremer en minder aansprakelijk deze mediagebruikers worden in hun handelen. Bovendien maakt de groeiende schaal en intensiteit van de circulatie van digitale dode lichamen het steeds moeilijker om actoren die bij hun circulatie betrokken zijn te identificeren en vervolgens aansprakelijk te stellen voor de verschillende betekenissen en functies die de digitale dode lichamen in kwestie hebben verworven.

Om de ethische vragen die mij interesseren aan de kaak te stellen, analyseer en vergelijk ik zes case studies in drie hoofdstukken. In Hoofdstuk 1, “Het historiseren van het digitale dode lichaam,” presenteer ik een historisch overzicht van dode en stervende lichamen in Westerse visuele media, en in het bijzonder fotografie. Het doel hiervan is het in kaart brengen van de veranderende houdingen jegens afbeeldingen van dode en stervende lichamen, houdingen die op verschillende manieren relevant blijven in het digitale tijdperk. In dit hoofdstuk ben ik vooral geïnteresseerd in de verschillende traditionele toepassingen van visueel gemedieerde dode lichamen of dode lichamen-in-wording – als zogenaamde lijkenbeelden – variërend van persoonlijk aandenken tot politiek hulpstuk. Ik breng eveneens de ethische vragen die dergelijke afbeeldingen in de loop van de geschiedenis hebben opgeroepen in beeld, en ik belicht hoe deze vragen terugkeren in de digitale milieus waarop de rest van dit onderzoek zich concentreert. Mijn historische overzicht laat zien dat de circulatie van afbeeldingen van dode en stervende lichamen niet uniek is voor digitale media, maar dat digitale media deze bestaande praktijken radicaal hebben *uitgebreid* wat betreft toegankelijkheid en deelbaarheid.

Voor het theoretische kader van dit hoofdstuk maak ik voornamelijk gebruik van het spraakmakende werk van de Franse historicus Philippe Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death: The Classic History of Western Attitudes Towards Death Over the Last One Thousand Years* (1977), in het bijzonder zijn beschrijving van de geleidelijke twintigste-eeuwse verschuiving richting opvattingen en afbeeldingen van de dood als iets “lelijks en vies” (569). Als reactie op dit

nieuwe perspectief op de dood, dat de negentiende-eeuwse nadruk op diens schoonheid verving, kregen afbeeldingen van de dood een nieuw politiek potentieel. In de tweede helft van de twintigste eeuw gingen ze in toenemende mate dienen als schokkende stimulans om mensen tot actie te bewegen. Ik verken dit politieke potentieel via een discussie van Emmett Till – een veertienjarige Afro-Amerikaanse jongen wiens lynching in 1955 wereldwijde aandacht aantrok na zijn openbare begrafenis in een open kist – en van performances en happenings die het menselijke dode lichaam op een nadrukkelijk politiek wijze mobiliseerden. Voorbeelden van dergelijke performances zijn die van de “Ashes Action” beweging ten tijde van de AIDS-crisis van de jaren tachtig. Op deze analyse volgt een discussie van manieren waarop bepaalde menselijke dode lichamen (op basis van geslacht of ras) historisch zijn gefetisjeerd binnen de Westerse beeldcultuur, een discussie die ik benader via *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic* (1992) van Elisabeth Bronfen, en via werk van hedendaagse kunstenaars (in het bijzonder de Amerikaanse kunstenaar Hannah Wilke met haar *Intra-Venus* reeks) die deze fetisjerende traditie hebben doorbroken door afbeeldingen van dode lichamen als een vorm van socio-politieke kritiek in te zetten. Ik concludeer dit hoofdstuk met een analyse van de controverses rondom de foto's van de dood van Princess Diana Spencer (1995) en de 9/11 Falling Man (2001). Beide beelden, zo stel ik, zijn exemplarisch voor de manier waarop de twintigste-eeuwse status van de dood als visueel taboe werd vergezeld door haar blijvende esthetisering.

In Hoofdstuk 2 begin ik mijn empirische vraagstelling door me te concentreren op de *appropriatie* van digitale dode lichamen. In dit hoofdstuk, getiteld “De appropriatie van digitale dode lichamen,” analyseer ik twee afbeeldingen van dode lichamen die breed werden gedeeld op social media door verschillende actoren, en wiens publieke zichtbaarheid aanzienlijk werd beïnvloed door de globale toegankelijkheid, grootschalige deelbaarheid en *meme*-ificatie die social media platforms typeren. De eerste afbeelding die ik bespreek is die van Nikki Catsouras (2006), een Amerikaanse tiener die omkwam bij een dodelijk auto-ongeluk; het ongeluk werd gefotografeerd en de foto's werden vervolgens actief gedeeld op het internet. De tweede afbeelding is die van de Iraanse activist Nedā Āghā-Soltān (2009), wiens moord door een overheidssluipschutter werd gefilmd en ge-upload op YouTube (als eerste menselijke dood ooit). Aan de hand van deze cases reflecteer ik op de ethische gevolgen van het visueel beschikbaar stellen van een dode lichaam voor brede toe-eigening op social media. Ik stel dat beide case studies op verschillende manieren illustreren hoe, en met welk effect, de afbeelding van een digitaal dode lichaam ontkoppeld kan raken van diens oorspronkelijke socio-politieke

context. De case studies laten zien dat we onderscheid kunnen maken tussen twee specifieke motivaties voor het appropriëren van afbeeldingen van digitale doden: (sadistisch) plezier en politiek activisme. Ze laten ook zien hoe het gender van de dode persoon wiens afbeelding wordt toegeëigend, invloed kan uitoefenen op de publieke functies en betekenissen die het beeld verwerft, en op de mate waarin anderen die functies en betekenissen passend vinden.

De controverses die deze case studies opriepen, illustreren op aangrijpende wijze welke ethische spanningen kunnen ontstaan wanneer afbeeldingen van een dood lichaam deelbare objecten worden binnen een digitale omgeving. Ze tonen ook het risico van de ethische distantiering die dergelijke digitale appropriatie, als gevolg van deelname in een systeem van gedistribueerde verantwoordelijkheid, voortbrengt. Om deze spanningen te analyseren, baseer ik me onder andere op het werk van de Amerikaanse mediatheoreticus Vivian Sobchack en haar concept van de “*lived-body subject*” als een visuele reproductie van een enkel, menselijk leven (242); en op dat van de Zuid-Afrikaanse kunsthistoricus Griselda Pollock en haar kritiek van digitale afbeeldingen en de ethische separatie die digitale omgevingen, als een “*mode of encounter*,” mogelijk maken.

In Hoofdstuk 3, “De creatie van een digitaal dood lichaam,” richt ik mij op de fictieve digitale dode lichamen gecreëerd door de Amerikaanse auteur Shelley Jackson in haar hypertextuele werk *Patchwork Girl* (1995), en door de Franse kunstenaars Pierre Huyghe en Philippe Parreno in hun videotentoonstelling *No Ghost Just a Shell* (1999-2002). Ik ga in op deze twee digitale kunstobjecten – die beide draaien om een fictieve, dode of stervende vrouwelijke hoofdpersoon in een digitale omgeving – om duidelijk te maken hoe de *creatie* van digitale dode lichamen een verder onderzoek mogelijk maakt naar diens appropriatie en naar de ethische vraagstukken met betrekking tot macht, verantwoordelijkheid en eigenaarschap die uit deze appropriatie voortkomen. In het bijzonder onderzoek ik hoe deze twee fictieve dode lichamen werden geconstrueerd door hun makers, en vervolgens gelezen en geappropriëerd door lezers (in het geval van *Patchwork Girl*) en kijkers (in het geval van *No Ghost Just a Shell*). Ik stel dat deze fictieve dode lichamen soortgelijke ethische vragen naar voren brengen als de non-fictieve dode lichamen die ik in Hoofdstuk 2 bespreek. Omdat deze lijk-afbeeldingen niet op ‘werkelijke’ lichamen zijn gebaseerd, doen ze dit echter op een minder controversiële en daardoor meer vrijelijk experimentele manier. Anders dan de foto’s van Catsouras en Agha-Soltan, welke beide een lichaam weergeven dat ooit werkelijk leefde, hebben de lijk-afbeeldingen gecreëerd voor *Patchwork Girl* en *No Ghost Just a Shell* nooit buiten het digitale rijk geleefd. Dit wil echter niet zeggen dat deze fictieve digitale dode lichamen kunnen worden

gescheiden van de onderdrukkende systemen (seksisme, racisme) die al lange tijd veel alledaagse levens domineren, zowel in non-digitale als digitale omgevingen. De digitale dode lichamen gemaakt door Jackson en door Huyghe en Parreno bieden waardevolle inzichten in hoe mensen omgaan met afbeeldingen van dode lichamen en hoe sociale constructies van gender en ras deze vormen van omgang beïnvloeden. Ik maak gebruik van het werk van de Amerikaanse mediawetenschapper Heather Warren-Crow en haar concept van kneedbaarheid en de “*girled image*” (dat wil zeggen, een afbeelding die tot “bekijkbaar, deelbaar, veranderbaar” object is gemaakt) om te verkennen hoe de gendering van fictieve digitale dode lichamen de manier beïnvloedt waarop zij worden benaderd en vervolgens geappropriëerd door lezers en kijkers (92). Ik verwijs eveneens naar het werk van de Amerikaanse mediawetenschapper Dorothy Howard en de Nieuw-Zeelandse kunsthistoricus Tim Gentles, met name hun concept van het tekenfilmlichaam, om de mate waarin afgebeelde lichamen (zoals digitale dode lichamen) de politieke – en meer specifiek de arbeidsgerichte – narratieven van de fysieke wereld reproduceren en kunnen bekritisieren, verder te onderzoeken (n. pag.).

In Hoofdstuk 4, “De re-appropriatie van het digitale dode lichaam,” richt ik mij op de digitalisering van toekomstige dode lichamen – dat wil zeggen, stervende lichamen – door middel van een analyse van twee Amerikaanse ervaringen met terminale ziekte die online werden gedeeld. Tom Mandel (1994) en Katherine E. Brandt (2019) produceerden beiden uitvoerige online teksten over hun terminale ervaringen met kanker. In een vergelijkend onderzoek naar deze teksten verken ik hoe online verhalen over ziekte kunnen dienen om de afbeelding van het stervende lichaam te re-appropriëren, om op deze manier de controle terug te krijgen over de functie en betekenis die aan een (toekomstig) digitaal dood lichaam wordt toegekend. Ik illustreer hoe Mandel en Brandt hun ervaringen met sterfte mobiliseerden om een online steunnetwerk te creëren, en hoe hun respectievelijke online ziekteverhalen hun hielpen zichzelf op een persoonlijke (Mandel) of meer politieke (Brandt) manier te doen gelden. Ik laat ook de keerzijde van deze praktijk zien, door te benadrukken hoe de interactieve kwaliteiten van online ziekteverhalen kunnen worden gebruikt of misbruikt door anderen om hun auteur onder druk te zetten of te bekritisieren. Dit risico van uitbuiting – in feite een appropriatie van een re-appropriatie – geeft een verdere draai aan de ethische vragen die de circulatie van digitale dode lichamen voortbrengt, door te suggereren dat zelfs de aanwezigheid van de eigenaar geen volledige macht of controle over dergelijke dode lichamen kan garanderen.

Het theoretisch kader voor mijn discussie in dit hoofdstuk grijpt terug op het werk van de Amerikaanse socioloog Arthur W. Frank en zijn concept van het ziekteverhaal. Specifiek

verwijs ik naar het zoektochtverhaal als een narratieve vorm die “de zieke persoon een stem verleent als de verteller van diens eigen verhaal” (115). Ik verwijs daarnaast naar Carsten Stage en zijn analyse van terminale-ziekte blogs als “overbrengers van affect” (2015: 174) en naar de Amerikaanse medische wetenschappers Jessica Keim-Malpass et al., die online teksten over terminale ziekte beschouwen als een vorm van “*legacy making*” (209). Door deze teksten te relateren aan het online schrijven van Mandel en Brandt, doorgrond ik de wijze waarop het tot een verhaal maken van een digitaal bijna-dood lichaam bijdraagt aan diens potentieel om stervenden een manier te bieden om hun gevoel van macht in een digitale ruimte te herwinnen. Hiermee wordt het digitale bijna-dode lichaam neergezet als een politiek instrument voor de stervenden. Echter, mijn lezing van de twee case studies bevraagt ook overmatig optimistische visies op de mate van *empowerment* die online ziekteverhalen verschaffen. Via het werk van de Britse sociologen Stephanie Alice Baker en Chris Rojek, demonstreer ik hoe terminale-ziekte blogs kunnen dienen als een vorm van aandachtskapitaal – en hoe dit bepaalde gebruikers (met bepaalde lichamen) kan uitsluiten van de mogelijke voordelen en vormen van socio-economische *empowerment* die terminale-ziekte blogs kunnen verschaffen.

In het nawoord, getiteld “Het recapituleren van een digitaal dood lichaam,” vat ik tenslotte mijn bevindingen samen en bied ik een kritische reflectie op mijn beschouwing van digitale dode lichamen in het kader van twee sociale crises die het nieuws domineerden gedurende het schrijven van deze studie. Ten eerste: de Europese vluchtelingencrisis, waarvan de ernst en menselijke tol kenbaar werd gemaakt aan het Europese publiek via het lijkbeeld van Alan Kurdi, een driejarige Syrische jongen die verdrong terwijl zijn gezin naar Europa probeerde te vluchten. Ten tweede: de transnationale protesten en rellen na de moord op George Floyd door politieagenten in Minneapolis op 25 mei 2020. Net als de virale afbeelding van Kurdi, brachten foto’s en video’s van de moord op Floyd een breed transnationaal protest op gang tegen systemisch racisme. Beide cases benadrukken de diepgaande, mondiale sociale en politieke impact die afbeeldingen van digitale dode lichamen kunnen hebben.

De bevindingen van dit onderzoek, zo concludeer ik, bieden gereedschappen om actuele gebeurtenissen waarin levens en lichamen op het spel staan te doordenken, en om te reflecteren op de rollen die digitale dode lichamen spelen – of zouden kunnen spelen – in deze gebeurtenissen: ze kunnen schade toebrengen, ze kunnen bestaande machtsrelaties bevestigen en ondermijnen, ze kunnen een therapeutisch doeleinde hebben, en ze kunnen lokale gevallen van onrecht op een mondiale schaal zichtbaar maken, en daarmee dienen als mogelijke aanstichters van politieke verandering.

DIGITAL

This study takes as its departure point a twofold media-related shift: the increasing ubiquity of what I call digital corpses, defined as digital images of dead and dying bodies, and the increasing lack of control over such images. With this twofold shift in mind, I ask: With what motivations and effects are digital corpses created, appropriated, and reappropriated online? What are the ethical stakes involved when media users (re)produce a human corpse or dying body on a digital platform? And what role do social constructions of gender and race play in the creation, appropriation, and reappropriation of such digital dead and dying bodies?

CORPSES

Though my study is not a comparison between the ethics of engaging with digital corpses and those ethics of engaging with non-digital corpses, I do explore the consequences of digitizing the human corpse in a global, highly interactive environment (the Internet), and ask what these consequences reveal about the power dynamics between living and dead bodies. More specifically, I look at how these power dynamics are influenced by the perceived distance between the viewer (the user) and the viewed (the dying person or corpse), and I ask how this perceived distance informs the mobilizations that the digital corpse is subjected to in a digital environment.