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[http://thanatosjournal.files.wordpress.com/2012/12/weber\\_oldfolks\\_than222013.pdf](http://thanatosjournal.files.wordpress.com/2012/12/weber_oldfolks_than222013.pdf)**Old Folks Never Die on TV: Representations of Corpses on American TV shows in the 21st Century****Tina Weber**

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**Abstract**

Every day during prime time, millions of viewers can view corpses and experience visually various body parts. This article examines different aesthetic techniques used to represent corpses on television in fictional American programmes in the twenty-first century. The empirical data consist of fifteen different television shows. In this paper two of the shows, a relatively little-known documentary, *Family Plots*, and a popular fictional series, *Six Feet Under*, are compared in order to demonstrate contrasting aesthetic styles of representing the deceased. The analytical method consists of a pictorial analysis arising from a structural-hermeneutic approach and based on three classic methods of image interpretation. The theoretical framework is primarily concerned with the discourse on corpse representations on television, in sociology, and in cultural science. The findings will show specific constraints on the presentation of dead bodies, including condition and position, which can be identified as manifestations of a new taboo. Despite these new representations, dead bodies connected with disorder, movement, or illness are largely absent. This paper argues that these constraints serve to protect from any harm the classical Western image of the dead as a silent sleeping beauty.

Only recently have cultural scientists described the dead body as invisible or as a subject that is taboo. (Bradbury 1999; Hallam, Hockey & Howarth 1999; Macho & Belting 2007) The purpose of this article is to examine the images of dead bodies on television and determine whether representational taboos exist and, if so, whether they can specifically be connected with death. At the dawn of the twenty-first century dead bodies proliferated in the context of a new series of American television shows. In these shows the deceased remained central to the plot and was shown at the crime scene and in a pathology lab or embalming area. Unlike action and horror movies, these prime-time television shows have no age restriction, and they attract audiences across the social spectrum worldwide.

This article will highlight the unique representation of corpses on contemporary American television by contrasting two programmes from different genres, each programme revolving around a family funeral business. The first and most popular, *Six Feet Under*, portrays a family and their work in the funeral business. In every episode someone dies at the beginning; the pilot episode begins with the death of the funeral director himself, Nathaniel Fisher, on Christmas Eve. From then on, Fisher's sons battle corporations that are competing for the family business. Fisher's widow and daughter have a different attitude to the presence of death and the daily problems. *Six Feet Under* was commissioned by HBO and produced from 2000 to 2005 by Alan Ball. In the five seasons there was a total of 63 episodes, each with a play length of approximately 60 minutes. The series contains elements of drama and black comedy. Numerous awards testify to its extremely high quality.

The second show, far less well known, is entitled *Family Plots*, available in two complete seasons on DVD. The series was created by A&E in 2005. Sixteen episodes with a play length of 30 minutes were produced. *Family Plots* is a little-known, but important documentary, because its subject matter serves as an analogy in documentary format to the highly dramatised *Six Feet Under*. *Family Plots* is about a family-run mortuary in San Diego, California, and the show concentrates on the employees' work and private lives. Occasionally, embalming, cosmetic preparation, or the dressing of the corpse may be shown. *Family Plots* is the first and so far, the only, TV programme about a funeral business to show real bodies of decedents. The corpses belong to elderly people.

Both programmes belong to a larger data set that consists of an additional thirteen American television shows, including *CSI Las Vegas*, *Crossing Jordan*, *Bones*, *Castle*, *NCIS*, *Dead Like Me*, *Pushing Daisies*, *Heroes*, *Dexter*, *Tru Calling*, *Dr. G*, *Autopsy*, *North Mission Road*, and *Quincy, M.E.* (a prototypical model), all of which were analysed for the research project 'Death and Dead Bodies: On the Change in Exposure to Death in Contemporary Society'. The material is comprised of approximately 5,000 screenshots representing death. The project was concerned with the tension between the displacement of death as a constitutive element of the modern age, on the one hand, and the increasing popularisation of the death in the recent decades, on the other. It focussed on the (clinical) autopsy and the dead body, which was treated as an object that generates tension between the removal of a taboo and the taboo of death. In most Western societies fewer and fewer people are prepared to assign their own or their relative's body to a clinical autopsy. The decrease in the clinical autopsy rate and its presumed acceptance stands in stark contrast to the publicity about dead bodies and their autopsies, as can be seen in the popularity of forensic autopsies on twenty-first century television shows. (Knoblauch 2009)

These fifteen programmes were selected because a corpse is a constant in every episode. *Six Feet Under* was chosen as the main example because it is representative of the entire data set in so far as this is possible. The documentary *Family Plots* was selected for its contrast to the fictional drama. The two programmes illustrate the specific constraints on the representation of dead bodies on fictional American TV shows in the twenty-first century, including the depiction of decline, dirt, and disorder. The television representations transform the image of a corpse from that of a peaceful sleeping body into that of a polluting and repulsive object. The profusion of corpses without these features shown on contemporary American television hardly conforms to the classical Western image of the silent sleeping beauty. What then do contemporary representations tell us about our collectively-held image of a socially acceptable portrayal of death?

### **Representation of Death on Television**

The examination of representations of death in the media began in 1955 when Geoffrey Gorer argued in his article, 'Pornography of Death', that contemporary society was suppressing death as a taboo just as the Victorians had suppressed sexuality. According to Gorer, the subject of death has been a taboo and 'charged with pleasurable guilt or guilty pleasure' (Gorer 1965, 175). Among other sources Gorer referred to horror comics to demonstrate that a taboo topic does not simply disappear; instead, it is expressed in another form. In his view the taboo subject re-appears like pornography and charged with pleasurable guilt. Similarly, when death is a taboo subject in conversation, it shows up instead as a visual element in television culture. Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, images of dead bodies in pathology departments have found their way into television screens and thereby into public discourse. In prime time television, these images became ordinary experiential elements of television interaction. Does death then remain taboo?

Tony Walter (1991) thoroughly challenged Gorer's prominent thesis by analysing the ongoing debates as to whether or not a taboo really exists. Walter reviewed the strengths and weaknesses of the taboo thesis and presented six modifications. According to Walter, two highly influential institutions today – medicine and the media – have unusually strong anxieties

about death. These two institutions also have a great influence on society, providing us with schema on how to interpret death properly. Walter avers that media (and medicine):

... to which our society has entrusted the interpretations and ritualisation of death ... are, or have been, almost uniquely embarrassed by the subject. It is not, therefore, so much society as a whole, but these two key institutions, for whom death is, or was, a taboo. (Walter 1991, 303)

In 1999 Elizabeth Hallam et al. focused more precisely on the representation of dead bodies and their visibility, stating that the representation of the dead body 'functions to mask the material reality of embodied death and its destabilising effects' (Hallam, Hockey & Howarth 1999, 24). The portrayal covers up the disorder of the decaying body. The authors continued by asserting that historical studies on the diverse proliferation of death imagery prove that the dead body has been replaced by sophisticated systems of representation in order to maintain its social presence. (Hallam, Hockey & Howarth 1999, 22f)

In 2006 Hans Belting and Thomas Macho were arguing in *The New Visibility of Death* (Die Neue Sichtbarkeit des Todes) that death is now manifestly visible on television and that television images do not represent the dead, but instead, hide the dead behind substitutes and claims that humans have always masked those things they refuse to see. In 2008, Jacquelyn Lynn Foltyn, in her article 'Dead famous and dead sexy: Popular culture, forensics, and the rise of the corpse', even branded the dead body on television as the new porn star, arguing in a manner recalling Gorer, that death is the new sex and the corpse is the new body, to be explored voyeuristically (Foltyn 2008).

On the other hand, Dolf Zillmann (2004) defines pornography as a pictorial representation of human sexual behaviour of every kind and in every connection. These definitions, of course, are based on the assumption that pornography is always what a society considers to be pornography at a certain time. This means that pornography is subject to temporal transformations of cultural norms. According to Herbert Selg, textual or graphic documents, which are classified as pornographic, illustrate the shift to a negative connotation because 'good pornography' is a contradiction in itself. (Selg 1997, 48) The categorisation 'pornography' contains the degradation primarily of female characters, thus defining what a specific society understands at a certain time as 'obscene'. The categorisation of the new media representation of corpses as pornography, even if portrayed as 'aesthetic pornography', describes the depreciation of these representations through the authors rather than the representation itself.

Here the circle closes. With the exception of Zillmann all of the aforementioned authors acknowledge the numerous examples of media representations of the dead, but still associate these representations with avoidance, denial, or negative connotations (i.e. pornography) ascribed to the phenomenon. This article will not follow this path, but instead will explore exactly what is taboo about representations of a dead body.

### **Features of Real Dead Bodies**

The physical appearance of a body usually signifies the social appearance of a body. What does a dead body represent? Hallam et al. (1999) describe the specific characteristics and the potential threat of a real dead body, stressing the lack of control of bodily boundaries. The loss of control and the lack of boundaries between bodily interiority and exteriority are attached to shame and humiliation. The passage of organic matter out of the body or the failure to manage the movement of the limbs and facial muscles can create disturbing impressions.

... the body in decline through death or decay forms a potent reminder of frailty, vulnerability and mortality. The passage of time and the inevitability of physical transformation become powerfully evident. They provoke anxieties about the integrity of the body as it faces destruction. When emphasis is placed upon control and the regulation of the body as a prerequisite for the maintenance of self-identity, the dying body and the dead body acquire terrifying qualities. (Hallam, Hockey & Howarth 1999, 21)

This image can be associated with Mary Bradbury's (1999) elaboration on order, disorder, and dirt. Bradbury refers to Mary Douglas's ideas of pollution and taboo in 'Purity and Danger' (1966), and identifies the real dead body as 'matter out of place' (ibid. 1999, 119). The dead body is human in appearance, yet clearly not human. A dead body – grey, cold and unresponsive – challenges the survivor's senses. Bradbury states that decomposition might bewilder the observer because of the ambiguity of the presence of the corpse and its symbolic threat as a source of pollution.

Thus, many of the rituals of death and much of the symbolism about the dead are concerned with the corpse's transformation from the 'danger within' into an 'outside' object. (Bradbury 1999, 120)

Ideas about pollution are not only psychological fears, but also social expressions. Referring to nurses and doctors, Bradbury acknowledges that pollution is not so much caused by the physical contact with the dead body as a polluting object, but rather through the attribution of social roles. (Bradbury 1999, 120) While doctors and nurses engage in preserving life, the undertaker deals with their failure, the dead body. The undertaker endeavours to embalm the deceased in order to control the orifices of the dead body and thereby reduce not only the risk of infection, but also all other unpleasant side effects of the polluting decomposition process. (Bradbury 1999)

The act of embalming is not dissimilar to surgery or to a post-mortem. The embalmer works in a room that apes the appearance of a hospital theatre, and they make use of 'medical' tools and substances. Thus, in keeping with the dominant ideologies and beliefs of our time, embalming fits nicely into the domain of medical-type interventions. ... Embalming can be viewed as a strategy whereby we attempt to attain some kind of mastery over death (Bradbury 1999, 128f).

Furthermore, Hallam Hockey & Howarth (1999) argue that Western societies are occupied with the body in life – its vital, beautiful, and healthy presence – and these social standards are transferred to the dead body. Christie Davies (1996) goes even further by claiming that foreign observers often see Americans as being obsessed with personal hygiene. The American predilection for embalming reveals a general pattern of cultural values and preferences. Just as Americans have spent their lives cultivating the body's appearance, the embalming of the body continues these efforts and ensures their perpetual preservation.

For Americans it is as important in life, as in embalmed death, to suppress all body smells and to achieve a sanitized odourlessness. The greater use of deodorants in America is an expression of the need to be clean, and is not in any sense a means for ensuring good health. ... Health is important to Americans but the appearance of health and youth is just as important in its own right. (Davies 1996, 64f).

For all of these authors, the difference between a dead body and a sleeping body is the unmistakable appearance of decline, dirt, and disorder. Yet do contemporary television programmes present corpses onscreen in states of decay?

### **Analysis of the Representation of Dead Bodies on Television**

*Empirical Data*

For an accurate analysis of audio-visual documents it is necessary to break them into single elements. These single elements are then analysed in order to capture important details about specific stylistic devices. The description and subsequent reconstruction of the meaning of these elements are essential before the elements are re-assembled as a whole and the audio-visual document interpreted. Yet one might object here, arguing that it is implausible to engage in such painstaking analysis, given that every film analysis requires countless film sequence protocols with descriptions, not to mention the respective subsequent protocols with reconstructions. This research, however, is concerned with dead bodies.

Representations of the dead, whether in a picture or on film, share certain characteristics. Compared to representations of the living, the sleeping, or even the comatose body, dead bodies do not move, respond, or interact. Passivity is this a stereotypical pattern that makes it possible to analyse the dead not as a person, but as an object. This is why screenshots were taken and analysed as stills: by looking carefully at a single picture, one can capture more detail than by looking at a sequence. At the same time, instead of only one television show, fifteen shows can be analysed, thus extending the depth and the scope of the study.

The selections of screenshots of dead bodies were limited to those showing the dead when they are most visible and in context-rich environments, i.e. those scenes that take place in a specific environment, such as the pathology room, the embalming room, the morgue, or the room in which the murder was carried out. *Six Feet Under* and *Family Plots* both focus on the life going on around the deceased. Every episode in *Six Feet Under* starts with someone's death. Most of the time, the bodies are seen in the embalming room. *Family Plots* depicts the daily routine of Poway Bernardo Mortuary in San Diego, while *Six Feet Under* presents a fictional funeral parlour in Los Angeles. The selected footage is representative of the study as a whole, as well as of each show.

*Methodology: Pictorial Analysis*

In addition to the statistical analysis of socio-structural aspects (e.g. age and gender) a novel social science method in the analysis of audio-visual representations is used, namely structural hermeneutic pictorial analysis. The method is unique in so far as the unusual object of the research is the representation of dead bodies on twenty-first century television programmes; the method itself is constructed to address this topic. Why is this method used and not another?

Stefan Mueller-Doohm (1993, 1997) connected hermeneutic and structural interpretation in order to combine an analysis of sense and meaning. He tested his analysis on text and pictorial messages, whereas this paper will introduce a pragmatic shortened pictorial analysis. Mueller-Doohm attempted to generate a cultural-image analysis and overcome the difference between the classical-hermeneutic and the structural-orientated interpretations. The result gave rise to three phases: a description of the analysis, a reconstruction of the analysis, and an interpretation of the analysis (see table 1.)

1. Description	2. Reconstruction	3. Interpretation
<p>A. Analysis of pictorial elements:            - Description of objects and people            - Configuration of objects and people            - Scenic relations and situations            - Relations of action            - Additional pictorial elements (logos or detail shots)</p> <p>B. Room/Space:            - Pictorial format (also pictures within the picture)            - General perspectives            - Foreground / background, lines of flight, partial spatial perspectives, etc., planimetric conditions (lines, centrality, geometrical figures, faces, etc.)            - Separate perspectives on arrangements</p> <p>C. Aesthetic elements:            - Light and shade conditions            - Styles: (e.g. natural, artificial, harmonious, disharmonious, static, moving, etc.)            - Style contrasts/ breaks            - Graphic / photographic practices (e.g. filtering, perspective, motion...)            - Colours, contrasts, nuances</p> <p>D. Impression overall:            - Overall impression in terms of 'mood impression'</p>	<p>A. Analysis of pictorial elements and connotation:            - of described objects and people            - Configuration of objects and people            - Scenic relations and situations            - Relations of action            - Additional pictorial elements (logos or detail shots)</p> <p>B. Room/Space:            - Pictorial format (also pictures within the picture)            - General perspectives:            - Foreground / background, lines of flight, partial spatial perspectives, etc., planimetric conditions (lines, centrality, geometrical figures, faces, etc.)            - Separate perspectives on arrangements</p> <p>C. Aesthetic elements            - Light and shade conditions            - Styles: (e.g. natural, artificial, harmonious, disharmonious, static, moving, etc.)            - Style contrasts/ breaks            - Graphic / photographic practices (e.g. filtering, perspective, motion ...)            - Colours, contrasts, nuances</p>	<p>The interpretation starts with the synthesis of reconstructed meanings as cultural expressions of meanings.</p> <p>In this work I also want to compare the contemporary cultural expression of meanings to previous media representations in order to demonstrate how certain ideas of the dead can change in certain historical conditions.</p>

Table 1. Description of analysis.

The first level, description, puts visual elements into words in a methodically controlled manner, which allows for an accurate and complete record of all pictorial elements and might stand as the constitutive elements of the symbolic pictorial message. With this method, a holistic data structure can be reconstructed and interpreted. The second level is reconstruction, an analysis of the elements already described for their symbolic meanings. Reconstruction is a tool for the development of these individual elements and their structures of meaning. The third level of analysis is socio-cultural interpretation. Here, the reconstructed symbolic meanings are attached to expressions of cultural patterns of meanings. According to Mueller-Doohm, this structure will generate a solid foundation for cultural interpretation, which is based on dense description and systematic reconstruction.

The analysis first aims to describe and then reconstruct the relations in which social phenomena are expressed. The hermeneutic-orientated approach includes inaccuracies in that one attributes isolated meanings to elements that are detached from their context. This failure can, however, be overcome in the structural-hermeneutic method by re-assembling the isolated elements into their former relations. Hence, a systematic hermeneutic-symbolic interpretation is based on a prior structural analysis of meaning. I have used the above methods in the analysis of the material, and below I will present the findings of this analysis.

## Results

### *Death and Age*

Not only are living characters unevenly distributed, but also the dead are unevenly shown. However, when it comes to the allocation of the age groups of the corpses, one feature stands out: the actors used to portray the stories in *Six Feet Under* are uniformly young. It is uncertain whether this is a general-level phenomenon (i.e. all television shows do not present equal proportions of the elderly and children) or whether the absence of the elderly in most episodes is better explained by the unease they might provoke in viewers about death.

### *The Elderly*

Of the age groups depicted in *Six Feet Under*, those of mature and advanced ages are rarely seen, a circumstance made more unusual by the funeral parlour-context of the show. The series was produced in Los Angeles and was supposed to play there (the original run: 2001–2005). The death rates in Los Angeles, however, differ from the statistics suggested by the television series. According to the LA County Mortality Report from 2003, the highest death rates in Los Angeles are among the 75+ age group. Yet of 120 corpses shown either directly or covered on *Six Feet Under*, there was one infant, four children, one teenager, thirteen persons in their twenties, thirty-seven adults (30–50), thirty-five mature adults (50–70), and eighteen elderly adults (70+) died or were dead, and were covered or directly shown; eleven could not be identified. The elderly dead are not only underrepresented on the series, but are almost always completely covered with sheets or already dressed for burial. Although the elderly are underrepresented in *Family Plots*, their representation remains relatively constant: their bodies are consistently shown in the embalming room, either lying on a table, being treated, or ready for viewing.

There are occasional exceptions in *Six Feet Under*. In one episode an elderly woman was suffocated by her roommate with a sausage; in another an elderly man died with priapism in a nursing home. While the decedent with the priapism never appeared in the embalming room, the discovery and removal of the sausage from the throat of the elderly woman was by violent force to the head – a challenge to the peaceful depictions of elderly deaths.

Approximately thirty corpses are shown on *Family Plots*, and only twenty are not completely covered. By comparison with *Six Feet Under*, all twenty visible and recognisable decedents are elderly. The decedents are mainly white, with an equal balance between men and women. Most of the corpses were shown in Season 1 in the initial phase of the series. Another significant difference from *Six Feet Under* is that the documentary showed at least three elderly corpses with clear signs of old-age deterioration. Medium-range shots and close-up to medium-range shots of the hands of a decedent, for instance, showed age spots and decay, wrinkles and grey hair. Physical details such as these never appear in *Six Feet Under*, even if great importance is attached to certain treatments, such as sewing autopsy incisions. *Family Plots* differs from *Six Feet Under* in that it clearly represents decedents in older age groups. Because the family depicted in the documentary run a real funeral business, they cannot 'provide' younger decedents.

Representational restrictions in *Six Feet Under* apply not only to the depiction of the elderly, but also to their visual staging. In *Six Feet Under* Corpses of people who have reached old age are rarely seen, but if shown, they are modestly dressed or covered. Relative nudity is reserved for the young and beautiful. No signs of decay, old age, or other undesirable features such as loose skin are allowed. Furthermore, although people are living longer (Healey & Ross 2002), *Six Feet Under* does not reflect a realistic proportion of the population. Tim Healey and Karen Ross, referring to research conducted in the United States since the 1950s, focus on the discrepancy between the proportion of the population and their visibility across the television landscape. (Healey & Ross 2002) Similar to the conclusions of Hanley and Webster (2000), Healey and Ross conclude that elderly people are still less likely to be seen on television than in real life. Considering that *Six Feet Under*

portrays a funeral parlour, which, as the documentary showed, is in reality usually concerned with the elderly, a strong avoidance of the connection of 'death and old age', including typical signs of decay, is noticeable.

#### *Children and Teenagers*

As the child mortality rate declined sharply at the end of the nineteenth century, another concern related to the death of children permeated the social landscape, namely the emotional impact such deaths have on those who loved the child. (Bideau, Desjardins, Brignoli, & Hector 1997) Intensive and distinctive mourning for children became widespread and has been investigated in previous studies of parents (Avery & Reynolds 2000, Videka-Sherman 1987) and professionals (Timmermans 2006). *Six Feet Under* reflects the great emotional effect of a child's death. Of 120 corpses, only five under the age of sixteen are mentioned by the protagonists. Of these five, only an SIDS infant, a child, and a teenager are actually shown. The usual medium-close shot (of the head, neck, and chest) is not used to show the corpse of an infant or a child; only the extremities are shown, while the face stays covered. The explicit avoidance of the usual image when faced with a deceased infant conveys the powerful emotional effect of a child's death. Moreover, grief at the death of a child or infant is shared by relatives and professionals alike in the programmes, and even affects the professional embalmer, Rico, who usually handles decedents as if they were artworks. The intensity of Rico's emotional outburst is exceptional, revealing how emotionally affected is this otherwise case-hardened professional.

*Six Feet Under* also contradicts its standard practice by showing a teenager whose face is paralysed with laughter. This exceptional image signals an extraordinarily unusual position for the show by comparison with contemporary programmes. In the storyline a young teen, laughing about prank calls, fell off her bed while and broke her neck. In the funeral parlour the employees struggle to turn the stiff, bright, laughing mouth resembling a rictus into a closed smile by sewing the upper and lower jaws together. The staging is unique in that the teenage corpse depicts a head, but a head stiffened in gleeful laughter, subverting the ordinary picture that with death comes serenity.

In sum, two corpses of very young children are shown in *Six Feet Under* and an unusual teenage corpse. Young corpses are still underrepresented. In *Family Plots* only one infant death is mentioned, but is not shown. Nevertheless, the background to the infant death is portrayed with immense emotional sympathy through the actions of one of its characters.

#### *Death and Disorder*

During her field observation in a funeral parlour, Bradbury (1999) noted that the embalming room, tools, and substances found there resembled a hospital. She defined embalming as an attempt to control death, and she described the corpse as a potential source of pollution. This view is conveyed in the protective measures taken in dealing with the dead, such as the use of medical gloves in funeral parlours, and the same attitude is reflected in the characters in the television programmes under scrutiny. Medical gloves are used in both *Six Feet Under* and *Family Plots*, allegedly to prevent exposure to infectious matter. By contrast with the medical context, in the embalming environment the gloves only serve to protect the undertaker from disease by having contact with the dead body or body fluids. The use of medical gloves clearly indicates that the dead body is a polluting object, exposing the undertaker to risk of pollution. In order to confine the pollution, the dead body is treated with embalming chemicals, which keep the corpse in a sanitised condition and a controlled environment.

In *Six Feet Under*, all corpses in the embalming room are placed in a supine position on the embalming table. The only corpse showing any sign of disability is an ex-soldier; presumably, his disability could be shown because it was the result of an injury received in combat. Other excluded categories of matter include the discharge of excretions, mucosal secretions, or bodily fluids. Signs of age and decay are almost entirely absent. Blood is shown only occasionally, and usually appears detached



from the body from which it presumably originated. Most bodies are neatly covered and only touched appropriately with gloves. Thus, the classical image of the dead as bodies that are asleep is not challenged by any disturbance; the undertaker keeps the polluting object and its environment clean.

By contrast, in *Family Plots* the dead are shown throughout all stages of preparation for burial. However, no long shots of embalming procedures are taken. Sometimes faces of the decedents or certain body parts are covered by means of visual effects. No advanced, aesthetic media techniques such as those in *Six Feet Under* are used, which is why all the elderly decedents are seen with clear signs of age and decay. By contrast to *Six Feet Under*, a corpse is never shown without a cloth drape. The few deceased bodies that are exposed are shown without any body fluids. Still, two adult decedents are seen in diapers. The screenshot of one showed a dead person with his suit cut open to reveal a diaper, worn to prevent faecal pollution. The diaper was covered by using visual effects until just before the corpse was lifted. A 'glimpse of the polluting threat' is visible right at the end. The same efforts to impose order on the environment are noticeable on the corpse's table as well. The tables in *Six Feet Under* are always neat and clean. The camera almost never shows the embalming table covered with a mess like those seen at least four times in *Family Plots*. By contrast to *Six Feet Under* where blood or tools are rarely seen, in *Family Plots* the embalming table is sometimes covered with tools, paper, and bodily fluids. The table serves as a clean frame encapsulating the object of pollution. The body is often old and shows age spots, the corpse is not always clean, and sometimes the tables are messy. Yet even here, efforts to restore order and cleanliness are clearly manifest.

#### *Death and Movement*

Standing still and straight is only one of many complex bodily skills a person has to learn. The complexity of the necessary reflexes can be compared to a railway control system operating with 50 railways at the same time. (Todd 2003, 43) However, natural movement does not usually attract attention unless the movement appears clumsy, out of control, or is noticeably absent. Moving a dead body and revealing the full absence of will and body tension attracts attention because the movement of a lifeless body is seldom seen.

In *Six Feet Under* the undertaker transports the corpses either in body bags or coffins. Heads, arms, and hands are rarely moved during the cleaning and embalming. Only once was the leg of a male body lifted. The dressing or closing of the eyes or mouth is likewise never shown. The undertaker is never shown lifting corpses into the coffins, and once in the coffin, the dead person largely appears untouched. Here too, however, there is a notable exception, namely when the undertaker pulls a sausage out of the throat of a decedent, and the head of the corpse is tilted backwards at a bizarre angle. The most usual movement occurs when the undertakers sew up the autopsy incision. In almost every episode of *Six Feet Under* there are examples of how dead bodies are moved before arriving in the embalming rooms. Once in the embalming room, however, there will be no corpse motion: no uncovered corpse is lifted, turned, or made to sit with one exception. In Season 3, episode 6, a decidedly comic slant is added to the dramatic tension and played out in slapstick. The comedy develops when a funeral home employee discovers that, because a coffin has slipped, an overweight decedent has apparently fallen out of it. After the employee fails the attempts to return the body to the coffin, family members and a friend, on hand for the viewing of the body, are recruited to help. With the combined efforts of family and employees, whose faces are distorted by disgust and strain, the deceased is finally turned around on a gurney. Moving the body by the family members seems to be the punch line, as the efforts result in an incongruous situation that completely contradicts the natural repose and quiet of a normal viewing. Not least, in all the efforts to return the corpse to his coffin, the decedent's nose has ended up crooked.

Numerous theories about humour are found in many academic disciplines. Representations of the dead normally considered taboo can be avoided or weakened by means of humour. Martin A. Rod (2007) claims that the perception of incongruity plays a central role in humour and shows that taboos can be broken and represented humorously without being offensive. To

support the comedy of the scene in *Six Feet Under*, the rearrangement of the body on the gurney reveals the decedent's now-damaged and skewed nose, which had just been moulded by an embalmer. The entire sequence is absurd. What heightens the incongruity is the implicit reference to the usual conception of a decedent as a body-at-rest. Throughout all of the episodes in the series the deceased remain uniformly, static while the survivors act. In this scene, however, the survivors manoeuvre the deceased, which provides him once more with agency.

A breach of this particular paradigm reveals the representational taboo. The breach does not take place in the embalming room or pathology laboratory, but in the staged space devoted to the viewing. Indeed, it is here that all the behind-the-scenes efforts to socialise the dead body are meant to be on display. Humour is used to push the boundaries of convention. Social norms such as the peaceful repose of the dead are violated, but no one takes offence, since the scenes are indicated as belonging to comedy and are not meant to be taken seriously. *Six Feet Under* is always concerned with death, dying, and grieving for the deceased. A scene of comic relief provides some contrast to the omnipresent visual coverage of grief on these television programmes, which might be too exhausting for viewers.

While *Six Feet Under* avoided scenes in which corpses are lifted into their coffins, the documentary *Family Plots* shows the dead literally hanging in the air while being lifted into a coffin. The entire dead-body-in-motion can only be seen when the corpses are enclosed in body bags or, as described above, in comic scenes. In one shot, a body is attached to ropes, hovers in the air, and is lifted into the coffin. This daily routine, lifting the body into the coffin, would only be conceivable in *Six Feet Under* if the action were embedded in comedy. In another picture, visual effects obscure the face and identity of the decedent. The visual effects also conceal the stomach area in which the undertaker, Shonna (only whose hands are shown), is busy with embalming tools. She restrains one arm of a corpse to avoid agitating it. During this quick shot, however, the movements can be observed. In the documentary, the body's identity is not revealed and supposedly intolerable scenes are covered. Like the diaper scene in *Six Feet Under*, these movements are excluded from view. The urge to avoid too many confusing images is clearly recognisable in these scenes, which are partly obscured by means of visual effects.

#### *Death and illness*

The subsection on the connection between death and illness is short because the connection is nearly invisible on the television shows analysed here. Individuals can die from illness, accidents, homicide, suicide, or old age. Many are treated in hospitals or ambulances in order to save and prolong their lives. Yet, while accidents and homicide victims on the TV shows have clear signs of fatal wounds or the characteristic Y incision of an autopsy on their bodies, signs of illness, disabilities, or infections are to a large extent absent. Medical techniques or tools belonging to life-prolonging actions (e.g. CPR, First Aid, etc.), hospitals, or medical efforts are seldom seen in connection with the corpses. Of the scenes examined, hospital-coded armbands were shown in 2 out of 30 corpse representations in *Family Plots*, and surgical dressings appeared in 2 out of 210 corpses in *Six Feet Under*.

#### **Discussion**

Where can we see a corpse other than in the media? The possibilities are rare and often involve grief. For the public the only audio-visual resource is television. Representations of the dead in the audio-visual media are unlimited. These representations are shaped by censors and determined by censorship negotiations. Television, therefore, represents rather subjective perspectives on the dead. Television today also introduces viewers to areas of death to which they previously had no access. Perceptions shown in films provide foundations for everyday communication. Since the viewer can 'follow' the camera into the hospital, pathology laboratory, or funeral parlour, television has become the main source providing visual knowledge of the dead.

As one can see from *Six Feet Under*, a cleaned and appropriately covered body in a sanitised environment is the dominant mode of representing corpses on television. The all-too-visible signs of age and decay are obscured. The real decedents in the documentary *Family Plots* contrast starkly with these representations. In Erving Goffman's (1959) conception, the informal back stage (the embalming room) turns into a formal front stage (the viewing room). As the documenting camera follows the employees into every corner of the funeral parlour, the boundaries between the formerly separate front and back stages become blurred. An unusual backstage insight is given to the audience, where the illusion of a clean, sleeping body is being produced for the front stage, but only a few brief shots of corpses and the embalming process are shown. Nevertheless, even if quick and at times blurred, these shots contrast with usual representations of corpses. The documentary shows that, no matter what conditions the corpse had been in before its transfer to the embalming room, in the hands of the professional caretaker, the ultimate goal is to stop the process of decay and pollution and return the body to its former aesthetic appearance to be ready for viewing.

The fictional drama/black comedy *Six Feet Under* omits all representations of the embalming process connected with pollution and ambiguity. It focuses on the more scientific art of restoration. No detailed representations of embalming work were shown that did not portray the dead as sanitised. In the embalming room, neither the body nor its environment ever appears messy. Even if moving the body belongs to the essential procedures of an embalmer, *Six Feet Under* refrained from showing any uncovered body being moved. Death is often associated with sleep and silence. On these programmes the corpse is therefore hardly ever shown in motion, in disorder, or diseased. The only way a dead body is consistently depicted as in motion is through humour, which is clearly marked by the characters' responses to situations.

This article has introduced theories in the social and cultural sciences on taboos pertaining to how death is represented in the media. Representations of the dead in a documentary drama and in a drama/black comedy show were analysed. The findings were concerned with specific representational taboos of dead bodies. The analysis focused on the difference between non-fictional and fictional representations of corpses and found that the fictional television shows omit detailed depictions of the embalming processes that could be connected with disorder and ambiguity. No detailed and accurate representation of embalming work in fictional genres was seen. Most of the time the fictional television programme depicted corpses as neat, sanitised decedents at rest. By contrast to the documentary, the fictional corpse was seldom from an old age group and if this was the case then no age spots or signs of decay were visible. The dead body was mostly represented as a white, middle-aged clean body in a neat and sanitary environment. Yet the strictest constraint seemed to concern the movement of the body. While it appeared to be appropriate for the living sometimes to move the arms, legs, or even the head of the dead, the entire uncovered corpse was never moved visibly with one notable exception in a comic scene.

These restrictions concerning age, disorder, and motion can be seen as manifestations of new taboos. Death in Western culture has always been seen as restful, often with the dead depicted in a posture imitating a light sleep. The association of death with sleep is as old as Western culture itself. In classical Greece, the sons of the night were Hypnos, the god of sleep, and his twin, Thanatos, the god of death. This connection has continued down to the present. From the writings of Homer and Virgil to Saint Paul, death was described as a 'deep rest' and a 'deathly sleep' (Ruby 1995, 63). Disorder and motion disturb this peace. Is this strong classical image being violated by other television shows that regularly depict corpses? The answer is no. All of the other above-mentioned TV shows mostly provide images of the dead as covered up, clean and neat, white, middle-aged, and male, the corpse resting motionless on a neat and clean table in a neat and clean environment and surrounded by figures who seem to care about his appearance. *Family Plots* presented the real dead with fewer restrictions in the first season, while in the second season dead bodies were avoided almost entirely. Amongst other reasons, perhaps the violation of these taboos in the documentary drama led to its low popularity and cancellation.

On the other hand, *Six Feet Under* made it through the scheduled five seasons and won several awards. Their images of the dead were approved by the viewing audience and stayed in the public visual discourse. The representational taboo concerns the reality of death in modern American society: being old and dying of illness in a busy and crowded place like a hospital, nursing home, or emergency room cannot, in the majority of cases, provide autonomy for the dying or dignity for the dead. (Kellehear 2007) Despite all kinds of 'scandalous' depictions of dead bodies, it is hardly surprising that *Six Feet Under* does not reflect the diverse reality of death.

### **Biographical note**

Tina Weber is a sociologist currently researching the decline of hospital autopsies in a Volkswagen foundation funded research project 'Death and Dead Bodies'. She completed her PhD thesis on representations of death in contemporary TV shows in the twenty-first century in April of 2010. Her research fields are the sociology of death and dying, religion, and violence. Contact: [TWeber@mail.tu-berlin.de](mailto:TWeber@mail.tu-berlin.de)

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[http://thanatosjournal.files.wordpress.com/2012/12/weber\\_oldfolks\\_than222013.pdf](http://thanatosjournal.files.wordpress.com/2012/12/weber_oldfolks_than222013.pdf)**Old Folks Never Die on TV: Representations of Corpses on American TV shows in the 21st Century****Tina Weber**

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**Abstract**

Every day during prime time, millions of viewers can view corpses and experience visually various body parts. This article examines different aesthetic techniques used to represent corpses on television in fictional American programmes in the twenty-first century. The empirical data consist of fifteen different television shows. In this paper two of the shows, a relatively little-known documentary, *Family Plots*, and a popular fictional series, *Six Feet Under*, are compared in order to demonstrate contrasting aesthetic styles of representing the deceased. The analytical method consists of a pictorial analysis arising from a structural-hermeneutic approach and based on three classic methods of image interpretation. The theoretical framework is primarily concerned with the discourse on corpse representations on television, in sociology, and in cultural science. The findings will show specific constraints on the presentation of dead bodies, including condition and position, which can be identified as manifestations of a new taboo. Despite these new representations, dead bodies connected with disorder, movement, or illness are largely absent. This paper argues that these constraints serve to protect from any harm the classical Western image of the dead as a silent sleeping beauty.

Only recently have cultural scientists described the dead body as invisible or as a subject that is taboo. (Bradbury 1999; Hallam, Hockey & Howarth 1999; Macho & Belting 2007) The purpose of this article is to examine the images of dead bodies on television and determine whether representational taboos exist and, if so, whether they can specifically be connected with death. At the dawn of the twenty-first century dead bodies proliferated in the context of a new series of American television shows. In these shows the deceased remained central to the plot and was shown at the crime scene and in a pathology lab or embalming area. Unlike action and horror movies, these prime-time television shows have no age restriction, and they attract audiences across the social spectrum worldwide.

This article will highlight the unique representation of corpses on contemporary American television by contrasting two programmes from different genres, each programme revolving around a family funeral business. The first and most popular, *Six Feet Under*, portrays a family and their work in the funeral business. In every episode someone dies at the beginning; the pilot episode begins with the death of the funeral director himself, Nathaniel Fisher, on Christmas Eve. From then on, Fisher's sons battle corporations that are competing for the family business. Fisher's widow and daughter have a different attitude to the presence of death and the daily problems. *Six Feet Under* was commissioned by HBO and produced from 2000 to 2005 by Alan Ball. In the five seasons there was a total of 63 episodes, each with a play length of approximately 60 minutes. The series contains elements of drama and black comedy. Numerous awards testify to its extremely high quality.

The second show, far less well known, is entitled *Family Plots*, available in two complete seasons on DVD. The series was created by A&E in 2005. Sixteen episodes with a play length of 30 minutes were produced. *Family Plots* is a little-known, but important documentary, because its subject matter serves as an analogy in documentary format to the highly dramatised *Six Feet Under*. *Family Plots* is about a family-run mortuary in San Diego, California, and the show concentrates on the employees' work and private lives. Occasionally, embalming, cosmetic preparation, or the dressing of the corpse may be shown. *Family Plots* is the first and so far, the only, TV programme about a funeral business to show real bodies of decedents. The corpses belong to elderly people.

Both programmes belong to a larger data set that consists of an additional thirteen American television shows, including *CSI Las Vegas*, *Crossing Jordan*, *Bones*, *Castle*, *NCIS*, *Dead Like Me*, *Pushing Daisies*, *Heroes*, *Dexter*, *Tru Calling*, *Dr. G*, *Autopsy*, *North Mission Road*, and *Quincy, M.E.* (a prototypical model), all of which were analysed for the research project 'Death and Dead Bodies: On the Change in Exposure to Death in Contemporary Society'. The material is comprised of approximately 5,000 screenshots representing death. The project was concerned with the tension between the displacement of death as a constitutive element of the modern age, on the one hand, and the increasing popularisation of the death in the recent decades, on the other. It focussed on the (clinical) autopsy and the dead body, which was treated as an object that generates tension between the removal of a taboo and the taboo of death. In most Western societies fewer and fewer people are prepared to assign their own or their relative's body to a clinical autopsy. The decrease in the clinical autopsy rate and its presumed acceptance stands in stark contrast to the publicity about dead bodies and their autopsies, as can be seen in the popularity of forensic autopsies on twenty-first century television shows. (Knoblauch 2009)

These fifteen programmes were selected because a corpse is a constant in every episode. *Six Feet Under* was chosen as the main example because it is representative of the entire data set in so far as this is possible. The documentary *Family Plots* was selected for its contrast to the fictional drama. The two programmes illustrate the specific constraints on the representation of dead bodies on fictional American TV shows in the twenty-first century, including the depiction of decline, dirt, and disorder. The television representations transform the image of a corpse from that of a peaceful sleeping body into that of a polluting and repulsive object. The profusion of corpses without these features shown on contemporary American television hardly conforms to the classical Western image of the silent sleeping beauty. What then do contemporary representations tell us about our collectively-held image of a socially acceptable portrayal of death?

### **Representation of Death on Television**

The examination of representations of death in the media began in 1955 when Geoffrey Gorer argued in his article, 'Pornography of Death', that contemporary society was suppressing death as a taboo just as the Victorians had suppressed sexuality. According to Gorer, the subject of death has been a taboo and 'charged with pleasurable guilt or guilty pleasure' (Gorer 1965, 175). Among other sources Gorer referred to horror comics to demonstrate that a taboo topic does not simply disappear; instead, it is expressed in another form. In his view the taboo subject re-appears like pornography and charged with pleasurable guilt. Similarly, when death is a taboo subject in conversation, it shows up instead as a visual element in television culture. Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, images of dead bodies in pathology departments have found their way into television screens and thereby into public discourse. In prime time television, these images became ordinary experiential elements of television interaction. Does death then remain taboo?

Tony Walter (1991) thoroughly challenged Gorer's prominent thesis by analysing the ongoing debates as to whether or not a taboo really exists. Walter reviewed the strengths and weaknesses of the taboo thesis and presented six modifications. According to Walter, two highly influential institutions today – medicine and the media – have unusually strong anxieties

about death. These two institutions also have a great influence on society, providing us with schema on how to interpret death properly. Walter avers that media (and medicine):

... to which our society has entrusted the interpretations and ritualisation of death ... are, or have been, almost uniquely embarrassed by the subject. It is not, therefore, so much society as a whole, but these two key institutions, for whom death is, or was, a taboo. (Walter 1991, 303)

In 1999 Elizabeth Hallam et al. focused more precisely on the representation of dead bodies and their visibility, stating that the representation of the dead body 'functions to mask the material reality of embodied death and its destabilising effects' (Hallam, Hockey & Howarth 1999, 24). The portrayal covers up the disorder of the decaying body. The authors continued by asserting that historical studies on the diverse proliferation of death imagery prove that the dead body has been replaced by sophisticated systems of representation in order to maintain its social presence. (Hallam, Hockey & Howarth 1999, 22f)

In 2006 Hans Belting and Thomas Macho were arguing in *The New Visibility of Death* (Die Neue Sichtbarkeit des Todes) that death is now manifestly visible on television and that television images do not represent the dead, but instead, hide the dead behind substitutes and claims that humans have always masked those things they refuse to see. In 2008, Jacquelyn Lynn Foltyn, in her article 'Dead famous and dead sexy: Popular culture, forensics, and the rise of the corpse', even branded the dead body on television as the new porn star, arguing in a manner recalling Gorer, that death is the new sex and the corpse is the new body, to be explored voyeuristically (Foltyn 2008).

On the other hand, Dolf Zillmann (2004) defines pornography as a pictorial representation of human sexual behaviour of every kind and in every connection. These definitions, of course, are based on the assumption that pornography is always what a society considers to be pornography at a certain time. This means that pornography is subject to temporal transformations of cultural norms. According to Herbert Selg, textual or graphic documents, which are classified as pornographic, illustrate the shift to a negative connotation because 'good pornography' is a contradiction in itself. (Selg 1997, 48) The categorisation 'pornography' contains the degradation primarily of female characters, thus defining what a specific society understands at a certain time as 'obscene'. The categorisation of the new media representation of corpses as pornography, even if portrayed as 'aesthetic pornography', describes the depreciation of these representations through the authors rather than the representation itself.

Here the circle closes. With the exception of Zillmann all of the aforementioned authors acknowledge the numerous examples of media representations of the dead, but still associate these representations with avoidance, denial, or negative connotations (i.e. pornography) ascribed to the phenomenon. This article will not follow this path, but instead will explore exactly what is taboo about representations of a dead body.

### **Features of Real Dead Bodies**

The physical appearance of a body usually signifies the social appearance of a body. What does a dead body represent? Hallam et al. (1999) describe the specific characteristics and the potential threat of a real dead body, stressing the lack of control of bodily boundaries. The loss of control and the lack of boundaries between bodily interiority and exteriority are attached to shame and humiliation. The passage of organic matter out of the body or the failure to manage the movement of the limbs and facial muscles can create disturbing impressions.



... the body in decline through death or decay forms a potent reminder of frailty, vulnerability and mortality. The passage of time and the inevitability of physical transformation become powerfully evident. They provoke anxieties about the integrity of the body as it faces destruction. When emphasis is placed upon control and the regulation of the body as a prerequisite for the maintenance of self-identity, the dying body and the dead body acquire terrifying qualities. (Hallam, Hockey & Howarth 1999, 21)

This image can be associated with Mary Bradbury's (1999) elaboration on order, disorder, and dirt. Bradbury refers to Mary Douglas's ideas of pollution and taboo in 'Purity and Danger' (1966), and identifies the real dead body as 'matter out of place' (ibid. 1999, 119). The dead body is human in appearance, yet clearly not human. A dead body – grey, cold and unresponsive – challenges the survivor's senses. Bradbury states that decomposition might bewilder the observer because of the ambiguity of the presence of the corpse and its symbolic threat as a source of pollution.

Thus, many of the rituals of death and much of the symbolism about the dead are concerned with the corpse's transformation from the 'danger within' into an 'outside' object. (Bradbury 1999, 120)

Ideas about pollution are not only psychological fears, but also social expressions. Referring to nurses and doctors, Bradbury acknowledges that pollution is not so much caused by the physical contact with the dead body as a polluting object, but rather through the attribution of social roles. (Bradbury 1999, 120) While doctors and nurses engage in preserving life, the undertaker deals with their failure, the dead body. The undertaker endeavours to embalm the deceased in order to control the orifices of the dead body and thereby reduce not only the risk of infection, but also all other unpleasant side effects of the polluting decomposition process. (Bradbury 1999)

The act of embalming is not dissimilar to surgery or to a post-mortem. The embalmer works in a room that apes the appearance of a hospital theatre, and they make use of 'medical' tools and substances. Thus, in keeping with the dominant ideologies and beliefs of our time, embalming fits nicely into the domain of medical-type interventions. ... Embalming can be viewed as a strategy whereby we attempt to attain some kind of mastery over death (Bradbury 1999, 128f).

Furthermore, Hallam Hockey & Howarth (1999) argue that Western societies are occupied with the body in life – its vital, beautiful, and healthy presence – and these social standards are transferred to the dead body. Christie Davies (1996) goes even further by claiming that foreign observers often see Americans as being obsessed with personal hygiene. The American predilection for embalming reveals a general pattern of cultural values and preferences. Just as Americans have spent their lives cultivating the body's appearance, the embalming of the body continues these efforts and ensures their perpetual preservation.

For Americans it is as important in life, as in embalmed death, to suppress all body smells and to achieve a sanitized odourlessness. The greater use of deodorants in America is an expression of the need to be clean, and is not in any sense a means for ensuring good health. ... Health is important to Americans but the appearance of health and youth is just as important in its own right. (Davies 1996, 64f).

For all of these authors, the difference between a dead body and a sleeping body is the unmistakable appearance of decline, dirt, and disorder. Yet do contemporary television programmes present corpses onscreen in states of decay?

## Analysis of the Representation of Dead Bodies on Television

### *Empirical Data*

For an accurate analysis of audio-visual documents it is necessary to break them into single elements. These single elements are then analysed in order to capture important details about specific stylistic devices. The description and subsequent reconstruction of the meaning of these elements are essential before the elements are re-assembled as a whole and the audio-visual document interpreted. Yet one might object here, arguing that it is implausible to engage in such painstaking analysis, given that every film analysis requires countless film sequence protocols with descriptions, not to mention the respective subsequent protocols with reconstructions. This research, however, is concerned with dead bodies.

Representations of the dead, whether in a picture or on film, share certain characteristics. Compared to representations of the living, the sleeping, or even the comatose body, dead bodies do not move, respond, or interact. Passivity is this a stereotypical pattern that makes it possible to analyse the dead not as a person, but as an object. This is why screenshots were taken and analysed as stills: by looking carefully at a single picture, one can capture more detail than by looking at a sequence. At the same time, instead of only one television show, fifteen shows can be analysed, thus extending the depth and the scope of the study.

The selections of screenshots of dead bodies were limited to those showing the dead when they are most visible and in context-rich environments, i.e. those scenes that take place in a specific environment, such as the pathology room, the embalming room, the morgue, or the room in which the murder was carried out. *Six Feet Under* and *Family Plots* both focus on the life going on around the deceased. Every episode in *Six Feet Under* starts with someone's death. Most of the time, the bodies are seen in the embalming room. *Family Plots* depicts the daily routine of Poway Bernardo Mortuary in San Diego, while *Six Feet Under* presents a fictional funeral parlour in Los Angeles. The selected footage is representative of the study as a whole, as well as of each show.

### *Methodology: Pictorial Analysis*

In addition to the statistical analysis of socio-structural aspects (e.g. age and gender) a novel social science method in the analysis of audio-visual representations is used, namely structural hermeneutic pictorial analysis. The method is unique in so far as the unusual object of the research is the representation of dead bodies on twenty-first century television programmes; the method itself is constructed to address this topic. Why is this method used and not another?

Stefan Mueller-Doohm (1993, 1997) connected hermeneutic and structural interpretation in order to combine an analysis of sense and meaning. He tested his analysis on text and pictorial messages, whereas this paper will introduce a pragmatic shortened pictorial analysis. Mueller-Doohm attempted to generate a cultural-image analysis and overcome the difference between the classical-hermeneutic and the structural-orientated interpretations. The result gave rise to three phases: a description of the analysis, a reconstruction of the analysis, and an interpretation of the analysis (see table 1.)

1. Description	2. Reconstruction	3. Interpretation
<p>A. Analysis of pictorial elements:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Description of objects and people</li> <li>- Configuration of objects and people</li> <li>- Scenic relations and situations</li> <li>- Relations of action</li> <li>- Additional pictorial elements (logos or detail shots)</li> </ul> <p>B. Room/Space:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Pictorial format (also pictures within the picture)</li> <li>- General perspectives</li> <li>- Foreground / background, lines of flight, partial spatial perspectives, etc., planimetric conditions (lines, centrality, geometrical figures, faces, etc.)</li> <li>- Separate perspectives on arrangements</li> </ul> <p>C. Aesthetic elements:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Light and shade conditions</li> <li>- Styles: (e.g. natural, artificial, harmonious, disharmonious, static, moving, etc.)</li> <li>- Style contrasts/ breaks</li> <li>- Graphic / photographic practices (e.g. filtering, perspective, motion...)</li> <li>- Colours, contrasts, nuances</li> </ul> <p>D. Impression overall:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Overall impression in terms of 'mood impression'</li> </ul>	<p>A. Analysis of pictorial elements and connotation:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- of described objects and people</li> <li>- Configuration of objects and people</li> <li>- Scenic relations and situations</li> <li>- Relations of action</li> <li>- Additional pictorial elements (logos or detail shots)</li> </ul> <p>B. Room/Space:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Pictorial format (also pictures within the picture)</li> <li>- General perspectives:</li> <li>- Foreground / background, lines of flight, partial spatial perspectives, etc., planimetric conditions (lines, centrality, geometrical figures, faces, etc.)</li> <li>- Separate perspectives on arrangements</li> </ul> <p>C. Aesthetic elements</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Light and shade conditions</li> <li>- Styles: (e.g. natural, artificial, harmonious, disharmonious, static, moving, etc.)</li> <li>- Style contrasts/ breaks</li> <li>- Graphic / photographic practices (e.g. filtering, perspective, motion ...)</li> <li>- Colours, contrasts, nuances</li> </ul>	<p>The interpretation starts with the synthesis of reconstructed meanings as cultural expressions of meanings.</p> <p>In this work I also want to compare the contemporary cultural expression of meanings to previous media representations in order to demonstrate how certain ideas of the dead can change in certain historical conditions.</p>

Table 1. Description of analysis.

The first level, description, puts visual elements into words in a methodically controlled manner, which allows for an accurate and complete record of all pictorial elements and might stand as the constitutive elements of the symbolic pictorial message. With this method, a holistic data structure can be reconstructed and interpreted. The second level is reconstruction, an analysis of the elements already described for their symbolic meanings. Reconstruction is a tool for the development of these individual elements and their structures of meaning. The third level of analysis is socio-cultural interpretation. Here, the reconstructed symbolic meanings are attached to expressions of cultural patterns of meanings. According to Mueller-Doohm, this structure will generate a solid foundation for cultural interpretation, which is based on dense description and systematic reconstruction.

The analysis first aims to describe and then reconstruct the relations in which social phenomena are expressed. The hermeneutic-orientated approach includes inaccuracies in that one attributes isolated meanings to elements that are detached from their context. This failure can, however, be overcome in the structural-hermeneutic method by re-assembling the isolated elements into their former relations. Hence, a systematic hermeneutic-symbolic interpretation is based on a prior structural analysis of meaning. I have used the above methods in the analysis of the material, and below I will present the findings of this analysis.

## Results

### *Death and Age*

Not only are living characters unevenly distributed, but also the dead are unevenly shown. However, when it comes to the allocation of the age groups of the corpses, one feature stands out: the actors used to portray the stories in *Six Feet Under* are uniformly young. It is uncertain whether this is a general-level phenomenon (i.e. all television shows do not present equal proportions of the elderly and children) or whether the absence of the elderly in most episodes is better explained by the unease they might provoke in viewers about death.

### *The Elderly*

Of the age groups depicted in *Six Feet Under*, those of mature and advanced ages are rarely seen, a circumstance made more unusual by the funeral parlour-context of the show. The series was produced in Los Angeles and was supposed to play there (the original run: 2001–2005). The death rates in Los Angeles, however, differ from the statistics suggested by the television series. According to the LA County Mortality Report from 2003, the highest death rates in Los Angeles are among the 75+ age group. Yet of 120 corpses shown either directly or covered on *Six Feet Under*, there was one infant, four children, one teenager, thirteen persons in their twenties, thirty-seven adults (30–50), thirty-five mature adults (50–70), and eighteen elderly adults (70+) died or were dead, and were covered or directly shown; eleven could not be identified. The elderly dead are not only underrepresented on the series, but are almost always completely covered with sheets or already dressed for burial. Although the elderly are underrepresented in *Family Plots*, their representation remains relatively constant: their bodies are consistently shown in the embalming room, either lying on a table, being treated, or ready for viewing.

There are occasional exceptions in *Six Feet Under*. In one episode an elderly woman was suffocated by her roommate with a sausage; in another an elderly man died with priapism in a nursing home. While the decedent with the priapism never appeared in the embalming room, the discovery and removal of the sausage from the throat of the elderly woman was by violent force to the head – a challenge to the peaceful depictions of elderly deaths.

Approximately thirty corpses are shown on *Family Plots*, and only twenty are not completely covered. By comparison with *Six Feet Under*, all twenty visible and recognisable decedents are elderly. The decedents are mainly white, with an equal balance between men and women. Most of the corpses were shown in Season 1 in the initial phase of the series. Another significant difference from *Six Feet Under* is that the documentary showed at least three elderly corpses with clear signs of old-age deterioration. Medium-range shots and close-up to medium-range shots of the hands of a decedent, for instance, showed age spots and decay, wrinkles and grey hair. Physical details such as these never appear in *Six Feet Under*, even if great importance is attached to certain treatments, such as sewing autopsy incisions. *Family Plots* differs from *Six Feet Under* in that it clearly represents decedents in older age groups. Because the family depicted in the documentary run a real funeral business, they cannot 'provide' younger decedents.

Representational restrictions in *Six Feet Under* apply not only to the depiction of the elderly, but also to their visual staging. In *Six Feet Under* Corpses of people who have reached old age are rarely seen, but if shown, they are modestly dressed or covered. Relative nudity is reserved for the young and beautiful. No signs of decay, old age, or other undesirable features such as loose skin are allowed. Furthermore, although people are living longer (Healey & Ross 2002), *Six Feet Under* does not reflect a realistic proportion of the population. Tim Healey and Karen Ross, referring to research conducted in the United States since the 1950s, focus on the discrepancy between the proportion of the population and their visibility across the television landscape. (Healey & Ross 2002) Similar to the conclusions of Hanley and Webster (2000), Healey and Ross conclude that elderly people are still less likely to be seen on television than in real life. Considering that *Six Feet Under*

portrays a funeral parlour, which, as the documentary showed, is in reality usually concerned with the elderly, a strong avoidance of the connection of 'death and old age', including typical signs of decay, is noticeable.

#### *Children and Teenagers*

As the child mortality rate declined sharply at the end of the nineteenth century, another concern related to the death of children permeated the social landscape, namely the emotional impact such deaths have on those who loved the child. (Bideau, Desjardins, Brignoli, & Hector 1997) Intensive and distinctive mourning for children became widespread and has been investigated in previous studies of parents (Avery & Reynolds 2000, Videka-Sherman 1987) and professionals (Timmermans 2006). *Six Feet Under* reflects the great emotional effect of a child's death. Of 120 corpses, only five under the age of sixteen are mentioned by the protagonists. Of these five, only an SIDS infant, a child, and a teenager are actually shown. The usual medium-close shot (of the head, neck, and chest) is not used to show the corpse of an infant or a child; only the extremities are shown, while the face stays covered. The explicit avoidance of the usual image when faced with a deceased infant conveys the powerful emotional effect of a child's death. Moreover, grief at the death of a child or infant is shared by relatives and professionals alike in the programmes, and even affects the professional embalmer, Rico, who usually handles decedents as if they were artworks. The intensity of Rico's emotional outburst is exceptional, revealing how emotionally affected is this otherwise case-hardened professional.

*Six Feet Under* also contradicts its standard practice by showing a teenager whose face is paralysed with laughter. This exceptional image signals an extraordinarily unusual position for the show by comparison with contemporary programmes. In the storyline a young teen, laughing about prank calls, fell off her bed while and broke her neck. In the funeral parlour the employees struggle to turn the stiff, bright, laughing mouth resembling a rictus into a closed smile by sewing the upper and lower jaws together. The staging is unique in that the teenage corpse depicts a head, but a head stiffened in gleeful laughter, subverting the ordinary picture that with death comes serenity.

In sum, two corpses of very young children are shown in *Six Feet Under* and an unusual teenage corpse. Young corpses are still underrepresented. In *Family Plots* only one infant death is mentioned, but is not shown. Nevertheless, the background to the infant death is portrayed with immense emotional sympathy through the actions of one of its characters.

#### *Death and Disorder*

During her field observation in a funeral parlour, Bradbury (1999) noted that the embalming room, tools, and substances found there resembled a hospital. She defined embalming as an attempt to control death, and she described the corpse as a potential source of pollution. This view is conveyed in the protective measures taken in dealing with the dead, such as the use of medical gloves in funeral parlours, and the same attitude is reflected in the characters in the television programmes under scrutiny. Medical gloves are used in both *Six Feet Under* and *Family Plots*, allegedly to prevent exposure to infectious matter. By contrast with the medical context, in the embalming environment the gloves only serve to protect the undertaker from disease by having contact with the dead body or body fluids. The use of medical gloves clearly indicates that the dead body is a polluting object, exposing the undertaker to risk of pollution. In order to confine the pollution, the dead body is treated with embalming chemicals, which keep the corpse in a sanitised condition and a controlled environment.

In *Six Feet Under*, all corpses in the embalming room are placed in a supine position on the embalming table. The only corpse showing any sign of disability is an ex-soldier; presumably, his disability could be shown because it was the result of an injury received in combat. Other excluded categories of matter include the discharge of excretions, mucosal secretions, or bodily fluids. Signs of age and decay are almost entirely absent. Blood is shown only occasionally, and usually appears detached

from the body from which it presumably originated. Most bodies are neatly covered and only touched appropriately with gloves. Thus, the classical image of the dead as bodies that are asleep is not challenged by any disturbance; the undertaker keeps the polluting object and its environment clean.

By contrast, in *Family Plots* the dead are shown throughout all stages of preparation for burial. However, no long shots of embalming procedures are taken. Sometimes faces of the decedents or certain body parts are covered by means of visual effects. No advanced, aesthetic media techniques such as those in *Six Feet Under* are used, which is why all the elderly decedents are seen with clear signs of age and decay. By contrast to *Six Feet Under*, a corpse is never shown without a cloth drape. The few deceased bodies that are exposed are shown without any body fluids. Still, two adult decedents are seen in diapers. The screenshot of one showed a dead person with his suit cut open to reveal a diaper, worn to prevent faecal pollution. The diaper was covered by using visual effects until just before the corpse was lifted. A 'glimpse of the polluting threat' is visible right at the end. The same efforts to impose order on the environment are noticeable on the corpse's table as well. The tables in *Six Feet Under* are always neat and clean. The camera almost never shows the embalming table covered with a mess like those seen at least four times in *Family Plots*. By contrast to *Six Feet Under* where blood or tools are rarely seen, in *Family Plots* the embalming table is sometimes covered with tools, paper, and bodily fluids. The table serves as a clean frame encapsulating the object of pollution. The body is often old and shows age spots, the corpse is not always clean, and sometimes the tables are messy. Yet even here, efforts to restore order and cleanliness are clearly manifest.

#### *Death and Movement*

Standing still and straight is only one of many complex bodily skills a person has to learn. The complexity of the necessary reflexes can be compared to a railway control system operating with 50 railways at the same time. (Todd 2003, 43) However, natural movement does not usually attract attention unless the movement appears clumsy, out of control, or is noticeably absent. Moving a dead body and revealing the full absence of will and body tension attracts attention because the movement of a lifeless body is seldom seen.

In *Six Feet Under* the undertaker transports the corpses either in body bags or coffins. Heads, arms, and hands are rarely moved during the cleaning and embalming. Only once was the leg of a male body lifted. The dressing or closing of the eyes or mouth is likewise never shown. The undertaker is never shown lifting corpses into the coffins, and once in the coffin, the dead person largely appears untouched. Here too, however, there is a notable exception, namely when the undertaker pulls a sausage out of the throat of a decedent, and the head of the corpse is tilted backwards at a bizarre angle. The most usual movement occurs when the undertakers sew up the autopsy incision. In almost every episode of *Six Feet Under* there are examples of how dead bodies are moved before arriving in the embalming rooms. Once in the embalming room, however, there will be no corpse motion: no uncovered corpse is lifted, turned, or made to sit with one exception. In Season 3, episode 6, a decidedly comic slant is added to the dramatic tension and played out in slapstick. The comedy develops when a funeral home employee discovers that, because a coffin has slipped, an overweight decedent has apparently fallen out of it. After the employee fails the attempts to return the body to the coffin, family members and a friend, on hand for the viewing of the body, are recruited to help. With the combined efforts of family and employees, whose faces are distorted by disgust and strain, the deceased is finally turned around on a gurney. Moving the body by the family members seems to be the punch line, as the efforts result in an incongruous situation that completely contradicts the natural repose and quiet of a normal viewing. Not least, in all the efforts to return the corpse to his coffin, the decedent's nose has ended up crooked.

Numerous theories about humour are found in many academic disciplines. Representations of the dead normally considered taboo can be avoided or weakened by means of humour. Martin A. Rod (2007) claims that the perception of incongruity plays a central role in humour and shows that taboos can be broken and represented humorously without being offensive. To

support the comedy of the scene in *Six Feet Under*, the rearrangement of the body on the gurney reveals the decedent's now-damaged and skewed nose, which had just been moulded by an embalmer. The entire sequence is absurd. What heightens the incongruity is the implicit reference to the usual conception of a decedent as a body-at-rest. Throughout all of the episodes in the series the deceased remain uniformly, static while the survivors act. In this scene, however, the survivors manoeuvre the deceased, which provides him once more with agency.

A breach of this particular paradigm reveals the representational taboo. The breach does not take place in the embalming room or pathology laboratory, but in the staged space devoted to the viewing. Indeed, it is here that all the behind-the-scenes efforts to socialise the dead body are meant to be on display. Humour is used to push the boundaries of convention. Social norms such as the peaceful repose of the dead are violated, but no one takes offence, since the scenes are indicated as belonging to comedy and are not meant to be taken seriously. *Six Feet Under* is always concerned with death, dying, and grieving for the deceased. A scene of comic relief provides some contrast to the omnipresent visual coverage of grief on these television programmes, which might be too exhausting for viewers.

While *Six Feet Under* avoided scenes in which corpses are lifted into their coffins, the documentary *Family Plots* shows the dead literally hanging in the air while being lifted into a coffin. The entire dead-body-in-motion can only be seen when the corpses are enclosed in body bags or, as described above, in comic scenes. In one shot, a body is attached to ropes, hovers in the air, and is lifted into the coffin. This daily routine, lifting the body into the coffin, would only be conceivable in *Six Feet Under* if the action were embedded in comedy. In another picture, visual effects obscure the face and identity of the decedent. The visual effects also conceal the stomach area in which the undertaker, Shonna (only whose hands are shown), is busy with embalming tools. She restrains one arm of a corpse to avoid agitating it. During this quick shot, however, the movements can be observed. In the documentary, the body's identity is not revealed and supposedly intolerable scenes are covered. Like the diaper scene in *Six Feet Under*, these movements are excluded from view. The urge to avoid too many confusing images is clearly recognisable in these scenes, which are partly obscured by means of visual effects.

#### *Death and illness*

The subsection on the connection between death and illness is short because the connection is nearly invisible on the television shows analysed here. Individuals can die from illness, accidents, homicide, suicide, or old age. Many are treated in hospitals or ambulances in order to save and prolong their lives. Yet, while accidents and homicide victims on the TV shows have clear signs of fatal wounds or the characteristic Y incision of an autopsy on their bodies, signs of illness, disabilities, or infections are to a large extent absent. Medical techniques or tools belonging to life-prolonging actions (e.g. CPR, First Aid, etc.), hospitals, or medical efforts are seldom seen in connection with the corpses. Of the scenes examined, hospital-coded armbands were shown in 2 out of 30 corpse representations in *Family Plots*, and surgical dressings appeared in 2 out of 210 corpses in *Six Feet Under*.

#### **Discussion**

Where can we see a corpse other than in the media? The possibilities are rare and often involve grief. For the public the only audio-visual resource is television. Representations of the dead in the audio-visual media are unlimited. These representations are shaped by censors and determined by censorship negotiations. Television, therefore, represents rather subjective perspectives on the dead. Television today also introduces viewers to areas of death to which they previously had no access. Perceptions shown in films provide foundations for everyday communication. Since the viewer can 'follow' the camera into the hospital, pathology laboratory, or funeral parlour, television has become the main source providing visual knowledge of the dead.

As one can see from *Six Feet Under*, a cleaned and appropriately covered body in a sanitised environment is the dominant mode of representing corpses on television. The all-too-visible signs of age and decay are obscured. The real decedents in the documentary *Family Plots* contrast starkly with these representations. In Erving Goffman's (1959) conception, the informal back stage (the embalming room) turns into a formal front stage (the viewing room). As the documenting camera follows the employees into every corner of the funeral parlour, the boundaries between the formerly separate front and back stages become blurred. An unusual backstage insight is given to the audience, where the illusion of a clean, sleeping body is being produced for the front stage, but only a few brief shots of corpses and the embalming process are shown. Nevertheless, even if quick and at times blurred, these shots contrast with usual representations of corpses. The documentary shows that, no matter what conditions the corpse had been in before its transfer to the embalming room, in the hands of the professional caretaker, the ultimate goal is to stop the process of decay and pollution and return the body to its former aesthetic appearance to be ready for viewing.

The fictional drama/black comedy *Six Feet Under* omits all representations of the embalming process connected with pollution and ambiguity. It focuses on the more scientific art of restoration. No detailed representations of embalming work were shown that did not portray the dead as sanitised. In the embalming room, neither the body nor its environment ever appears messy. Even if moving the body belongs to the essential procedures of an embalmer, *Six Feet Under* refrained from showing any uncovered body being moved. Death is often associated with sleep and silence. On these programmes the corpse is therefore hardly ever shown in motion, in disorder, or diseased. The only way a dead body is consistently depicted as in motion is through humour, which is clearly marked by the characters' responses to situations.

This article has introduced theories in the social and cultural sciences on taboos pertaining to how death is represented in the media. Representations of the dead in a documentary drama and in a drama/black comedy show were analysed. The findings were concerned with specific representational taboos of dead bodies. The analysis focused on the difference between non-fictional and fictional representations of corpses and found that the fictional television shows omit detailed depictions of the embalming processes that could be connected with disorder and ambiguity. No detailed and accurate representation of embalming work in fictional genres was seen. Most of the time the fictional television programme depicted corpses as neat, sanitised decedents at rest. By contrast to the documentary, the fictional corpse was seldom from an old age group and if this was the case then no age spots or signs of decay were visible. The dead body was mostly represented as a white, middle-aged clean body in a neat and sanitary environment. Yet the strictest constraint seemed to concern the movement of the body. While it appeared to be appropriate for the living sometimes to move the arms, legs, or even the head of the dead, the entire uncovered corpse was never moved visibly with one notable exception in a comic scene.

These restrictions concerning age, disorder, and motion can be seen as manifestations of new taboos. Death in Western culture has always been seen as restful, often with the dead depicted in a posture imitating a light sleep. The association of death with sleep is as old as Western culture itself. In classical Greece, the sons of the night were Hypnos, the god of sleep, and his twin, Thanatos, the god of death. This connection has continued down to the present. From the writings of Homer and Virgil to Saint Paul, death was described as a 'deep rest' and a 'deathly sleep' (Ruby 1995, 63). Disorder and motion disturb this peace. Is this strong classical image being violated by other television shows that regularly depict corpses? The answer is no. All of the other above-mentioned TV shows mostly provide images of the dead as covered up, clean and neat, white, middle-aged, and male, the corpse resting motionless on a neat and clean table in a neat and clean environment and surrounded by figures who seem to care about his appearance. *Family Plots* presented the real dead with fewer restrictions in the first season, while in the second season dead bodies were avoided almost entirely. Amongst other reasons, perhaps the violation of these taboos in the documentary drama led to its low popularity and cancellation.



On the other hand, *Six Feet Under* made it through the scheduled five seasons and won several awards. Their images of the dead were approved by the viewing audience and stayed in the public visual discourse. The representational taboo concerns the reality of death in modern American society: being old and dying of illness in a busy and crowded place like a hospital, nursing home, or emergency room cannot, in the majority of cases, provide autonomy for the dying or dignity for the dead. (Kellehear 2007) Despite all kinds of 'scandalous' depictions of dead bodies, it is hardly surprising that *Six Feet Under* does not reflect the diverse reality of death.

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**Biographical note**

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[http://thanatosjournal.files.wordpress.com/2012/12/weber\\_oldfolks\\_than222013.pdf](http://thanatosjournal.files.wordpress.com/2012/12/weber_oldfolks_than222013.pdf)**Old Folks Never Die on TV: Representations of Corpses on American TV shows in the 21st Century****Tina Weber**

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**Abstract**

Every day during prime time, millions of viewers can view corpses and experience visually various body parts. This article examines different aesthetic techniques used to represent corpses on television in fictional American programmes in the twenty-first century. The empirical data consist of fifteen different television shows. In this paper two of the shows, a relatively little-known documentary, *Family Plots*, and a popular fictional series, *Six Feet Under*, are compared in order to demonstrate contrasting aesthetic styles of representing the deceased. The analytical method consists of a pictorial analysis arising from a structural-hermeneutic approach and based on three classic methods of image interpretation. The theoretical framework is primarily concerned with the discourse on corpse representations on television, in sociology, and in cultural science. The findings will show specific constraints on the presentation of dead bodies, including condition and position, which can be identified as manifestations of a new taboo. Despite these new representations, dead bodies connected with disorder, movement, or illness are largely absent. This paper argues that these constraints serve to protect from any harm the classical Western image of the dead as a silent sleeping beauty.

Only recently have cultural scientists described the dead body as invisible or as a subject that is taboo. (Bradbury 1999; Hallam, Hockey & Howarth 1999; Macho & Belting 2007) The purpose of this article is to examine the images of dead bodies on television and determine whether representational taboos exist and, if so, whether they can specifically be connected with death. At the dawn of the twenty-first century dead bodies proliferated in the context of a new series of American television shows. In these shows the deceased remained central to the plot and was shown at the crime scene and in a pathology lab or embalming area. Unlike action and horror movies, these prime-time television shows have no age restriction, and they attract audiences across the social spectrum worldwide.

This article will highlight the unique representation of corpses on contemporary American television by contrasting two programmes from different genres, each programme revolving around a family funeral business. The first and most popular, *Six Feet Under*, portrays a family and their work in the funeral business. In every episode someone dies at the beginning; the pilot episode begins with the death of the funeral director himself, Nathaniel Fisher, on Christmas Eve. From then on, Fisher's sons battle corporations that are competing for the family business. Fisher's widow and daughter have a different attitude to the presence of death and the daily problems. *Six Feet Under* was commissioned by HBO and produced from 2000 to 2005 by Alan Ball. In the five seasons there was a total of 63 episodes, each with a play length of approximately 60 minutes. The series contains elements of drama and black comedy. Numerous awards testify to its extremely high quality.

The second show, far less well known, is entitled *Family Plots*, available in two complete seasons on DVD. The series was created by A&E in 2005. Sixteen episodes with a play length of 30 minutes were produced. *Family Plots* is a little-known, but important documentary, because its subject matter serves as an analogy in documentary format to the highly dramatised *Six Feet Under*. *Family Plots* is about a family-run mortuary in San Diego, California, and the show concentrates on the employees' work and private lives. Occasionally, embalming, cosmetic preparation, or the dressing of the corpse may be shown. *Family Plots* is the first and so far, the only, TV programme about a funeral business to show real bodies of decedents. The corpses belong to elderly people.

Both programmes belong to a larger data set that consists of an additional thirteen American television shows, including *CSI Las Vegas*, *Crossing Jordan*, *Bones*, *Castle*, *NCIS*, *Dead Like Me*, *Pushing Daisies*, *Heroes*, *Dexter*, *Tru Calling*, *Dr. G*, *Autopsy*, *North Mission Road*, and *Quincy, M.E.* (a prototypical model), all of which were analysed for the research project 'Death and Dead Bodies: On the Change in Exposure to Death in Contemporary Society'. The material is comprised of approximately 5,000 screenshots representing death. The project was concerned with the tension between the displacement of death as a constitutive element of the modern age, on the one hand, and the increasing popularisation of the death in the recent decades, on the other. It focussed on the (clinical) autopsy and the dead body, which was treated as an object that generates tension between the removal of a taboo and the taboo of death. In most Western societies fewer and fewer people are prepared to assign their own or their relative's body to a clinical autopsy. The decrease in the clinical autopsy rate and its presumed acceptance stands in stark contrast to the publicity about dead bodies and their autopsies, as can be seen in the popularity of forensic autopsies on twenty-first century television shows. (Knoblauch 2009)

These fifteen programmes were selected because a corpse is a constant in every episode. *Six Feet Under* was chosen as the main example because it is representative of the entire data set in so far as this is possible. The documentary *Family Plots* was selected for its contrast to the fictional drama. The two programmes illustrate the specific constraints on the representation of dead bodies on fictional American TV shows in the twenty-first century, including the depiction of decline, dirt, and disorder. The television representations transform the image of a corpse from that of a peaceful sleeping body into that of a polluting and repulsive object. The profusion of corpses without these features shown on contemporary American television hardly conforms to the classical Western image of the silent sleeping beauty. What then do contemporary representations tell us about our collectively-held image of a socially acceptable portrayal of death?

### **Representation of Death on Television**

The examination of representations of death in the media began in 1955 when Geoffrey Gorer argued in his article, 'Pornography of Death', that contemporary society was suppressing death as a taboo just as the Victorians had suppressed sexuality. According to Gorer, the subject of death has been a taboo and 'charged with pleasurable guilt or guilty pleasure' (Gorer 1965, 175). Among other sources Gorer referred to horror comics to demonstrate that a taboo topic does not simply disappear; instead, it is expressed in another form. In his view the taboo subject re-appears like pornography and charged with pleasurable guilt. Similarly, when death is a taboo subject in conversation, it shows up instead as a visual element in television culture. Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, images of dead bodies in pathology departments have found their way into television screens and thereby into public discourse. In prime time television, these images became ordinary experiential elements of television interaction. Does death then remain taboo?

Tony Walter (1991) thoroughly challenged Gorer's prominent thesis by analysing the ongoing debates as to whether or not a taboo really exists. Walter reviewed the strengths and weaknesses of the taboo thesis and presented six modifications. According to Walter, two highly influential institutions today – medicine and the media – have unusually strong anxieties

about death. These two institutions also have a great influence on society, providing us with schema on how to interpret death properly. Walter avers that media (and medicine):

... to which our society has entrusted the interpretations and ritualisation of death ... are, or have been, almost uniquely embarrassed by the subject. It is not, therefore, so much society as a whole, but these two key institutions, for whom death is, or was, a taboo. (Walter 1991, 303)

In 1999 Elizabeth Hallam et al. focused more precisely on the representation of dead bodies and their visibility, stating that the representation of the dead body 'functions to mask the material reality of embodied death and its destabilising effects' (Hallam, Hockey & Howarth 1999, 24). The portrayal covers up the disorder of the decaying body. The authors continued by asserting that historical studies on the diverse proliferation of death imagery prove that the dead body has been replaced by sophisticated systems of representation in order to maintain its social presence. (Hallam, Hockey & Howarth 1999, 22f)

In 2006 Hans Belting and Thomas Macho were arguing in *The New Visibility of Death* (Die Neue Sichtbarkeit des Todes) that death is now manifestly visible on television and that television images do not represent the dead, but instead, hide the dead behind substitutes and claims that humans have always masked those things they refuse to see. In 2008, Jacquelyn Lynn Foltyn, in her article 'Dead famous and dead sexy: Popular culture, forensics, and the rise of the corpse', even branded the dead body on television as the new porn star, arguing in a manner recalling Gorer, that death is the new sex and the corpse is the new body, to be explored voyeuristically (Foltyn 2008).

On the other hand, Dolf Zillmann (2004) defines pornography as a pictorial representation of human sexual behaviour of every kind and in every connection. These definitions, of course, are based on the assumption that pornography is always what a society considers to be pornography at a certain time. This means that pornography is subject to temporal transformations of cultural norms. According to Herbert Selg, textual or graphic documents, which are classified as pornographic, illustrate the shift to a negative connotation because 'good pornography' is a contradiction in itself. (Selg 1997, 48) The categorisation 'pornography' contains the degradation primarily of female characters, thus defining what a specific society understands at a certain time as 'obscene'. The categorisation of the new media representation of corpses as pornography, even if portrayed as 'aesthetic pornography', describes the depreciation of these representations through the authors rather than the representation itself.

Here the circle closes. With the exception of Zillmann all of the aforementioned authors acknowledge the numerous examples of media representations of the dead, but still associate these representations with avoidance, denial, or negative connotations (i.e. pornography) ascribed to the phenomenon. This article will not follow this path, but instead will explore exactly what is taboo about representations of a dead body.

### **Features of Real Dead Bodies**

The physical appearance of a body usually signifies the social appearance of a body. What does a dead body represent? Hallam et al. (1999) describe the specific characteristics and the potential threat of a real dead body, stressing the lack of control of bodily boundaries. The loss of control and the lack of boundaries between bodily interiority and exteriority are attached to shame and humiliation. The passage of organic matter out of the body or the failure to manage the movement of the limbs and facial muscles can create disturbing impressions.

... the body in decline through death or decay forms a potent reminder of frailty, vulnerability and mortality. The passage of time and the inevitability of physical transformation become powerfully evident. They provoke anxieties about the integrity of the body as it faces destruction. When emphasis is placed upon control and the regulation of the body as a prerequisite for the maintenance of self-identity, the dying body and the dead body acquire terrifying qualities. (Hallam, Hockey & Howarth 1999, 21)

This image can be associated with Mary Bradbury's (1999) elaboration on order, disorder, and dirt. Bradbury refers to Mary Douglas's ideas of pollution and taboo in 'Purity and Danger' (1966), and identifies the real dead body as 'matter out of place' (ibid. 1999, 119). The dead body is human in appearance, yet clearly not human. A dead body – grey, cold and unresponsive – challenges the survivor's senses. Bradbury states that decomposition might bewilder the observer because of the ambiguity of the presence of the corpse and its symbolic threat as a source of pollution.

Thus, many of the rituals of death and much of the symbolism about the dead are concerned with the corpse's transformation from the 'danger within' into an 'outside' object. (Bradbury 1999, 120)

Ideas about pollution are not only psychological fears, but also social expressions. Referring to nurses and doctors, Bradbury acknowledges that pollution is not so much caused by the physical contact with the dead body as a polluting object, but rather through the attribution of social roles. (Bradbury 1999, 120) While doctors and nurses engage in preserving life, the undertaker deals with their failure, the dead body. The undertaker endeavours to embalm the deceased in order to control the orifices of the dead body and thereby reduce not only the risk of infection, but also all other unpleasant side effects of the polluting decomposition process. (Bradbury 1999)

The act of embalming is not dissimilar to surgery or to a post-mortem. The embalmer works in a room that apes the appearance of a hospital theatre, and they make use of 'medical' tools and substances. Thus, in keeping with the dominant ideologies and beliefs of our time, embalming fits nicely into the domain of medical-type interventions. ... Embalming can be viewed as a strategy whereby we attempt to attain some kind of mastery over death (Bradbury 1999, 128f).

Furthermore, Hallam Hockey & Howarth (1999) argue that Western societies are occupied with the body in life – its vital, beautiful, and healthy presence – and these social standards are transferred to the dead body. Christie Davies (1996) goes even further by claiming that foreign observers often see Americans as being obsessed with personal hygiene. The American predilection for embalming reveals a general pattern of cultural values and preferences. Just as Americans have spent their lives cultivating the body's appearance, the embalming of the body continues these efforts and ensures their perpetual preservation.

For Americans it is as important in life, as in embalmed death, to suppress all body smells and to achieve a sanitized odourlessness. The greater use of deodorants in America is an expression of the need to be clean, and is not in any sense a means for ensuring good health. ... Health is important to Americans but the appearance of health and youth is just as important in its own right. (Davies 1996, 64f).

For all of these authors, the difference between a dead body and a sleeping body is the unmistakable appearance of decline, dirt, and disorder. Yet do contemporary television programmes present corpses onscreen in states of decay?

## Analysis of the Representation of Dead Bodies on Television

### *Empirical Data*

For an accurate analysis of audio-visual documents it is necessary to break them into single elements. These single elements are then analysed in order to capture important details about specific stylistic devices. The description and subsequent reconstruction of the meaning of these elements are essential before the elements are re-assembled as a whole and the audio-visual document interpreted. Yet one might object here, arguing that it is implausible to engage in such painstaking analysis, given that every film analysis requires countless film sequence protocols with descriptions, not to mention the respective subsequent protocols with reconstructions. This research, however, is concerned with dead bodies.

Representations of the dead, whether in a picture or on film, share certain characteristics. Compared to representations of the living, the sleeping, or even the comatose body, dead bodies do not move, respond, or interact. Passivity is this a stereotypical pattern that makes it possible to analyse the dead not as a person, but as an object. This is why screenshots were taken and analysed as stills: by looking carefully at a single picture, one can capture more detail than by looking at a sequence. At the same time, instead of only one television show, fifteen shows can be analysed, thus extending the depth and the scope of the study.

The selections of screenshots of dead bodies were limited to those showing the dead when they are most visible and in context-rich environments, i.e. those scenes that take place in a specific environment, such as the pathology room, the embalming room, the morgue, or the room in which the murder was carried out. *Six Feet Under* and *Family Plots* both focus on the life going on around the deceased. Every episode in *Six Feet Under* starts with someone's death. Most of the time, the bodies are seen in the embalming room. *Family Plots* depicts the daily routine of Poway Bernardo Mortuary in San Diego, while *Six Feet Under* presents a fictional funeral parlour in Los Angeles. The selected footage is representative of the study as a whole, as well as of each show.

### *Methodology: Pictorial Analysis*

In addition to the statistical analysis of socio-structural aspects (e.g. age and gender) a novel social science method in the analysis of audio-visual representations is used, namely structural hermeneutic pictorial analysis. The method is unique in so far as the unusual object of the research is the representation of dead bodies on twenty-first century television programmes; the method itself is constructed to address this topic. Why is this method used and not another?

Stefan Mueller-Doohm (1993, 1997) connected hermeneutic and structural interpretation in order to combine an analysis of sense and meaning. He tested his analysis on text and pictorial messages, whereas this paper will introduce a pragmatic shortened pictorial analysis. Mueller-Doohm attempted to generate a cultural-image analysis and overcome the difference between the classical-hermeneutic and the structural-orientated interpretations. The result gave rise to three phases: a description of the analysis, a reconstruction of the analysis, and an interpretation of the analysis (see table 1.)

1. Description	2. Reconstruction	3. Interpretation
<p>A. Analysis of pictorial elements:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Description of objects and people</li> <li>- Configuration of objects and people</li> <li>- Scenic relations and situations</li> <li>- Relations of action</li> <li>- Additional pictorial elements (logos or detail shots)</li> </ul> <p>B. Room/Space:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Pictorial format (also pictures within the picture)</li> <li>- General perspectives</li> <li>- Foreground / background, lines of flight, partial spatial perspectives, etc., planimetric conditions (lines, centrality, geometrical figures, faces, etc.)</li> <li>- Separate perspectives on arrangements</li> </ul> <p>C. Aesthetic elements:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Light and shade conditions</li> <li>- Styles: (e.g. natural, artificial, harmonious, disharmonious, static, moving, etc.)</li> <li>- Style contrasts/ breaks</li> <li>- Graphic / photographic practices (e.g. filtering, perspective, motion...)</li> <li>- Colours, contrasts, nuances</li> </ul> <p>D. Impression overall:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Overall impression in terms of 'mood impression'</li> </ul>	<p>A. Analysis of pictorial elements and connotation:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Of described objects and people</li> <li>- Configuration of objects and people</li> <li>- Scenic relations and situations</li> <li>- Relations of action</li> <li>- Additional pictorial elements (logos or detail shots)</li> </ul> <p>B. Room/Space:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Pictorial format (also pictures within the picture)</li> <li>- General perspectives:</li> <li>- Foreground / background, lines of flight, partial spatial perspectives, etc., planimetric conditions (lines, centrality, geometrical figures, faces, etc.)</li> <li>- Separate perspectives on arrangements</li> </ul> <p>C. Aesthetic elements</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Light and shade conditions</li> <li>- Styles: (e.g. natural, artificial, harmonious, disharmonious, static, moving, etc.)</li> <li>- Style contrasts/ breaks</li> <li>- Graphic / photographic practices (e.g. filtering, perspective, motion ...)</li> <li>- Colours, contrasts, nuances</li> </ul>	<p>The interpretation starts with the synthesis of reconstructed meanings as cultural expressions of meanings.</p> <p>In this work I also want to compare the contemporary cultural expression of meanings to previous media representations in order to demonstrate how certain ideas of the dead can change in certain historical conditions.</p>

Table 1. Description of analysis.

The first level, description, puts visual elements into words in a methodically controlled manner, which allows for an accurate and complete record of all pictorial elements and might stand as the constitutive elements of the symbolic pictorial message. With this method, a holistic data structure can be reconstructed and interpreted. The second level is reconstruction, an analysis of the elements already described for their symbolic meanings. Reconstruction is a tool for the development of these individual elements and their structures of meaning. The third level of analysis is socio-cultural interpretation. Here, the reconstructed symbolic meanings are attached to expressions of cultural patterns of meanings. According to Mueller-Doohm, this structure will generate a solid foundation for cultural interpretation, which is based on dense description and systematic reconstruction.

The analysis first aims to describe and then reconstruct the relations in which social phenomena are expressed. The hermeneutic-orientated approach includes inaccuracies in that one attributes isolated meanings to elements that are detached from their context. This failure can, however, be overcome in the structural-hermeneutic method by re-assembling the isolated elements into their former relations. Hence, a systematic hermeneutic-symbolic interpretation is based on a prior structural analysis of meaning. I have used the above methods in the analysis of the material, and below I will present the findings of this analysis.



## Results

### *Death and Age*

Not only are living characters unevenly distributed, but also the dead are unevenly shown. However, when it comes to the allocation of the age groups of the corpses, one feature stands out: the actors used to portray the stories in *Six Feet Under* are uniformly young. It is uncertain whether this is a general-level phenomenon (i.e. all television shows do not present equal proportions of the elderly and children) or whether the absence of the elderly in most episodes is better explained by the unease they might provoke in viewers about death.

### *The Elderly*

Of the age groups depicted in *Six Feet Under*, those of mature and advanced ages are rarely seen, a circumstance made more unusual by the funeral parlour-context of the show. The series was produced in Los Angeles and was supposed to play there (the original run: 2001–2005). The death rates in Los Angeles, however, differ from the statistics suggested by the television series. According to the LA County Mortality Report from 2003, the highest death rates in Los Angeles are among the 75+ age group. Yet of 120 corpses shown either directly or covered on *Six Feet Under*, there was one infant, four children, one teenager, thirteen persons in their twenties, thirty-seven adults (30–50), thirty-five mature adults (50–70), and eighteen elderly adults (70+) died or were dead, and were covered or directly shown; eleven could not be identified. The elderly dead are not only underrepresented on the series, but are almost always completely covered with sheets or already dressed for burial. Although the elderly are underrepresented in *Family Plots*, their representation remains relatively constant: their bodies are consistently shown in the embalming room, either lying on a table, being treated, or ready for viewing.

There are occasional exceptions in *Six Feet Under*. In one episode an elderly woman was suffocated by her roommate with a sausage; in another an elderly man died with priapism in a nursing home. While the decedent with the priapism never appeared in the embalming room, the discovery and removal of the sausage from the throat of the elderly woman was by violent force to the head – a challenge to the peaceful depictions of elderly deaths.

Approximately thirty corpses are shown on *Family Plots*, and only twenty are not completely covered. By comparison with *Six Feet Under*, all twenty visible and recognisable decedents are elderly. The decedents are mainly white, with an equal balance between men and women. Most of the corpses were shown in Season 1 in the initial phase of the series. Another significant difference from *Six Feet Under* is that the documentary showed at least three elderly corpses with clear signs of old-age deterioration. Medium-range shots and close-up to medium-range shots of the hands of a decedent, for instance, showed age spots and decay, wrinkles and grey hair. Physical details such as these never appear in *Six Feet Under*, even if great importance is attached to certain treatments, such as sewing autopsy incisions. *Family Plots* differs from *Six Feet Under* in that it clearly represents decedents in older age groups. Because the family depicted in the documentary run a real funeral business, they cannot 'provide' younger decedents.

Representational restrictions in *Six Feet Under* apply not only to the depiction of the elderly, but also to their visual staging. In *Six Feet Under* Corpses of people who have reached old age are rarely seen, but if shown, they are modestly dressed or covered. Relative nudity is reserved for the young and beautiful. No signs of decay, old age, or other undesirable features such as loose skin are allowed. Furthermore, although people are living longer (Healey & Ross 2002), *Six Feet Under* does not reflect a realistic proportion of the population. Tim Healey and Karen Ross, referring to research conducted in the United States since the 1950s, focus on the discrepancy between the proportion of the population and their visibility across the television landscape. (Healey & Ross 2002) Similar to the conclusions of Hanley and Webster (2000), Healey and Ross conclude that elderly people are still less likely to be seen on television than in real life. Considering that *Six Feet Under*

portrays a funeral parlour, which, as the documentary showed, is in reality usually concerned with the elderly, a strong avoidance of the connection of 'death and old age', including typical signs of decay, is noticeable.

#### *Children and Teenagers*

As the child mortality rate declined sharply at the end of the nineteenth century, another concern related to the death of children permeated the social landscape, namely the emotional impact such deaths have on those who loved the child. (Bideau, Desjardins, Brignoli, & Hector 1997) Intensive and distinctive mourning for children became widespread and has been investigated in previous studies of parents (Avery & Reynolds 2000, Videka-Sherman 1987) and professionals (Timmermans 2006). *Six Feet Under* reflects the great emotional effect of a child's death. Of 120 corpses, only five under the age of sixteen are mentioned by the protagonists. Of these five, only an SIDS infant, a child, and a teenager are actually shown. The usual medium-close shot (of the head, neck, and chest) is not used to show the corpse of an infant or a child; only the extremities are shown, while the face stays covered. The explicit avoidance of the usual image when faced with a deceased infant conveys the powerful emotional effect of a child's death. Moreover, grief at the death of a child or infant is shared by relatives and professionals alike in the programmes, and even affects the professional embalmer, Rico, who usually handles decedents as if they were artworks. The intensity of Rico's emotional outburst is exceptional, revealing how emotionally affected is this otherwise case-hardened professional.

*Six Feet Under* also contradicts its standard practice by showing a teenager whose face is paralysed with laughter. This exceptional image signals an extraordinarily unusual position for the show by comparison with contemporary programmes. In the storyline a young teen, laughing about prank calls, fell off her bed while and broke her neck. In the funeral parlour the employees struggle to turn the stiff, bright, laughing mouth resembling a rictus into a closed smile by sewing the upper and lower jaws together. The staging is unique in that the teenage corpse depicts a head, but a head stiffened in gleeful laughter, subverting the ordinary picture that with death comes serenity.

In sum, two corpses of very young children are shown in *Six Feet Under* and an unusual teenage corpse. Young corpses are still underrepresented. In *Family Plots* only one infant death is mentioned, but is not shown. Nevertheless, the background to the infant death is portrayed with immense emotional sympathy through the actions of one of its characters.

#### *Death and Disorder*

During her field observation in a funeral parlour, Bradbury (1999) noted that the embalming room, tools, and substances found there resembled a hospital. She defined embalming as an attempt to control death, and she described the corpse as a potential source of pollution. This view is conveyed in the protective measures taken in dealing with the dead, such as the use of medical gloves in funeral parlours, and the same attitude is reflected in the characters in the television programmes under scrutiny. Medical gloves are used in both *Six Feet Under* and *Family Plots*, allegedly to prevent exposure to infectious matter. By contrast with the medical context, in the embalming environment the gloves only serve to protect the undertaker from disease by having contact with the dead body or body fluids. The use of medical gloves clearly indicates that the dead body is a polluting object, exposing the undertaker to risk of pollution. In order to confine the pollution, the dead body is treated with embalming chemicals, which keep the corpse in a sanitised condition and a controlled environment.

In *Six Feet Under*, all corpses in the embalming room are placed in a supine position on the embalming table. The only corpse showing any sign of disability is an ex-soldier; presumably, his disability could be shown because it was the result of an injury received in combat. Other excluded categories of matter include the discharge of excretions, mucosal secretions, or bodily fluids. Signs of age and decay are almost entirely absent. Blood is shown only occasionally, and usually appears detached

from the body from which it presumably originated. Most bodies are neatly covered and only touched appropriately with gloves. Thus, the classical image of the dead as bodies that are asleep is not challenged by any disturbance; the undertaker keeps the polluting object and its environment clean.

By contrast, in *Family Plots* the dead are shown throughout all stages of preparation for burial. However, no long shots of embalming procedures are taken. Sometimes faces of the decedents or certain body parts are covered by means of visual effects. No advanced, aesthetic media techniques such as those in *Six Feet Under* are used, which is why all the elderly decedents are seen with clear signs of age and decay. By contrast to *Six Feet Under*, a corpse is never shown without a cloth drape. The few deceased bodies that are exposed are shown without any body fluids. Still, two adult decedents are seen in diapers. The screenshot of one showed a dead person with his suit cut open to reveal a diaper, worn to prevent faecal pollution. The diaper was covered by using visual effects until just before the corpse was lifted. A 'glimpse of the polluting threat' is visible right at the end. The same efforts to impose order on the environment are noticeable on the corpse's table as well. The tables in *Six Feet Under* are always neat and clean. The camera almost never shows the embalming table covered with a mess like those seen at least four times in *Family Plots*. By contrast to *Six Feet Under* where blood or tools are rarely seen, in *Family Plots* the embalming table is sometimes covered with tools, paper, and bodily fluids. The table serves as a clean frame encapsulating the object of pollution. The body is often old and shows age spots, the corpse is not always clean, and sometimes the tables are messy. Yet even here, efforts to restore order and cleanliness are clearly manifest.

#### *Death and Movement*

Standing still and straight is only one of many complex bodily skills a person has to learn. The complexity of the necessary reflexes can be compared to a railway control system operating with 50 railways at the same time. (Todd 2003, 43) However, natural movement does not usually attract attention unless the movement appears clumsy, out of control, or is noticeably absent. Moving a dead body and revealing the full absence of will and body tension attracts attention because the movement of a lifeless body is seldom seen.

In *Six Feet Under* the undertaker transports the corpses either in body bags or coffins. Heads, arms, and hands are rarely moved during the cleaning and embalming. Only once was the leg of a male body lifted. The dressing or closing of the eyes or mouth is likewise never shown. The undertaker is never shown lifting corpses into the coffins, and once in the coffin, the dead person largely appears untouched. Here too, however, there is a notable exception, namely when the undertaker pulls a sausage out of the throat of a decedent, and the head of the corpse is tilted backwards at a bizarre angle. The most usual movement occurs when the undertakers sew up the autopsy incision. In almost every episode of *Six Feet Under* there are examples of how dead bodies are moved before arriving in the embalming rooms. Once in the embalming room, however, there will be no corpse motion: no uncovered corpse is lifted, turned, or made to sit with one exception. In Season 3, episode 6, a decidedly comic slant is added to the dramatic tension and played out in slapstick. The comedy develops when a funeral home employee discovers that, because a coffin has slipped, an overweight decedent has apparently fallen out of it. After the employee fails the attempts to return the body to the coffin, family members and a friend, on hand for the viewing of the body, are recruited to help. With the combined efforts of family and employees, whose faces are distorted by disgust and strain, the deceased is finally turned around on a gurney. Moving the body by the family members seems to be the punch line, as the efforts result in an incongruous situation that completely contradicts the natural repose and quiet of a normal viewing. Not least, in all the efforts to return the corpse to his coffin, the decedent's nose has ended up crooked.

Numerous theories about humour are found in many academic disciplines. Representations of the dead normally considered taboo can be avoided or weakened by means of humour. Martin A. Rod (2007) claims that the perception of incongruity plays a central role in humour and shows that taboos can be broken and represented humorously without being offensive. To

support the comedy of the scene in *Six Feet Under*, the rearrangement of the body on the gurney reveals the decedent's now-damaged and skewed nose, which had just been moulded by an embalmer. The entire sequence is absurd. What heightens the incongruity is the implicit reference to the usual conception of a decedent as a body-at-rest. Throughout all of the episodes in the series the deceased remain uniformly, static while the survivors act. In this scene, however, the survivors manoeuvre the deceased, which provides him once more with agency.

A breach of this particular paradigm reveals the representational taboo. The breach does not take place in the embalming room or pathology laboratory, but in the staged space devoted to the viewing. Indeed, it is here that all the behind-the-scenes efforts to socialise the dead body are meant to be on display. Humour is used to push the boundaries of convention. Social norms such as the peaceful repose of the dead are violated, but no one takes offence, since the scenes are indicated as belonging to comedy and are not meant to be taken seriously. *Six Feet Under* is always concerned with death, dying, and grieving for the deceased. A scene of comic relief provides some contrast to the omnipresent visual coverage of grief on these television programmes, which might be too exhausting for viewers.

While *Six Feet Under* avoided scenes in which corpses are lifted into their coffins, the documentary *Family Plots* shows the dead literally hanging in the air while being lifted into a coffin. The entire dead-body-in-motion can only be seen when the corpses are enclosed in body bags or, as described above, in comic scenes. In one shot, a body is attached to ropes, hovers in the air, and is lifted into the coffin. This daily routine, lifting the body into the coffin, would only be conceivable in *Six Feet Under* if the action were embedded in comedy. In another picture, visual effects obscure the face and identity of the decedent. The visual effects also conceal the stomach area in which the undertaker, Shonna (only whose hands are shown), is busy with embalming tools. She restrains one arm of a corpse to avoid agitating it. During this quick shot, however, the movements can be observed. In the documentary, the body's identity is not revealed and supposedly intolerable scenes are covered. Like the diaper scene in *Six Feet Under*, these movements are excluded from view. The urge to avoid too many confusing images is clearly recognisable in these scenes, which are partly obscured by means of visual effects.

#### *Death and illness*

The subsection on the connection between death and illness is short because the connection is nearly invisible on the television shows analysed here. Individuals can die from illness, accidents, homicide, suicide, or old age. Many are treated in hospitals or ambulances in order to save and prolong their lives. Yet, while accidents and homicide victims on the TV shows have clear signs of fatal wounds or the characteristic Y incision of an autopsy on their bodies, signs of illness, disabilities, or infections are to a large extent absent. Medical techniques or tools belonging to life-prolonging actions (e.g. CPR, First Aid, etc.), hospitals, or medical efforts are seldom seen in connection with the corpses. Of the scenes examined, hospital-coded armbands were shown in 2 out of 30 corpse representations in *Family Plots*, and surgical dressings appeared in 2 out of 210 corpses in *Six Feet Under*.

#### **Discussion**

Where can we see a corpse other than in the media? The possibilities are rare and often involve grief. For the public the only audio-visual resource is television. Representations of the dead in the audio-visual media are unlimited. These representations are shaped by censors and determined by censorship negotiations. Television, therefore, represents rather subjective perspectives on the dead. Television today also introduces viewers to areas of death to which they previously had no access. Perceptions shown in films provide foundations for everyday communication. Since the viewer can 'follow' the camera into the hospital, pathology laboratory, or funeral parlour, television has become the main source providing visual knowledge of the dead.

As one can see from *Six Feet Under*, a cleaned and appropriately covered body in a sanitised environment is the dominant mode of representing corpses on television. The all-too-visible signs of age and decay are obscured. The real decedents in the documentary *Family Plots* contrast starkly with these representations. In Erving Goffman's (1959) conception, the informal back stage (the embalming room) turns into a formal front stage (the viewing room). As the documenting camera follows the employees into every corner of the funeral parlour, the boundaries between the formerly separate front and back stages become blurred. An unusual backstage insight is given to the audience, where the illusion of a clean, sleeping body is being produced for the front stage, but only a few brief shots of corpses and the embalming process are shown. Nevertheless, even if quick and at times blurred, these shots contrast with usual representations of corpses. The documentary shows that, no matter what conditions the corpse had been in before its transfer to the embalming room, in the hands of the professional caretaker, the ultimate goal is to stop the process of decay and pollution and return the body to its former aesthetic appearance to be ready for viewing.

The fictional drama/black comedy *Six Feet Under* omits all representations of the embalming process connected with pollution and ambiguity. It focuses on the more scientific art of restoration. No detailed representations of embalming work were shown that did not portray the dead as sanitised. In the embalming room, neither the body nor its environment ever appears messy. Even if moving the body belongs to the essential procedures of an embalmer, *Six Feet Under* refrained from showing any uncovered body being moved. Death is often associated with sleep and silence. On these programmes the corpse is therefore hardly ever shown in motion, in disorder, or diseased. The only way a dead body is consistently depicted as in motion is through humour, which is clearly marked by the characters' responses to situations.

This article has introduced theories in the social and cultural sciences on taboos pertaining to how death is represented in the media. Representations of the dead in a documentary drama and in a drama/black comedy show were analysed. The findings were concerned with specific representational taboos of dead bodies. The analysis focused on the difference between non-fictional and fictional representations of corpses and found that the fictional television shows omit detailed depictions of the embalming processes that could be connected with disorder and ambiguity. No detailed and accurate representation of embalming work in fictional genres was seen. Most of the time the fictional television programme depicted corpses as neat, sanitised decedents at rest. By contrast to the documentary, the fictional corpse was seldom from an old age group and if this was the case then no age spots or signs of decay were visible. The dead body was mostly represented as a white, middle-aged clean body in a neat and sanitary environment. Yet the strictest constraint seemed to concern the movement of the body. While it appeared to be appropriate for the living sometimes to move the arms, legs, or even the head of the dead, the entire uncovered corpse was never moved visibly with one notable exception in a comic scene.

These restrictions concerning age, disorder, and motion can be seen as manifestations of new taboos. Death in Western culture has always been seen as restful, often with the dead depicted in a posture imitating a light sleep. The association of death with sleep is as old as Western culture itself. In classical Greece, the sons of the night were Hypnos, the god of sleep, and his twin, Thanatos, the god of death. This connection has continued down to the present. From the writings of Homer and Virgil to Saint Paul, death was described as a 'deep rest' and a 'deathly sleep' (Ruby 1995, 63). Disorder and motion disturb this peace. Is this strong classical image being violated by other television shows that regularly depict corpses? The answer is no. All of the other above-mentioned TV shows mostly provide images of the dead as covered up, clean and neat, white, middle-aged, and male, the corpse resting motionless on a neat and clean table in a neat and clean environment and surrounded by figures who seem to care about his appearance. *Family Plots* presented the real dead with fewer restrictions in the first season, while in the second season dead bodies were avoided almost entirely. Amongst other reasons, perhaps the violation of these taboos in the documentary drama led to its low popularity and cancellation.

On the other hand, *Six Feet Under* made it through the scheduled five seasons and won several awards. Their images of the dead were approved by the viewing audience and stayed in the public visual discourse. The representational taboo concerns the reality of death in modern American society: being old and dying of illness in a busy and crowded place like a hospital, nursing home, or emergency room cannot, in the majority of cases, provide autonomy for the dying or dignity for the dead. (Kellehear 2007) Despite all kinds of 'scandalous' depictions of dead bodies, it is hardly surprising that *Six Feet Under* does not reflect the diverse reality of death.

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