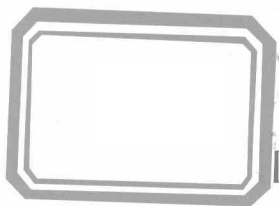


CHARLTON D. McILWAIN

WHEN **death** GOES

POP

DEATH, MEDIA & THE
REMAKING OF COMMUNITY



HARLTON D. McILWA

WHEN death GOES



DEATH, MEDIA & THE
REMAKING OF COMMUNITY



PETER LANG

New York • Washington, D.C./Baltimore • Bern
Frankfurt am Main • Berlin • Brussels • Vienna • Oxford

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

McIlwain, Charlton D.

When death goes pop: death, media
& the remaking of community / Charlton D. McIlwain.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Death on television. I. Title.

PN1992.8.D4M38 306.9—dc22 2003025197

ISBN 0-8204-7064-3

Bibliographic information published by **Die Deutsche Bibliothek**.
Die Deutsche Bibliothek lists this publication in the “Deutsche
Nationalbibliografie”; detailed bibliographic data is available
on the Internet at <http://dnb.ddb.de/>.

Cover design by Sophie Boorsch Appel

The paper in this book meets the guidelines for permanence and durability
of the Committee on Production Guidelines for Book Longevity
of the Council of Library Resources.



© 2005 Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., New York
275 Seventh Avenue, 28th Floor, New York, NY 10001
www.peterlangusa.com

All rights reserved.

Reprint or reproduction, even partially, in all forms such as microfilm,
xerography, microfiche, microcard, and offset strictly prohibited.

Printed in the United States of America

ADVANCE PRAISE FOR



"This book is a welcome addition to the literature on the social and cultural aspects of death and dying that I shall be recommending in my courses. It is perhaps the first sociologically relevant book-length treatment of popular media representations of death and is a significant advance on the current literature.

The argument moves us past tired old debates about media violence and into new territories that stress media as potentially community-building. It draws on contemporary media theory, a thorough analysis of media representations, and audience studies to present a narrative that is highly relevant to current thinking in thanatology. Expanding, too, into an analysis of the Internet and other new media in the final chapters, the book brings together hitherto diverse fields of scholarship in an exemplary fashion. I congratulate the author on his achievement."

*Clive Seale, Professor of Sociology, Department of Human Sciences,
Brunel University, West London, and Author of
Constructing Death: The Sociology of Dying and Bereavement*

"Charlton D. McIlwain's *When Death Goes Pop* is an ambitious and much-needed examination of the representation of death in contemporary popular culture. The book displays an impressive synthesis of media theory, rhetorical studies, and work in thanatology, and utilizes these various bodies of scholarship to render a lucid and provocative reading of contemporary popular culture.... *When Death Goes Pop* places representations of death within broader elements of culture, especially media technology, and, in so doing, provides an intelligible grid for thinking about death as a symbolic element in popular culture.

One of the most impressive elements of McIlwain's work is his integration of empirical observations with sweeping theoretical insights. This book is an excellent example of strong critical research and should be invaluable to anyone interested in the study of popular culture and media."

*Kendall R. Phillips, Associate Professor of Communication
and Rhetorical Studies, Syracuse University, and Author of
Framing Public Memory: Rhetoric, Culture, and Social Critique*

WHEN death GOES



0-8204-7060-3

G206.2

260页. 23cm

出版次。



PETER LANG

New York • Washington, D.C./Baltimore • Bern
Frankfurt am Main • Berlin • Brussels • Vienna • Oxford

To my mother and father, Annie and Ronald McIlwain

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The idea for this book was hatched alone, but finishing it could not have been accomplished without the help of many.

While he cannot receive my thanks, I am grateful to Neil Postman, whose ideas helped me to think about the direction of this book, and who gave me encouragement in the beginning to pursue it.

I also need to thank my acquisitions editor at Peter Lang, Phyllis Korper, who helped me to focus the content of the book in a direction that I think has made it much better than originally conceived and written, and for her patience for the extended time it took for me to complete it.

I am indebted to my friend and colleague Phil Dalton, a former graduate student, Alexandra Ross, and friend Karen Philips, who read and gave invaluable feedback on several of the chapters included here.

Many thanks go out to the staff of Esperanto Café in New York City, where the majority of this book was written. Without the never-ending boosts of caffeine and an atmosphere conducive for writing, the book would not have turned out as well as I would have hoped.

Finally, I must thank many friends and colleagues—David Worth, Eric Kramer, Denise Scannell, Ted Magder, M. J. Robinson, Monique Mitchell, Sheridan Philips, Stephen and Jillian Maynard Caliendo, Siva Vaidhyathan, and others that I may have neglected to mention—who helped me along the way by engaging me in helpful conversations, sharing their ideas, and providing much-needed encouragement.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Figures	ix
Acknowledgments	xi
Introduction: Permission to Speak the Discourse of Death.....	1
1 Amusing Ourselves about Death: Violent Media and Death Education	27
2 Death, Home from Its Holiday?	49
3 Death Becomes Them: Reading <i>Six Feet Under</i>	71
4 Rhetorical Invention: Structure and Argument in <i>Six Feet Under</i> ...	89
5 Affiliation, Critique, and Community: Viewers Respond to <i>Six Feet Under</i>	109
6 Myths of Death in Science Fiction: The Case of <i>The Twilight Zone</i>	131
7 Believing in What's "Out There": The Myth of <i>The X-Files</i>	145
8 Two Mediums, One Message: <i>Crossing Over</i> and the Mass Consumption of "Contact"	175
9 Digital Media Meets Death Culture: The Impact of Time, Space, and Vision.....	197
10 Web Funerals, Virtual Funerals and the Business of Death.....	227
Selected References.....	247
Index.....	251

FIGURES

2.1.	Death Rate Comparison by Decade.....	56
2.2.	Comparative Trend in Murder Rate	56
2.3.	Death by Illness/Natural Causes	57
2.4.	Depictions of Funerals and Grief	57
8.1.	Selected U.S. Attitudes, 1978, Religious Beliefs, the Afterlife, Paranormal Phenomena, and Issues of Concern	181
8.2.	Selected U.S. Attitudes, 2000, Religious Beliefs, Death Attitudes, Paranormal Phenomena and Issues of Concern.....	188
10.1.	Webcast System Diagram	230

INTRODUCTION

Permission to Speak the Discourse of Death

A few years ago I was sitting outside at a bar with several friends celebrating the end of another school semester. As time went on, my friends and I happened to make the acquaintance of a few strangers sitting near us, and, following a few minutes of small talk, the topic of conversation shifted to what my friends and I do for a living. When it was my turn to speak, I told them I am a researcher and writer, which immediately brought up the question of what exactly it is that I research and write about. Reluctant to break the norms of etiquette and describe in elaborate detail my thoughts about death and dying, I simply replied that I study the rituals surrounding death for some cultures in America. I was content to throw out that statement and move on to what might have been a more suitable topic of conversation.

As I made a gesture to politely signal my disinterest in continuing that line of discussion, I unexpectedly found myself listening to one of these strangers' stories about her mother who had recently passed away. She described many of the circumstances in elaborate detail, while the rest of us at the table listened with unrelenting attention. The discussion (no doubt encouraged a little by several of the beverages we had consumed by this time) soon turned to each person explaining how they want to be eulogized when they die, how they want to be buried, what they want others to go through on their behalf, and what they want to leave behind. The question that emerged again and again, which acted as our transition into other parts of the conversation, was, "Why do you study death?" The answer I gave that particular night I cannot recall. I do, however, remember feeling as if none of my answers were sufficient. It is a question that I continue to ponder.

Why concern ourselves with death? It is meaningless to, as our positivist friends would, seek to understand death in order to mitigate its ultimate occurrence. While, undoubtedly, the scientists of our era and following will do

all in their power to prove me wrong, all of our knowledge production about the phenomenon of death—from the empirical to the social—will not free us from the grip of the reaper. Why then do we take great pains to understand this inevitability? Why would we spend our time thinking about that thing which provides so much uncertainty for us? Why spend the time contemplating the dark regions of the dead—the nursing homes where the old go to decay and die; the hospital trauma wards where, despite the elaborate machinery and technology keeping a loved one “alive,” the one in the bed already knows they are really dead; the cold morgues and funeral homes where quickly decaying flesh is poked at and sliced up, awaiting the filling of their cavities with fluid to mask death’s sting; the frighteningly overgrown cemeteries where the dead are disposed of one beside (and often upon) the other; or the cemetery park where manicured lawns, high fences, and pavement conceal the dark lifelessness and isolation revealed by it? Are we masochists? Demented? Abnormal?

Despite all of its gruesomeness, humans from time immemorial have consumed themselves with deliberations about death. And, while we have, here in America, done well in masking this interest—though we have succeeded in convincing ourselves and others that the question of death really does not occupy a significant place in our thoughts and daily routines—beneath the façade, death permeates much more of our lives than we are most of the time willing to admit. That night at the bar, I probably would have been inclined to challenge this statement. I may have said that we have so many distractions that we rarely think about death, that life requires so much of us these days that we cannot afford to dwell on it too long. I might have even ventured that, in America, we have no time to die—that time thinking about death is time shamefully wasted.

Having delved into the phenomenon of death, and the variety of experiences surrounding it over the past few years, when I am now asked why I study death, I reply with the story of the person who asked the same question of me before them—the person who undoubtedly responded to my reply (which is always different) with a story—sometimes several stories—about how their mother died, about recently attending a funeral of a friend who died fifty years prematurely, about what they believe happens when they die or how they want to be treated at death. These stories, by people I have had the good fortune to interact with at one time or another, on an airplane, in a classroom, at a bar or a job interview, funeral home, or football game, demonstrated to me quite pointedly that, not only do Americans think often about

death, but they are quite willing to talk about it. Why then does it seem we have no concern for it? I believe, precisely, because people need to be given a reason, or better yet, be given *permission* to speak about it. And, when given permission to do so, people rise to the challenge principally because it is meaningful for them to do so.

Meaning in Death: the Death of Ethics?

Death is life's only certainty. It is the only event of human existence not bound by time or space. In its universality it does not discriminate—affecting rich and poor, black and white, the “first world” and the “third world” alike. As the counter-pole of life, it is that which ultimately gives life its meaning. It is the one experience that, above others, begs to be made sense of. In light of this, it is no wonder that the human experience of death served as the initial impetus for what might be considered the first mass medium. From the time that human civilizations transitioned from nomadic life to permanent communal settlements, the meaningfulness of death was marked by the living. Whether a pile of rocks and sticks, vast pyramids, or large blocks of granite stone with linguistic inscriptions, people throughout time have erected mediums signifying the death of a member of the family, clan, or larger human community—a sign for all those who entered the space of the dead that this was sacred ground. Such mediums served a variety of functions. It was a place of contemplation for the living looking forward to their certain future, a place in which they could maintain a continuing connection with the ancestral community. It was also the center of religious and spiritual life. It was this function that marked such mediums, and the spaces they occupied, as the precursor to contemporary urban life. Lewis Mumford correctly made the point that the city of the dead antedates the city of the living.¹

The primary purpose for permanence was our fore-parents' passion for their dead. People in these early times knew, seemingly instinctually, that it was important not only for their dead to be “properly” buried in the soil (or any other method deemed appropriate by a collective), but that their bodies were marked and recognizable—a visible sign of where “they” were. This is to say, the ancient cities of the dead were spaces for worship—of both deity and ancestry (which in some societies coincided). The germ of the modern city began in these cities of the dead as the central place for ceremony and ritual, a place where one could commune with ancestors, be enlightened, and

be reinvigorated. It was a place where one could continually be reminded of the teachings of their relatives and contemplate one's own life and eventual death, where they would, in turn, take their place among those who had gone on before them to the mystery of the life following.

Given the depth of meaning associated with the experience of death, it is no wonder that the whole foundation of Western philosophy centered on existential contemplations about death, dying, and the afterlife. The questions philosophers pondered in this regard are significant, primarily because they provide some basis for ethical living. Plato's thoughts on this subject provide as good of a beginning to approach these ideas as any. Plato, it seems, was somewhat obsessed by death, but if obsession is too strong a description, he certainly believed that death, dying, and the afterlife were central to what it means to live—the manner of social organization we develop, our system of values and ethics, and our politics. His detailed attention to the subject is repeated throughout some of his most celebrated writings on government and democratic politics. Two examples of how Plato treated death are instructive for us here in understanding not only the role that death has played in the life of great thinkers throughout history, but also how it has provided a benchmark of sorts—showing how far we have come in terms of our relationship with death and the impact of this dissociation on our current cultural and political situation here in America.

Plato's interest in the experience of death lay in being able to establish some foundation for ethics—the pursuit of virtue that he considered central to the functioning of democratic government. The ethical basis he derived for his politics centered on what he believed was the irrefutable claim regarding the immortality of the soul. Plato argued that the soul was a separate and distinct entity from the physical body and, while various diseases of the flesh could corrupt and kill the body, he argued that the soul was inextinguishable, free from the corrupting powers of either external or internal corruption. That the soul lives—is immortal—meant that individuals themselves lived beyond the death of their bodies. Further, the individual soul after separation from the body incurred consequences. God (in whatever form so delineated) would mete out on each individual soul either reward or punishment, depending on how he or she lived. Only after a period of living with the recompense of their mortal deeds would these souls return to live among the living; the nature of their new life was theirs to choose. Plato's point was this: Individuals should seek virtue and justice, to strive to achieve as closely as possible a resemblance to God, the ideal soul—truth. They should do this

because they would be spared suffering in the afterlife, reap its rewards, and be imbued with the wisdom necessary to choose prudently the course their mortal souls would take in their subsequent reincarnation. Plato reasoned that one could only attain truth through the soul's separation from the body, which is the source of all that impedes our ability to pursue truth. Knowledge of such expectations, he reasoned, should spur individuals to live ethically—and an ethical life was the hallmark of a free, just, and happy individual and collective state.

After telling Glaucon, in *The Republic*, the tale of how this transition from life to death, and the soul's transmigration, worked, Plato concluded his admonition saying,

And thus, Glaucon, the tale has been saved and has not perished, and will save us if we are obedient to the word spoken; and we shall pass safely over the river of Forgetfulness, and our soul will not be defiled. Wherefore my counsel is that we hold fast ever to the heavenly way and follow after justice and virtue always, considering that the soul is immortal and able to endure every sort of good and every sort of evil. Thus shall we live dear to one another and to the gods, both while remaining here and when, like conquerors, in the games who go round to gather gifts, we receive our reward. And it shall be well with us both in this life and in the pilgrimage of a thousand years which we have been describing.²

This ethics—the pursuit of truth that can be approached through just and virtuous living without succumbing to the pleasures and corrupting appetites of the body—provides not only the mechanism for a just society, but allows one to place death in its proper perspective, the final attainment of that truth that was sought all along. His own death being imminent, Socrates stated that “True philosophers are ever studying death” because they know that death culminates their search for the true knowledge of the divine.³ The extent to which philosophy has panted after death reveals a strange longing for it as something not to be feared but welcomed, a fitting culmination of a life spent in the virtuous pursuit of truth.

But not all philosophers share Plato's dogmatic claims of personal immortality and belief in an afterlife. Thus, the question becomes, is the belief in the soul's immortality a necessary condition for having some ethical foundation for civil, democratic life? Is one's longing for the rewards of death or fear of the punishment it may bring the only motivation for ethical behavior?

If we move to the other end of the spectrum—away from philosophers such as Plato and Immanuel Kant, and many modern philosophers and theologians between them and since—we get a sense that the answer to whether

there can be ethics and morality without the expectation of the afterlife is absolutely, yes. Corliss Lamont was perhaps among the most formidable contemporary skeptics of the afterlife, and, in his *Illusion of Immortality*, he seeks not only to point out the failure of immortalists' claims about the afterlife, but offers some positive proof refuting all such notions. Lamont begins his questioning of the ethical arguments for the afterlife with Plato, noting that modern immortalists have both returned to, and departed from, his arguments for the immortality and transmigration of souls. Lamont argues that Plato's arguments were too ephemeral for modern thinkers and believers to grasp. "It is unlikely that the 'proofs' of immortality in the *Phaedo*, many of which subtly assume their conclusions from the start, never in themselves alone won anyone to a belief in an afterlife,"⁴ Lamont is eager to point out.

For a more modern ground to cling to as a referent for his objections, Lamont turned to Kant, who, like Plato, reasoned that the soul's immortality can be inferred by a natural and instinctual human drive toward perfection and truth, found in our creator who is our ultimate ideal. Lamont quotes Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason* in this regard:

Man, and indeed every rational being as such, exists as an end in himself, not merely as a means to be made use of by this or that will. ...The disposition it [the moral law] produces in him to promote the highest good that can be practically realized by us, presupposes at the very least that the highest good is possible. ...[This highest good] is the union of virtue and happiness in the same person, that is, in happiness exactly proportioned to morality.⁵

On this point Kant and Plato differed. That is, for Plato, virtue and morality are what the virtuous strive for because of the fact of immortality; for Kant, virtue and morality exist and are realized in light of the continuation of the soul. This is to say, this immortality is an *a priori* of sorts, a necessary condition for the possibility of living a virtuous life, which he reasons can only be accomplished through the inevitable perfect union of man with the greatest good, over the course of many lifetimes following our present corporeal existence.

This is significant for Lamont, as it shows the two extremes upon which many immortalists lie, in terms of the claims they offer for the afterlife. For some, knowledge of a hereafter filled with blessings or torments compels them to live virtuously; for others, the afterlife makes possible such living, but has little bearing on the condition of the life following since there is a universal predestination of the integration of all souls with the universal

ideal, or God. One of the reasons that Lamont spends so much time making these distinctions is, in some respect, to highlight the motives of those who proffer arguments which are in between Plato and Kant's positions—namely, proponents of Christianity.

Lamont argues that Christians' belief in the afterlife was not originally predicated on compelling individuals to live ethically *per se*; nor were they interested in suggesting some universal ideal to which all are bound at some point in eternity. Rather, the Christian argument for the afterlife was a self-serving one. Their insistence on a final judgment where individuals' fates would be decided once and for all was a means of coercion whereby they could command and control the minds, hearts, and actions of their followers. Such behaviors were not engaged in out of a genuine longing to attain some godly state (though this is what Lamont would argue that church leaders would have followers believe), but in response to the will of spiritual leaders who could control their state of mind by reminding them of their doom or bliss, depending on whether they complied with what was right living as their leaders deemed it. Anyone who has had to endure growing up in a dogmatic, fundamentalist-Christian religion understands this clearly.

So it is by demonstrating not only the absurdity of reasoning that immortalists use to argue for the existence of the afterlife, but also its corrupting nature—the unethical use, we might say, of such arguments—that Lamont dismisses all such claims. But while Lamont does not explicitly address the question of whether there can be ethics without the expectation of the afterlife, one can infer from the body of literature he invokes to cast doubt on the existence of immortality that ethics and morality are not conditioned on a belief in the eternal, living soul or any element of human nature. After all, atheists do not disproportionately murder because they fear no eternal consequence, and even the most flagrant hedonists often draw the line as to what modicum of pleasure they derive at the expense of others of a given community. So, we must conclude, to some degree, the meaninglessness of the question of the afterlife insofar as it relates to our ability and propensity to act ethically, morally—with some regard for others of a particular community. One may do so irrespective of his or her belief in one position or the other. But I also maintain that there must be something more to hang our ethical hats on than the pure utilitarian self-interest that scholars such as Robert Putnam (whom I take up later in this chapter) offers.

By seeking some other ground, I believe that we can reconcile Platonic immortalists with those unbelievers in the afterlife, and those who locate ra-