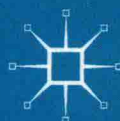


Joanne Clarke Dillman



WOMEN AND DEATH IN FILM, TELEVISION, AND NEWS

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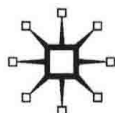


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JOANNE CLARKE *DILLMAN*

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Women and Death in Film, Television, and News

For
Brad, Harry & Noelle
My mom, Ellen Clarke
Ellen, Mary Pat, Elisa, Peter, and Michael
Aunt Patsy
Tom and Mary Alice Dillman
and the Clarkes who are gone but not forgotten:
Peter, Mary, Helen, and John

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Dead women litter the cultural landscapes of the 2000s. Their bodies appear at the beginning of films and television shows, inciting the narratives that follow. The audience might witness a sequence of events leading to the moment of a woman's violent death; most often the audience sees the aftermath of murder: a woman's corpse. In an increasing number of cultural products, a dead woman comes back to life, either as a reanimated corpse or as a normally appearing person in a liminal state between life and the afterlife. In other cases—especially in news stories about young women who have disappeared—the dead woman is herself invisible. She has only a spectral presence conveyed through photographs of her when she was alive, repurposed to animate and individualize stories about her death. The dead women in visual texts interact with the living: they look back, talk back, or are championed by those who look and talk back on their behalf. Using examples from three sites across the visual field—film, television, and Internet-mediated news—I make the case that the images and stories of dead women have both a haunting power and a disciplining function.

One of my main arguments is that these images are the vehicles for the cultural trashing of the stand-in body of second-wave feminism, generally considered to be a white, middle-class movement. Particularly in the American domestic arena, the circulation of these images and the stories in which they are embedded express the profound ambivalence to social changes that the women's movement endorsed and that globalization has accelerated and exploited. Women's gains in social, political, and economic life have come at a price, and this collateral damage is made visible through a decade full of dead women in the

visual sphere. While feminism blossomed as an emergent discourse in the 1960s and 1970s, it failed to become culturally dominant; instead, by the 2000s it had gone partially underground in mainstream cultural sites. Where feminism maintained a presence, it was in the form of an individualistic, apolitical postfeminism. The dead women who saturate our visual landscapes represent a form of masculine anger and resentment at the actual gains women have made. The anger can be seen, but it is not stated as such. By these deaths feminism is undergoing a symbolic destruction in the representational arena of culture.

Another key argument I make in the work that follows is that these dead women's bodies echo and visually intensify a discourse that posits women as disposable and replaceable in the era of neoliberalism and globalization. Ironically, at the same time that female labor is increasingly vital to the global economy, powerful elites are undervaluing the contributions of women in order to frame them as disposable and exploitable. I propose that the media representations under study facilitate this "myth of disposability"¹ by repeatedly depicting women as negligible objects who turn up dead in TV shows, films, and the news. A reverse process is also in effect: the "discourse of disposable women" that scholars such as Melissa Wright, Kevin Bales, and Grace Chang see as pervasive in the globalized world of work reinforces the images and storylines involving dead women that I examine.² Both processes serve the ends of a still-androcentric social order that produces male power at female expense and the ends of a neoliberal economic order that requires an ever-expandable, exploitable, individualized—and some might say feminized—labor force. In an era of hypermobility and global flows, these images depict the forced immobility of the world's increasingly mobile women. As Manuel Castells notes in *The Power of Identity*, "The human landscape of women's liberation and men's defense of their privileges is littered with corpses of broken lives, as is the case with all true revolutions."³ The rancor and ambivalence surrounding the feminist project and our anxieties about the place of women in a changing world are manifest in the surfeit of women who need to be dead before an exploration of their lives, subjectivities, and experiences is authorized in mainstream representations.

Reading Dead Women across Visual Texts

The films, television shows, and news stories that I examine operate via a contradictory logic that recognizes feminist goals and speaks through

feminist codes, but that ultimately serves the status-quo, androcentric, dominant culture. The common denominator in all the works under study here is that a woman comes to visibility *because* she is dead. I call this point of entry or inciting incident a “dead beginning” because figuratively or literally the temporal progression of this character is halted from the start, even though she may feature in the story that follows. This key contradiction in the works that I examine leads to a number of questions, namely: How can a film or television show profess to offer a woman agency if she is positioned as dead from the start? What manner of agency can be claimed for a ghost or spectral presence? Can progressive status be granted to these cultural objects if the central woman character is put under erasure at a narrative’s inception—often through an act of graphic violence—but “lives” on in the film, TV show, or news story through what I call a “dead-but-not-gone” convention? These are questions I seek to answer throughout this book.

I argue that these women’s deaths have deep cultural meaning, even though they are often blamed on random acts of violence, offered as serving a seemingly minor purpose in a longer narrative, or are naturalized as one of the “given” elements in a story. Images of dead women and the stories they help to constitute can be read in more than one way; their meaning is tied to an uncertain social context in the 2000s. On one level, it might be imagined that these dead women are made to stand in for and speak for all the dead women in the news media landscape who cannot speak for themselves. But on another level, the media’s visible rendering and amplification of acts of gendered violence in the arena of representation has consequences for all women.

To watch American entertainment and news in the first decade of the twenty-first century is to wonder whether there isn’t some kind of open season on women. While images of dead women are not a new phenomenon, they are much more graphic and sensationalized in contemporary films and television shows than in mainstream visual texts before the new millennium. In addition, dead women (or presumed-to-be-dead women) are featured more routinely and more prominently in the news than in previous decades. This could plausibly reflect a heightened political recognition of domestic violence and other crimes against women that were ignored in the past. Even if so, I assert that the representational realm in the contemporary moment has “naturalized” the violent deaths of women, with consequences that constrain women and reinscribe androcentrism.

I begin with an examination of dead women in five films: *Minority Report* (2002), *Déjà Vu* (2006), *Corpse Bride* (2005), *The Lovely Bones* (2009), and *Disturbia* (2007). I have chosen these films, which were

released within seven years of each other, for their graphic acts of gendered violence. In *Corpse Bride* the violence is implied through some residual effects, such as blackened eyes, and in *The Lovely Bones* the violence is implied through retrospective framing and unsettling “stand in” imagery. I then turn to dead and “undead” women in the first three seasons of CBS’s television series *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* (2000–2003) and in the complete two seasons of Showtime’s *Dead Like Me* (2003–2004). The attitude of these two shows toward their subject matter could not be more different: the first trafficks in gendered deaths while the second meditates on death as a state of mind that channels the melancholy of post-9/11 America. Next, I link these fictional films and television shows to three news-mediated narratives about Laci Peterson, Chandra Levy, and Natalee Holloway. The disappearance/murder of these three young women circulated in the same historical time and context as the fictional works and played out across the transmedia spectrum. I ground all of the representations of the dead and reanimated-from-the-dead women in the contextual moment of their production and compare the narratives in which they are embedded. My interrogation of these representations finds patterns in which dead women incite narratives or come back from the dead with pseudoagency. In all but the most fantastical or exceptional cases, these deaths cannot be undone.

The linkage of *death* and *agency* does not just occur in the specific visual texts I have chosen; it is a prominent trope in contemporary culture and in many fictional and nonfictional cultural products. It can be seen in Steve Brett’s low-budget film *My Dead Girlfriend* (2006), Chris Severtson’s film *I Know Who Killed Me* (2007), Eric Wright’s graphic novel *My Dead Girlfriend* (Vol. 1, 2007), and Jeff Lowell’s film *Over Her Dead Body* (2008). It has played out in a number of popular television shows such as *Ghost Whisperer*, *Medium*, *CSI: New York*, *CSI: Miami*, *Criminal Minds*, and *Bones*—even though in these shows the trope is split (more traditionally) between dead woman victim and avenging woman agent/actant. There are also iterations of this death-agency linkage in news frenzies about missing (and presumed dead) women and the anonymous dead women found during the 2000s in the *maquiladora*-rife border town Ciudad Juárez in Mexico.

Theories of the Image

This book contributes to the interdisciplinary field of visual culture, which examines the relationships among sight, knowledge, and

embodiment.⁴ Since the mid-1990s, when media and information technologies underwent a synergistic fusion, theorizing the image and the relationship of images to the texts that they help to constitute has become an important concern in image studies.⁵ While “most artistic traditions mark what persists and is sustaining,” according to Svetlana Alpers, visual culture attends to what is “changing in a culture.”⁶ The saturation of media with dead women in the 2000s is precisely the change that I am documenting. Visual culture foregrounds the process of looking, the features of cognition that enable us to look, and the codes necessary to our “social” looking. John Berger’s *Ways of Seeing* is an early text linking gendered images and ideology that naturalize male dominance and privilege male desire, especially in advertising and art.⁷ Berger’s dictum that “man acts, woman appears” holds true decades later in many films and television shows. In the 2000s, the woman appears as dead; this is the condition for her emergence on film, television, and online news screens. Perhaps the strangest surfacing of this phenomenon was on a November 2007 episode of Tyra Banks’s show *America’s Next Top Model* that featured models posing as “beautiful corpses.”⁸

What is special about the image? W. J. T. Mitchell, a key theorist in image studies, argues that the image element of a film or picture was historically slighted in relation to the narrative element; hence, film studies was subsumed under literature programs in the academy.⁹ Visual culture redresses this original privileging of narrative over image. The tension between the narrative (or syntagmatic) axis and the visual (or paradigmatic) axis is central to my argument. Focusing on these axes as separate registers brings potentially contradictory meanings into view. The image component of a film, for example, can offer a sexualized and sexist rendering, while the narrative storyline can be read as ultimately “positive” or “feminist” if there is resolution or closure. I argue that these different registers can compete in the overall text, rendering films and television shows complex “sites of struggle” over meaning.

Mitchell theorizes that there is an excess to images, a “surplus value.”¹⁰ He gives the example of a crossbar over a cigarette—indicating “No Smoking”—to point out that images “cannot say no to what they signify.”¹¹ The implication of this theorizing for my study is that even though a story may reestablish order in the end by having the murderer caught or killed, it cannot undo the work of the images that incite and constitute that narrative. Without a figurative crossbar over a scene of a dead woman—indicating “This Woman Should Not Have Been Killed”—the image assents to what it presents. All’s not well that ends well.

Nicholas Mirzoeff, who also understands the image as aligned with excess, writes,

The visual is not simply the medium of information and mass culture. It offers a sensual immediacy that cannot be rivaled by the print media: the very element that makes visual imagery of all kinds distinct from texts... It is this surplus of experience that moves the different components of the visual sign or semiotic circuit into relation with one another.¹²

In *Ideology and the Image*, Bill Nichols concurs, referring to a caption below a picture as that which “locks down” or “locks in” meaning. He writes, “The great precision of a digital code like written language allows a dense mass of meaning to be packed into a relatively small surface area to which the eye is almost inevitably attracted and from which meanings are discharged like a shower of needle points to pin down the ambiguity of images.”¹³ This is to suggest that without a caption, the image sign is polyvalent.¹⁴ The eminent polyvalence of the image must come under some kind of formal control. Narrative codes in film, television, and advertising anchor the image to a “preferred” meaning. It is the apparent naturalness of images that makes them so seductive as vehicles for carrying ideology, which the reader then often reads unconsciously.

Laura Mulvey, a key feminist theorist of the visual, presents her landmark arguments in the 1975 essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.”¹⁵ She argues that the “male gaze” is consolidated by the camera and augmented by the male character. Thus, a sexualized gaze is produced and reproduced, and with it comes a sexual division of labor. Men tend to take up three-dimensional space and move the story forward; women take up two-dimensional space, frozen for the audience’s “contemplative pleasure.”¹⁶ In the decade of the 2000s, we also begin to contemplate the woman as dead corpse image. The woman still equals spectacle but often of a different kind. Mulvey also elucidates the structuring binary opposition: man is the ego ideal (the identification the film offers to the male or female audience member), while the woman character is marked by lack (her embodied difference). As such, she has a structural role within the system, even though “in herself, the woman has not the slightest importance.”¹⁷

Similarly, Teresa De Lauretis regards the woman figure as akin to a structural element, just like any other element of the Classical style. In her book, *Alice Doesn't*, De Lauretis examines woman’s centrality to visual and narrative texts, but also her anonymity and status as

replaceable. She considers the woman's positioning as "an element of the plot space" or "placeholder," in that the woman functions as an entity without her own narrative significance.¹⁸ In other words, she happens to be in someone else's story: the male character's story.

Building on the work of Julia Kristeva (*Powers of Horror*),¹⁹ Elisabeth Bronfen (*Over Her Dead Body*),²⁰ Carol Clover ("Her Body, Himself"),²¹ and Barbara Creed (*The Monstrous Feminine*),²² I also claim that the dead woman is a *sight* to channel terror, abjection, and sexual fascination and a *sign* that cathects these emotions. As the cases reveal—especially *Minority Report* and *Déjà Vu*—what has been seen cannot be unseen. The power of the image is not decathected or diffused of its energy in the narrative settling of accounts; rather, it remains with and haunts the viewer, serving a disciplinary function. In other words, a narrative with black humor, levity, meticulous forensic and police investigation, or eventual justice in its last minutes cannot undo the disturbing effects on the audience of the graphic images of dead or presumed-to-be-dead women who comprise its material content. I argue that these images have an implicit ideological project that disciplines mainstream viewers and that many critics and reviewers "overlook" in the reception of the texts.²³

Dead Women in Feminist Media Studies and Literature

Feminist perspectives in film and media studies have led the critique of power relations, subject positions, and situated knowledges across the disciplines. Using a feminist epistemology, I show how graphic deaths by sexual violence and the aftereffects of this violence on the woman's body visually nullify the agency gained by other powerful women figures within the story space. I posit that strong women characters who simply happen to be forensic specialists or other professionals serve to enable or encourage the increasingly brutal graphic violence visited upon the victims in the same texts. In some sense, these dead women and strong women are symbiotically related in terms of the privilege of on-screen visibility. Moreover, I emphasize that many of these gruesome images simply frighten viewers out of their wits.

The reading method I apply to the visual objects under study is adapted from the method Mieke Bal articulates in *Death and Dissymmetry*, the final book in her trilogy about biblical texts and the role of women within them.²⁴ Bal uncovers a previously hidden dimension or logic to the "order of things" by attending to the feminist mantra that in

representation women *mean*. She utilizes speech act theory to argue that three things determine power relationships within a text: speech (or lack of it); focalization, which allocates power to the person from whose perspective we watch the events unfold; and action. Although Bal is examining *The Book of Judges*—written more than two-and-a-half millennia ago—the questions she asks about it are the very questions I ask about women killed in films, television shows, and news programs in the early twenty-first century. In *Death and Dissymmetry*'s fifth chapter, "The Scandal of the Speaking Body: From Speech Act to Body Language," Bal asks, "How can a dead woman speak? Why does she have to be dead in order to speak? And what is speech in a book about murder? How does speech relate to action, affect lives, and bring about death?"²⁵ For Bal, a dead woman's importance to the storyline is determined by the three aforementioned criteria—speech, focalization, and action—that I appropriate to examine the visual texts that follow. By centering the dead woman in the analysis, I can search for what factors demanded her death and for what purpose.

Mieke Bal refuses the terms of traditional biblical scholarship, which accepts and reproduces the judges as heroes of the Judeo-Christian tradition and ignores the "minor" women who anonymously people the text.²⁶ As wives, daughters, or nameless virgins, many biblical women were victims of murder or acts of violence. In Bal's reading—"counter to the coherence" of the established scholarship—the women are crucial to the work of the text, even though they are left out of the "political coherence" that the biblical narratives relate. Bal states that a "counter-coherence relates the 'official' reading to what it leaves out; it relates texts to the needs of the reader; it relates everything that is denied importance to the motivations for such denials."²⁷ Countering the "tendency to use a self-evident, commonsense coherence for purposes of active repression,"²⁸ Bal offers her method as a "feminist hermeneutics"²⁹ to explore the "reality of gender-bound violence."³⁰ Instead of seeing a text as "a window through which we can get a glimpse of reality," she sees it "as the figuration of the reality that brought it forth and to which it responded."³¹ Inspired by her methodological approach and convinced of its acuity and significance, I read the contemporary visual texts "counter-coherently" and tie them to their fluctuating social context in the 2000s. In so doing, I denaturalize the process whereby we routinely accept tales of dead women in show after show, on channel after channel, from film to television to news, without interrogating how or why this visual onslaught is occurring.