Soms deed je het vanwege Beek: *Surveillance, subversion and the presence of death in Thomas Olde Heuvelt's* HEX

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What will follow is an analysis of the 2016 novel *HEX* by Thomas Olde Heuvelt, examining the way in which death is established as a material and symbolic presence, and the role that surveillance (particularly the use of cameras) plays to control this manifestation. Personified in the novel by the figure of Katharina van Wyler, Olde Heuvelt presents video and audio-visual media as both a means of recording content and as a narrative device, exploring the relationship between Katharina and the community of the village of Beek. Before moving on to a summary and close reading of the work, I wish to set out some the context for the novel and how it affects my methodology. *HEX* is a story written by a Dutch author and was first published in this language in 2013. A revised edition appeared in 2016 [1], released alongside the English translation of the title, in which the setting and other elements, such as character names and historical context, were revised for a foreign audience, the action moved from a small town in the Netherlands to Black Spring, in the Hudson Valley region of New York State. Such a change of scenery undoubtedly affects the understanding of the story, something which Olde Heuvelt comments on in the afterword of the 2016 Dutch edition: horror and the supernatural should play on personal, recognizable fears, but these may not be as familiar to a foreign reader confronted with a Dutch setting: 'He would wonder: what is the threshold for these people, what frightens them. I didn't want that distance [to be a factor]' (2016a:342) [2]. However, this does not indicate a lack of interest in the original on the part of Olde Heuvelt: 'I loved the Dutch setting, and the utter *Dutchness* of the book. Not in the sense that the witch smoked pot or stood behind some Amsterdam red-framed window; I'm talking about the secular nature of small-town Dutch communities and the down-to-earthness of its people' (2016b:382; author's emphasis). It is this Dutchness, as identified by

Olde Heuvelt, that is of importance for my essay. My position in writing this is not only one of an academic, but also of a Dutch expat, familiar with the views and values as described in the original *HEX*. For this essay, I wish to lean into this subjectivity, and to study a text that can be considered inaccessible to many readers due to the language barrier. My intention is to examine these sensibilities as they appear in *HEX* and how they might relate to understandings of death and dying within this Dutch context, as well as the theme of surveillance and recording that permeates the book. As a result, this essay will avoid discussion of the translation and instead use the 2016 Dutch text as its primary resource. When quoting, the original text will often be included, followed by my translation, in an attempt to reproduce the cultural markers present in the novel. Finally, this essay exists as a companion piece to an interview with Thomas Olde Heuvelt, featured in this issue, where some of these themes are discussed in more detail.

The plot of the novel itself appears to be rather straightforward: the small town of Beek, situated in the eastern part of the Netherlands, suffers from a curse. During the seventeenth century, a local woman, Katharina van Wyler, was accused of and executed on charges of witchcraft. Unfortunately, Katharina did not stay dead, instead returning to Beek to roam the village and its environs shortly after her death. Her whispered words are said to incite suicidal urges in those who hear them, an influence on all who live in the town, and this supposed display of evil powers has earned her the nickname of the *Wylerheks*, or witch of Wyler. Now, in 2012, when the events of the novel take place, Katharina has become part of the day-to-day life of the villagers, a constant reminder of the cruelties committed by their ancestors. Although most of Beek's inhabitants have come to terms with the situation, this fate is more difficult to accept for its younger people, who see their future disappear before it has truly begun. In an attempt to fight back and break the curse, a group of five boys set up a number

of experiments to try and understand Katharina and her powers, with disastrous consequences. This brief outline points towards a familiar horror narrative: a cursed town, an ancient, supernatural threat, and a community held captive by sins committed in the past. However, for the purposes of this paper I am less concerned with the plot of the novel, instead focusing on the type of 'death' exhibited by the figure of Katharina, which situates her as an exceptional dead body, and on the role of technology and (camera) surveillance, which highlights struggles of power and control of / over death.

Olde Heuvelt sketches a timeline for Katharina's history starting in the seventeenth century (2016a:55-71). As a single mother to two children, Katharina presented a model of womanhood that would have been unheard of during this era, and was mistrusted by the other villagers. These suspicions were compounded when one of her children dies in 1665 and, according to eyewitness accounts from locals, was seen alive and well a few days after the burial. In response, Katharina was put on trial for witchcraft and forced to confess to these allegations after extensive torture. As punishment, she had to kill her son, the object of her supposed supernatural ability to raise the dead, a task which she completed to save the life of her daughter. After fulfilling this part of her sentence, Katharina herself would be put to death by hanging, but would have to go to this fate willingly, forced to step into the noose herself, after which her lifeless body was dumped in the woods. The story picks up again in 1666, roughly four months after Katharina's death, when all inhabitants of Beek mysteriously disappear, leaving the village deserted, apparent victims of the wrath of the *Wylerheks*. In 1713, people once more settle in Beek, and what follows is an apparent epidemic of deaths, murders and suicides, as the new inhabitants fall prey to the influence of Katharina, with one of the perpetrators reporting that they spoke to a woman in the woods who incited her to kill eight children. In response, servants of the church make their way into the woods and locate

‘*een bezeten vrouw’* (a woman possessed, 2016a:64), who they attempt to put to rest by placing chains around her body, shackling her hands and ankles, and sewing her eyes and mouth shut. Although all of those involved in this process die within a year, they appear to have closed Katharina’s evil eye, as no further incidents occur. This setup presents the witch as a recognizable horror monster, yet it is the events that follow that complicate such an understanding, as Katharina’s tale is far from over: she was not put to rest, and neither does she leave, instead remaining a constant presence within the village. Her influence is found in the whispers she still manages to produce through her pursed lips, creating what is best described as a force field around the village. Those contained within it do not suffer any negative effects, but those who leave Beek and its environs, even for a limited period (such as a holiday), start to experience dark thoughts and hallucinations, and are driven to suicide, in a way similar to how Katharina herself was forced to take her own life. Although the inhabitants of Beek can work or attend school outside of the village, they are forced to return at the end of each day. Those who live in Beek and newcomers moving to the village are included in the curse, but Katharina’s influence does not extend to brief, accidental exposure to the *Wylerheks* (for example, if seen by guests from outside of Beek). Described as *‘een paranormale tijdbom’* (a supernatural time bomb, 2016a:65), the influence of Katharina’s whispers, and the risk of her being discovered, form a constant threat to the inhabitants of Beek.

In 2012, the time the events of the novel take place, Katharina continues to walk the village streets as an apparent embodiment of a vengeful spirit, a ghost of atrocities from times past. However, Olde Heuvelt’s descriptions of her physical qualities complicate such a reading. Katharina does not possess the ethereal form and beauty often ascribed to the image of the female ghost, instead displaying a grotesque materiality of dirt and decay:

Een kleine, gedrongen vrouw, broodmager en roerloos. Ze zag eruit als iets wat niet paste in het heldergele namiddaglicht: donker, vuil, iets van de nacht. [...] Ze wiegde zachtjes, waardoor de smeedijzeren ketting die haar armen strak tegen haar gedrongen lichaam ketende steeds met een doffe bonk tegen de gelakte deurpost sloeg. (2016a:11, 20)	A small woman, thin as a rail and motionless. She looked like something that did not fit the bright yellow afternoon light: dark, dirty, something belonging to the night. […] She swayed gently, causing the iron chain that tightly bound her arms to her stocky body to hit the lacquered door with a dull thud.

Within this first detailed description of Katharina found in the novel, Olde Heuvelt draws attention to how out of place this figure is, realised in the juxtaposition of light and dark, as well as the site of her appearance (a corner of a modern living room and conservatory space). In addition, rather than exhibiting the qualities commonly associated with ghosts, Katharina is not faint, or able to glide through walls: the banging of the chain against the door renders her distinctly material, *solid*. A later incident, in which Katharina collides with an object while moving through the village, further highlights the physicality of her presence: '*Met een hoorbare bons liep de Wylerheks tegen de lantaarnpaal op en viel achterover op haar gat'* ('With an audible thud, the Wylerheks walked into the lamp post and fell backwards on her ass', 2016a:45). Katharina is somehow able to get to her feet, after which she attempts to continue on her way, but finds her path obstructed: *'[ze] schuurde met haar kettingen tegen de lantaarnpaal alsof ze er dwars doorheen wilde lopen'* ('she scraped her chains against the lamppost as if she simply wanted to walk through it', 2016a:45). As the novel's events start to escalate and Katharina is stabbed by one of the protagonists, she is also shown to bleed and be sensitive to pain: *'Het lichaam van de heks schokte achteruit en sidderde alsof het onder stroom stond. Haar magere handen trokken zich krampachtig samen. Toen Jelmer het mes terugtrok nam het een gulp bloed mee die over het tapijt spatte.'* ('The body of the witch

jolted backwards and trembled as if there was electricity was running through it. Her bony hands convulsively contracted. When Jelmer pulled back the knife, it released a gush of blood that splattered onto the carpet', 2016a:126). Katharina is dead, but able to affect and be affected by the world around her.

Coded as distinctly physical and grotesque, while at the same time possessing some form of awareness and agency, the body of the *Wylerheks* does not fit comfortably within existing categories of the (un)dead found within horror fiction, most often exemplified by traditional figures such as ghosts, zombies or vampires. Her materiality serves as a counterpoint to the motif of the ghost, described by Briggs as 'a restless sleeper whose bed is uncomfortable or who is troubled by guilt or an unfulfilled obligation. There is similarly an illogical logic in those "spirits created for vengeance"' (1977:15). However, within the novel, this motif appears to be an element which is projected by other characters *onto* Katharina, as a means of understanding her presence: *'We nemen aan dat ze wraak wil. […] Wat het ook is dat haar aanstuurt; haar dood heeft een kracht losgelaten die wraak zoekt op degenen die haar tot die gruweldaden hebben aangezet'* ('We assume she wants revenge. [...] Whatever might be guiding her, her death has released a force that seeks revenge on those who instigated her terrible deeds', 2016a:65). Although this example shows Katharina in opposition to a vengeful ghost, she does not fit the category of other undead, and is lacking the appetite and mindless drive of monsters such as zombies or vampires. Within horror studies, these figures represent a particular archetype of physiology and behaviours which, as demonstrated, are absent in the history and descriptions of Katharina. A similar approach to the zombie and vampire is seen in Penfold-Mounce's study on death in popular culture, where she typifies the Undead as 'monstrous animated corpses', which are defined by a loss of self-awareness and selfhood (2018:63-64). Her analysis ties the Undead to concepts of morbid sensibility, an

idea which focuses on the way in which media audiences encounter the fictional (un)dead. In this context, the Undead function as metaphor, a means of exploring particular understandings and aspects of society, often taking the role of social commentary. Seen through this lens, casting Katharina as undead (ghost or zombie) remains an uncomfortable fit: instead, Olde Heuvelt codes her (dead) body as exceptional, positioned both within and outside the community of Beek.

It is worth highlighting the Dutchness, as noted in the introduction, both in terms of responses to death, more generally, and to Katharina, specifically. In the afterword of all three editions of the novel, Olde Heuvelt continuously circles back to this concept as central to the narrative, informing the motivations of his characters. As previously quoted, Olde Heuvelt was interested in exploring the relationship between a smalltown, Dutch, secular community and their attitude towards a supernatural entity carrying a 400-year-old curse. Even in moving the action to Black Spring in the translation, the backstory Olde Heuvelt sketches for Katharina in this new American context remains rooted in a particular Dutch belief system. In the English version, Katharina is described as having reached the United States in the mid-17th century, on a ship of the Dutch West India Company, becoming part of a Dutch settlement near the Hudson River that was originally known as New Beeck. A cluster of supernatural occurrences raised suspicions regarding Katharina's place within the community, leading to events virtually identical to those described in the Dutch novel regarding her death and reappearance (2016b:60-79). Not only does this allow Katharina to remain Dutch, as Olde Heuvelt points to her status as an immigrant from the Netherlands, but it embeds her within a colony of Dutch settlers, allowing the attitudes of the characters in the translation to develop in a way similar to those in the Dutch original. As Olde Heuvelt notes in the afterword of the English edition: '[With the translation,] I could create an enhanced

version […] with new rich and layered details, culturally specific legends and superstitions, all without losing touch of the Dutch elements of the original' (2016b:383). This approach allows for an attempt to retain the aforementioned Dutchness within an international context, resulting in almost no differences in the narrative or the actions of the characters between the second edition of the Dutch novel and its English counterpart. The centrality of Dutchness in my analysis of Katharina is informed by the emphasis placed by Olde Heuvelt on this concept and the particular attitudes it points to.

The first of these attitudes is the status of the Netherlands as a secularised country, which impacts on approaches to the rituals surrounding death. As Venbrux *et al.* point out, 'Comparatively speaking, the Netherlands is one of the more secularised countries of the world' (2009:97), which has strongly influenced the country's relationship to death and dying: 'In the course of secularisation and individualisation, traditional religious rituals have fallen increasingly out of favour […]; in death rites, in particular, experimentation and innovation are taking place' (2009:97). In their essay, the authors note this move to more personal, individual funerary practices, tailored specifically to the person being buried or cremated. These responses extend to ways in which an individual might wish to encounter death in light of the Netherlands' liberal attitude towards euthanasia (Venbrux et al., 2009:99), ideas which permeate the novel in a variety of ways. The notion of an individual funeral is displayed closer to the end of the book, when one of the protagonists passes away and their service is described in the terms as outlined by Venbrux et al., with their wake being held in a local café-bar, and the music played being noted as preferred by the deceased, combined with a more traditional church funeral (2016a:263-265, 268-269). Similarly, although the church and its officials feature within the story, this part of the community is not seen as an overwhelming influence within the village, nor does it impact on the way in which

death is handled by the characters. Yet these aspects of secularization and individual responses to death and dying are not necessarily unique to Dutch society and can be seen in other 'Western' countries; instead, it is in the interactions with Katharina's dead body that the Dutch down-to-earthness, as noted by Olde Heuvelt, shines through.

Most notable in this context is the normalisation of Katharina within the context of Beek: she is portrayed as a part of the fabric of the village, as much a member of the community as the local pub landlord or the mayor, rather than a monstrous entity whose presence should be met with terror upon each encounter. The residents of Beek have become used to her presence (as much as it is possible to become used to random appearances of a supernatural entity within the village, anyway) and they have found ways to deal with such visitations. This normalising is evidenced by a discussion between two characters after Katharina appears within their living room*: 'Ik moet je er wel even op wijzen dat we bezoek hebben […] Oma,' zei ze.[…] Jolanda had een oude vaatdoek over [Katharina's] hoofd gehangen zodat je haar gezicht niet kon zien.'* ('I do need to point out that we have visitors. […] Grandma,' she said. […] Jolanda had put an old tea towel over [Katharina's] head so you couldn't see her face, 2016a:11). Within a few sentences, the *Wylerheks*, her supposed vengeance and her evil eye are reduced to a visit from 'grandma', the grotesque body effectively defanged. The result, then, is not a denial of death, but rather, the normalisation of its presence as portrayed by Katharina's exceptional dead body within the context of everyday life in Beek. This provides a link between Olde Heuvelt's description of the *Wylerheks* to Walter's (2019) concept of the pervasive dead. Positioned as a counterpoint to what Walter terms separated dead, the pervasive dead centres on the idea of an integration of the dead into everyday life, framed in his essay as 'a new collective attitude to, and representation of, the place of the dead' (2019:391). The pervasiveness of the dead in this context is demonstrated by the discourse

surrounding them, in which the living express continuing bonds with the dead, speaking of them of still being present or as having some form of agency: 'The dead are addressed as angels with agency to hear and care; and the body's physical remains are pictured as an active part of the everyday environment' (2019:398). As Walter explains, this is often reflected in the way the living interact with and speak of the dead, with language a big marker of such endurance. Arguably, Katharina is the ultimate example of the pervasive dead, of a dead body who continues to move and exist among the living, a constant companion to everyday life.

This pervasiveness is not only exemplified in Katharina's presence within Beek, but also links back to the curse for which she is responsible. Katharina's influence is felt in the way in which the curse spreads and is experienced on a day-to-day basis. Rather than what I will call a traditional haunting, where a ghost may have a particular objective or target, and will find peace once this has been accomplished (following Briggs' model of the restless or vengeful spirit), Katharina's influence encapsulates the entirety of the town of Beek. This includes all who live there, and, more notably, all who move there. Instances such as these are not so much linked to Katharina's evil influence, but rather, to the effect they have on those who suddenly find themselves included as part of the curse:

Voor veel nieuwelingen in Beek was de onomkeerbaarheid van hun lot, het *definitieve* ervan, een eerste, ongewenste confrontatie met hun eigen sterfelijkheid. Volgens Grim verzetten mensen zich krampachtig tegen het idee van hun eigen dood door er zo lang mogelijk van weg te kijken en er niet over te praten. In Beek leefden ze met de dood. Ze namen haar in huis, verborgen haar voor de buitenwereld… (2016a:54; author's emphasis)

For many of the newcomers to Beek, it was the inevitability of their fate, the *definitiveness* of it, which would be the first, unwanted confrontation with their own mortality. According to Grim, people staunchly resisted the notion of their own death by looking away for as long as possible and not discussing it. In Beek, they lived with death. They took her home, and hid her from the outside world…

This further complicates the relationship of the inhabitants of Beek with the dead body of Katharina and with death, more widely. The concept of death denial, defined by Robert and Tradii as 'the assumption that modern Western societies deny the reality of death' (2019:247), has been a pervasive idea throughout much of death studies. In particular, the concept is used in connection to a defanging of death as, due to modern developments, death and the dead were slowly removed from the more central positions they held prior to the twentieth century: 'Through these works, in the first half of the twentieth century, the notion that death and mortality were somewhat concealed, insignificant or not fully integrated when modern Western societies began to take shape' (Robert, Tradii, 2019:250). What Robert and Tradii provide is a literature review which support these claims of death denial, although they simultaneously flag up the complexity of the concept, as, they argue, 'heterogeneous factors are grouped together and labelled as 'denial' [including] the medicalisation of death, the beautification of the corpse and embalming, the reluctance to speak of death in public, the segregation of the sick and the elderly in hospices, and the bureaucratisation of death-procedures' (Tradii, Robert, 2019:377). Much of their follow-up essay centres on texts which have critiqued and challenged the understanding of death denial as a label for these practices, as well as noting the durability of the original thesis of death as taboo. Echoes of this stance can be found in Penfold-Mounce, as she argues that 'these cultural taboos tell us that dead bodies do not belong in the public sphere and something extraordinary must be the case for them to be on display and rendered visible' (2018:87).

Within the context of Beek, however, death denial is effectively impossible, as Katharina serves as a constant reminder of one's current and ultimate fate, of the curse and of mortality. This position opens new understandings of Katharina's dead body in a counterpoint to Walter's pervasive dead, a mentality which he refers to as the separated dead. In his essay, Walter discusses the juxtaposition between pervasiveness and separation, where the latter is associated with historical models of treatment of the dead and death denial. As Walter explains, 'Modernist separation encompasses a dead body separated from everyday life, a soul inaccessible in heaven, and mourners enjoined to let go and move on' (2019:393). The previously held connection cannot endure, as ultimately, 'The dead are to be left behind; life is to proceed without them' (Walter, 2019:393). Although Walter does note that the two categories of pervasive and separated dead are not discrete (2019:399), the concepts apply simultaneously to Katharina: on the one hand, she is a continuous presence and a constant reminder of death, which the villagers of Beek are unable to deny; on the other, a

supernatural entity, her status as dead body denying her the opportunity to be a true part of the community.

In terms of the treatment of this latter aspect of Katharina, Beek displays an additional Dutch attitude to death, as noted by Venbrux et al.: 'While there is a strong ideology of individualism, a longing for community is also apparent' (2009:99). The quotation from the novel used above hints at this, at a village living with death, and of a village, in its own way, guarding death. There may be a certain cavalier attitude amongst the inhabitants of Beek on how to deal with the *Wylerheks* and with her visits into their homes or places of business, but at the same time, there is a need for the community to hide the existence of a cursed supernatural entity from the outside world, and such an attitude has been enforced for centuries within the region. Following the sewing shut of her mouth and eyes in the eighteenth century, additional countermeasures are put in place during the nineteenth century to manage the presence of Katharina (2016a:63-71). In 1848, the *Noodverordening* (emergency decree) is instated, setting out several basic rules to govern interactions with Katharina (or rather, to prevent these from occurring):

Gij zult zich niet inlaten met de heks. Gij zult met geen woord over haar reppen met mensen van buiten. Gij zult zich houden aan de bezoeksregeling. En de doodzonde: Gij zult nooit of te nimmer haar ogen openen. (2016a:73)	Thou shalt not consort with the witch. Thou shalt not converse about her with outsiders. Thou shalt observe the rules of visitation. And the cardinal sin: thou shalt never, ever open her eyes.

This is followed by the founding of HEX [3] in 1887, set up as an organization to monitor and control both Katharina and the populace of Beek to manage the threat. HEX becomes an instrumental part of the containment policy, properly enshrined in 1917, which, in effect, is a large cover-up situation. In collaboration with the AIVD (Dutch national security services), HEX works to hide Katharina's existence from anyone outside of Beek through a variety of surveillance measures to keep her presence out of the public eye and avoid an (inter)national media circus and panic regarding proof of the supernatural. At the same time, attempts to understand Katharina and (perhaps) get rid of her influence continue, culminating in 1967,

when a team of scientists attempt to sever the thread binding Katharina's lips. The experiment leads to the instant, violent death of those directly involved, as well as sending an apparent shockwave through the area, causing several elderly people to suffer a bleed on the brain. Since then, the guiding policy regarding the *Wylerheks* on both a local and national level has remained one of containment, with an emphasis on the cooperation of the inhabitants of Beek. The footage of the failed 1967 experiment is screened to all children of Beek while in primary school, and reminders of the *Noodverordening* are a central part of education. In addition, smartphones are distributed to all villagers in encouragement of using the Hexapp, an application designed to report sightings of Katharina so her movements can be tracked, and HEX can step in to cover up her presence if needed (for example, if she appears near a main road and there is a risk of sightings by outsiders). In addition, certain internet connections and communications are monitored to avoid discussion of Katharina with people outside of the village. These measures are seen as part of a greater good: if someone in Beek were to challenge Katharina in any way, or, worse still, to make another attempt at opening her eyes and mouth, the entire village might be at risk, heading towards an event as cataclysmic as the disappearances of 1666.

However, these policies do not negate Katharina's influence, and collaboration is needed from all inhabitants of Beek to enforce this containment policy, although there is some contestation of this, especially from younger residents of the village. A conversation between teenager Timo de Graaf and his father Stefan, which takes place early in the novel, captures this internal clash, and shows the centrality of community in relation to these attitudes. Timo bemoans the lack of freedom within Beek with regards to outside communication in light of the containment policy: '*We zijn het zat om in de middeleeuwen te leven. We willen vrij internet and privacy. Onze Facebook- en Whatsapp-berichten worden gecensureerd door*

HEX en soms niet eens doorgestuurd. Twitter is helemaal geblokkeerd' (We are done living in the middle ages. We want free internet and privacy. Our Facebook and Whatsapp messages are screened by HEX and sometimes, they are not even sent. Twitter is blocked entirely, 2016a:75). However, Stefan reminds his son of what is at stake: '*Je hebt hier niet met een dictator te maken. Katharina is een bovennatuurlijk kwaad. Daarmee vervallen alle bekende normen en waarden en staat veiligheid op nummer één'* (You are not dealing with a dictator here. Katharina is a supernatural evil. With that, all existing core values fall by the wayside and safety comes first, 2016a:75). The containment policy espoused by HEX and the AIVD, then, is also a community policy, upheld by individual citizens in support of the greater good.

As can be glimpsed from the descriptions above, surveillance is one of the most powerful tools available to HEX to enforce these policies. A constant monitoring of Katharina's grotesque body signifies an attempt to control death, the creation of a record that can potentially be accessed and analysed in continued efforts to understand the *Wylerheks* and her motivations, as well as keep her presence contained on a day-to-day basis. As explained by Galič et al. in a review of surveillance studies literature, such an act of monitoring is often twofold: 'The subject of surveillance is being watched with a certain purpose, which can be controlling and disciplining the subject into a certain behaviour or a set of norms, but also – possibly at the same time – protecting and caring for that subject' (2016:10). Arguably, this translates into the almost uniform support for some form of greater good, as outlined above, and the view that the system of surveillance is not so much regarded as invasive, but rather as caring and protective. In Beek, the cameras create a barrier between the Wylerheks and ordinary villagers, between the living and the pervasive dead, a community effort to keep death at bay:

> Je paste je aan en soms gaf je iets op. Je deed het voor je kinderen of voor een liefde. Je deed het vanwege ziekte of door een ongeluk. Je deed het omdat je nieuwe

dromen kreeg... en soms deed je het vanwege Beek. *Soms deed je het vanwege Beek.* (2016a:35; author's emphasis)

You adjusted and sometimes you sacrificed something. You did it for your children or for love. You did because of an illness or because of an accident. You did it because you found new dreams… and sometimes, you did it because of Beek. *Sometimes, you did it because of Beek.*

The result, then, is a particular willingness to participate in the surveillance process, to see / report and to be seen. Inclusion, in Beek, creates an illusion of safety, of being part of the network of surveillance and reports of sightings, of not being caught unawares by the image of death personified. The screens of cameras and surveillance, then, are used as much to keep death in as it acts as a talisman to ward it off. At the same time, this relationship between individual – death – screen results in a similar normalization to the way in which the *Wylerheks* is encountered during the everyday:

'We hebben meer dan veertigduizend uur beeldmateriaal van haar in ons digitaal archief,' zei Grim. 'We hebben het hele dorp vol hangen met camera's, was je dat nog niet opgevallen? We bewaren het archiefmateriaal tien jaar, maar daarna gooien we het weg. Eigenlijk wordt het nogal saai, na een tijdje.' (2016a:63)

'We have over forty-thousand hours of footage of her in our digital archives,' Grim said. 'There are cameras all over the village, haven't you noticed? We keep hold of the archival material for ten years, but after that, we delete it. Becomes a bit boring after a while, to be honest with you.'

The perception here is one of control, where the act of surveillance, of looking from above, offers power to the one doing the watching and with that, as the quotation demonstrates, comes a certain degree of comfort. Capturing images of Katharina onscreen both commodifies and distances her presence, creating a dynamic reminiscent of Hviid Jacobsen's definition of the spectacular death, a death which 'inaugurates an obsessive interest in appearances that simultaneously draws death near and keeps it at arm's length - it is something that we witness at a safe distance with equal amounts of fascination and abhorrence' (2016:10). The screens of Hexapp / phone and surveillance / camera allow for a separation between the physical presence of Katharina's dead body and the living.

However, the cameras of HEX are not the only ones in operation, with the network of surveillance and censorship inviting acts of citizen protest through sousveillance, to watch from below, which 'refers both to hierarchical sousveillance, e.g. citizens photographing police, shoppers photographing shopkeepers, and taxicab passengers photographing cab

drivers, as well as personal sousveillance (bringing cameras from the lamp posts and ceilings, down to eye-level, for human-centered recording of personal experience)' (Mann, 2004:620). This is exemplified in the novel by the efforts of a few teenagers in Beek who operate under the banner of Open Your Eyes: Preachings from the Witch's Nest (OYE) (2016a:36-37). Consisting of a private website run via a server located outside the village (away from the prying eyes of HEX), OYE is responsible for creating written and audio-visual records of Katharina in an effort to ultimately publicize her existence to the outside world. This is done with a view of bringing down the restrictive measures enforced by the containment policy, as well as solving the problem of Katharina herself and removing the curse, thus granting freedom to those currently bound by the whispers of the *Wylerheks* and the censorship enforced by HEX. Here, recordings are not used to distance oneself from the pervasive dead, but rather, to close the gap in an attempt at comprehension and release. Although different in their aims, the efforts from HEX and OYE, respectively, centre on an illusion of power, of the ability to control death through observation of Katharina's grotesque body to create, in one case, safety, and in the other, an understanding of the unknowable.

Yet both initiatives prove merely misguided attempts at capturing death (onscreen). The surveillance of the deceased does not result in an automatic transfer of power to the living, with the panoptical structures embedded within the village serving as quite the opposite. HEX does not only serve to keep an eye on Katharina, but, by extension, on the whole community, its policies of surveillance in combination with the decrees of the *Noodverordening* effectively creating a code of conduct for the inhabitants of Beek. The network of cameras operated by HEX may have been installed to monitor the *Wylerheks*, but in as much as they look toward Katharina, they look back at the villagers, invoking the concept of the panopticon (as put forward by Bentham and Foucault), where 'an illusion of constant surveillance is created – the prisoners are not really watched constantly but they believe they are' (Galič et al., 2016:12). Through such systems, particular behaviours can become engrained: 'When everybody can potentially be under surveillance, people will internalise control, morals and values—discipline is thus a type of power, a strategy and a kind of technology' (Galič et al., 2016:16), creating a culture of conformity. Although OYE presents itself as a counterpoint to this apparent compliance to the greater good, their efforts prove as fatal as previous attempts to secure Katharina, with one of its contributors lamenting its creation as events start to escalate:

Ik schijt ‘em *bigtime*. Ben nog nooit zo bang geweest. Waarom heb ik ons project *Open Your Eyes* genoemd? Het is vreemd hoe dingen die eerst nog zo kloppen later zo fucked-up lijken. Het was altijd bedoeld als een kreet aan Beek. Waarom klinkt het dan nu als een roep aan de heks? (2016a:168; author’s emphasis)

I’m bigtime shitting myself. Have never been this scared. Why did I name our project *Open Your Eyes*? It is weird how things that seem so right at first suddenly appear to be so fucked-up. It was always meant as a cry to Beek. Why does it now sound like a call to the witch?

In both the institutionalised and grassroots activities, HEX and OYE use mediatization and commodification to try and exert power over death and, in particular, over the exceptional dead body of Katharina van Wyler. As Venbrux et al. have noted, ‘In the Netherlands, many confess they believe in something [*iets*], the precise nature of which cannot be known to the living. This so-called somethingism [*ietsisme*] implies a shift of authority from religious institutions to individuals’ (2009:98-99; author’s emphasis). In Beek, this belief in *iets* is, arguably, exemplified as a belief in technology, with surveillance and sousveillance being regarded as a way to control the confrontation with mortality. Although Olde Heuvelt makes mention of the influence of reactionary religious practices and folk beliefs on the villagers (for example, the character of Jan Orthensen (2016a, 28, 150) and the burning of a *Wickervrouw* (Wicker woman, 2016a, 104-112)), I would argue that the turning towards recordings by the younger generation through OYE and the pervasiveness of HEX points towards an additional belief system of technology as saviour. Yet this dynamic presents a double-edged sword: where HEX and OYE observe the Wylerheks, the cameras also watch the inhabitants of Beek. Those in a supposed position of power, of watcher / jailer / judge, as their ancestors were in the seventeenth century, are themselves now held captive by Katharina as the embodiment of death. Ultimately, the illusion of safety provided by surveillance protects neither the Wylerheks nor the community, and the ending of the novel, which sees Beek and its inhabitants regress to committing medieval atrocities, only serves to disprove this faith in modernity. Her eyes sewn shut, it is through the surveillance cameras and their influence over Beek and the behaviours of its community that sight is granted to

Katharina. Despite attempts of control, Katharina's grotesque / exceptional / mediated / commodified / dead body remains a reminder of mortality, and of endless cycles of death and violence that cannot be normalized or denied, but instead, pervade their surroundings, as a physical marker of the eternal. As one character notes, '*Wat van Beek is, blijft in Beek'* ('What belongs to Beek, remains in Beek', 2016a:118).

Notes

[1] The text of the 2013 and 2016 editions of *HEX* is largely similar, with the revisions focused on the ending of the book. I will be referring to the 2016 version here, as this is the one that should be considered canon as highlighted by the reappearance of one of the characters from *HEX* in Olde Heuvelt's novel *Orakel* (2021), a character who does not survive the events as described in the 2013 edition. This provenance has also been confirmed in personal correspondence with Olde Heuvelt.
[2] Any quotations listed as originating from 2016a are from the 2016 Dutch edition of the novel, and will often consist of Dutch language quotation and my English translation. Author name will not be included to avoid needless repetition.
[3] It is perhaps worth noting the play on words here, as it is possible to read the word HEX for its English meaning of spell or incantation, as well as the Dutch connotation as a homonym for *heks*, or witch.

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