Foreword: Oscillating between death and life

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A tall man with a comedically rumpled-looking face stands on stage in front of red velvet curtains, dressed in a tuxedo and wearing a somewhat incongruous red Fez hat. As his glamorous blonde assistant adorns him with a 'magic' cloak, oversized and made of shot, orange silk, the live audience in the theatre auditorium laugh. He is, indeed, quite a sight. He mutters "Thank you, love", his arms stretching out, almost, into his trademark gesture (splayed hands a kind of pantomime of a magical spell-casting movement) and then he crumples to the ground. His assistant and the audience laugh. He falls further back into the curtain. His arms and legs rise and fall. He makes a strange, guttural, snoring sound. They laugh some more. Then, as a hand appears from behind the curtain to drag him backwards, the words "Live from Her Majesty's" appear on screen and jaunty music begins to play.

The above is a description of the unexpected death from a heart attack of the British television performer, comedian and magician Tommy Cooper, broadcast live on the ITV variety show *Live from Her Majesty's* on the 15th of April 1984. It is a moment that reminded millions of British television viewers of the closeness of death to life, or of the fact that 'the live' on screen always carries with it the possibility of death. Everywhere that life is photographed, filmed, videoed, broadcast, *captured* in some way, so is death. All images of the living on screen are all also eventually posthumous images, and when death appears on screen, this fact is brought into sharp relief. All footage of Tommy Cooper is now posthumous. In and out of the archive, the dead comedian comes back, posthumously, to entertain us. His dying on screen is not entertaining. It is achingly sad. However, he is no more or less posthumous in this footage (which is freely available to watch on multiple posts on YouTube in November 2022) than he is in any of his other screen performances.

André Bazin's 'The ontology of the photographic image' essay (1960) and Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida* (1981) can be found at the root of much critical thinking about the relationship between death, photography and the moving image. As Laura Mulvey argues, this thinking goes right back to Bazin's categorisation of art as 'the making of a likeness, as driven by the human desire to overcome death' (2006: 58). For Barthes, influenced by his mourning for his own mother, the presence of death was caught as the punctum in each photograph, expressed as the realisation that 'He [sic] is going to die' (1981: 96). As Barthes explains, 'Whether or not the subject is already dead, every photograph is this catastrophe' (ibid). This is also described eloquently by Mulvey as that 'rather terrible thing that is there in every photograph: the return of the dead' (2006: 61).

Whilst many of us are familiar with the critical writing on posthumous photography and the growing critical literature on film's posthumous possibilities, the mapping of television and other screen media's inherent posthumousness has received much less critical attention. I should show my hand here. Bethan Michael-Fox and Renske Visser, the editors of this wonderful collection of writing about death and the screen, invited me to write this foreword as I was completing my monograph *Television/Death* (forthcoming, 2023), which looks, in part, at this very thing. The book, organised into three parts, covers the representation of death and dying on television, looks at the burgeoning of narratives of grief, trauma, and bereavement in UK and US television fictions, and turns, for its final part, towards the topic of posthumous television. I am fascinated, then, not only by how death, dying and bereavement appear on television (along with many of the authors in this special edition of *Revenant*) but also by the proliferation of posthumous images beyond photography and film and how the directness, immediacy, and (often) liveness of television and other screen media complicate the critical writing on the recorded posthumous image.

What does it mean to write about death on screen? When I think about the field of Death Studies I am drawn to consider the question: "Can you imagine what 'Life Studies' might be?". We do, of course, regularly use the term 'Life Sciences' to describe that branch of science that deals with living organisms, but 'Life Studies', a discipline dedicated to the study of the living, does not exist. Perhaps it doesn't because we acknowledge that 'life' or 'the living' would be too broad a topic to do justice to without breaking the category down into more nuanced foci on a particular group of 'the living' or a specific aspect of 'life' or its representation. This is, of course, also true of death studies. As the pieces in this collection show, we cannot speak of 'death', only 'deaths'. Here the topic of 'death on screen' is shown to be a complex and multifaceted one. The richness of this special edition is thus found in its scope, the breadth of its coverage and the number of screens that it draws us toward to say: "Look! Here is death. Here is an experience of dying on screen. Here is how we are working through the experience of life coming to an end."

All of the scholars, writers, artists, filmmakers, theatre practitioners whose voices are gathered together in this collection are up for facing death. They turn into, rather than away from, associated anxieties, traumas, griefs, revulsions. Is that odd? I have wondered myself about my own long-standing interests in the dead and their representation. Is my critical writing on death related to the fact that one of my earliest memories is of straddling the dead body of my just-dead, much-loved Nana-Great, kissing her cooling face, aged just three years old? Does it come from my experiences as a student when I paid my way through university by nursing the dying and laying out the dead when barely old enough to wrap my head around that stark confrontation with mortality? Is this all just a long process of working through these and other death-related experiences? Arguably, everybody here takes the process of writing, both critical and creative, to explore that subject which might worry them

the most, to look death squarely in the face, in order to make sense of it for themselves, as well as for others.

It is certainly true that many of the people writing in this collection intertwine critical curiosity and/or creative expression with personal experience; our personal brushes with death, with grief, bereavement and loss, are often what lead us down this path, death tugging at our hand like an insistent child, pulling us towards and through the unthinkable, the unbearable. As with Paul Sutton's critical reflection on the loss of his wife, Antonella (and how the end of her life and his experience of grief were connected to his/their television viewing) (2020), Laura Canning's account in this special edition of her fiancé's death and its aftermath is coupled with a story of self-exploration through filmmaking. Canning, whose account of grief is searingly honest and painful, comments that she 'oscillate[d] between life and death' in her experience of the days and weeks that followed her fiancé death. This comment is made in relation to her tortured contemplation of whether she could keep on living without him, but it struck me as a wider truth, for all of us. We all oscillate between life and death - we are all always moving toward death - and our media always does too. As I argued above, every image which captures life also predicts, foreshadows, contains death.

So, we all try to figure death out, to come to terms with it, to predict its shape, its impact. Certainly, those of us that write about death and its representation on screen do, but also those of us that consume death-related media do too. Many of the essays (and some of the artistic works here) precisely seek to analyse the ways that the game player, the serial television viewer, the engrossed film watcher, the reader, the theatre goer, the habitual social media scroller, are all explorers of the terrains of death. They ask, particularly, how fiction represents, negotiates, reiterates, informs, critiques and challenges the ideas about death and dying that circulate in society. This collection certainly opened up new media terrains of death for me: I'm not a gamer but after reading the essays below, I wish that I was. For

others, there will be other openings up: who knew that teen television, or situation comedy, or telefantasy, or Hindi-language cinema, or TikTok had so much to *teach* us about death?

Finally, we not only learn about what it is (or might be) to die through our consumption of screen media, but also how it is (or could be) to grieve, to lose someone we care about through death. Grief feels like an emotion which is very close to the surface at the moment; we have seen far more real grief on our screens since the beginning of 2020 than we might ever have hoped to see, whether through casual social media scrolling and subsequent encounters with friends' and strangers' public expressions of grief, or through the factual and fictional television programming which tried to make sense of the mass bereavements (with no space for our usual rituals of mourning) that happened during the Covid-19 pandemic. This collection both explores representations of grief, loss, bereavement on screen, but also thinks about how we work through our grief beside and through the screen. As I have argued elsewhere (Wheatley, 2021 and forthcoming, 2023), and as a number of the essays that follow show, the perpetual, cyclical patterns of grief are particularly well suited to the long duration and serial narrative forms of television, as well as other media forms. Our media maps out the contours of grief for us, even if it no longer promises, as Elizabeth Kübler-Ross once did in 1969, that grief will come to a neat and predictable end. This collection shows us that grief is continuous, that it rolls on and unravels alongside our day-to-day lives; we continue to feel its impacts long after the fact of its associated bereavement/s. And so we grieve, and our media grieves for and with us, alongside us.

References

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