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**Article:**

Penfold-Mounce, Ruth (2016) Corpses, Popular Culture and Forensic Science: Public Obsession with Death. Mortality. pp. 19-35. ISSN: 1469-9885

<https://doi.org/10.1080/13576275.2015.1026887>

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## **Corpses, Popular Culture and Forensic Science: Public Obsession with Death**

### **Abstract**

The cadaver has been heralded as 'pop culture's new star' (Foltyn, 2008 p. 154). Foltyn's (2008) claim will be expanded in that it does not adequately consider the underlying components of the rise of the corpse in popular culture. It will be argued that forensic science portrayals in popular culture play a critical role in fuelling public obsession with death and cadavers. A particular focus will be taken upon the sociological concept of the gaze by drawing on Foucault's (1973) clinical gaze and using it to explore how watching the dead is influenced through popular culture forensic work portrayals. The gaze is used to highlight how forensic science in popular culture provides a softening lens through which death and corpses are viewed and how this leads to the normalisation of consuming the dead by the public. Finally this article will propose the notion of morbid space which is argued to be part of the process in which public fascination with death, dying and corpses is experienced and normalised.

### **Keywords**

Corpses, Popular Culture, CSI, Forensic Science, The Gaze

### **Introduction**

Fascination with death, dying and corpses is not new. Evidence of widespread fascination with the morbid and macabre as normal behaviour dates back through time to public executions and instances where people have visited locations and items that cause tourist like behaviour surrounding crimes, atrocities, tragedy and death (Penfold-Mounce, 2009). News coverage about

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disasters, terrorism, and wars push the corpse to the forefront (Foltn, 2008a, p. 99) of the public mind along with popular culture representations in film and on television making the corpse a universal medium of connection between the living and the dead (Quigley, 1996). However the dead are not *just* a connection any longer but instead '[t]oday, the living hover around the dead, demand that they entertain them, and [try to make] the corpse into manageable, useful entities' (Foltn, 2008a, p. 103). Death may be less hidden and the corpse exposed to the living via media portrayals but the cadaver, or more crudely put, the meat shell of the person, is a complicated human. It is not alive and so can no longer assert rights or make demands making it 'a powerless entity, needing our protection'. Contradictorily it is also 'a powerful threat to the living' (Sappol, 2002) through the questions it raises regarding questions of morality and entertainment, mortality, afterlife and ownership along with disease and the disposal of human flesh. Fascination with the dead is increasingly prominent and expanding beyond death studies scholars to archaeology to forensic anthropology to movie and television programme makers to fiction book authors to undergraduate and postgraduate forensic science university courses. Huge numbers of society are obsessed with death and corpses but what is the catalyst for embracing the cadaver with such verve?

This article advances the argument that popular culture representations of science, namely forensic science is providing a normalising and softening process towards death and corpses that is stimulating public morbidity. Morbidity in the context of this article does not refer to 'sickness' as it would in public health or medicine but instead is used to refer to public fascination with the morbid, the macabre, death and corpses. Public morbidity is fed by a rich vein of popular culture portrayals of death, dying and cadavers which highlight how even a societally sensitive topic can become part of everyday conversation and even become consumed as entertainment. The conjunction between death and morbidity and the aesthetically pleasing is noted within artistic representation by Bronfen (1992) who argues that death portrayed in artwork is acceptable because it occurs in a realm clearly delineated as not real life. This unreal space in which death can be explored and consumed lies at the heart of this article's argument that experiencing 'death by proxy' is a safe and acceptable way

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[to explore death and the dead in contrast to actual death and corpses which continues to be inappropriate and uncomfortable viewing. Links have been made between the](#) widespread

fascination with death and corpses and the rise in number of fictional portrayals of the dead within forensic science dominated popular culture (McIlwain, 2005). The rise in forensic science portrayals in popular culture has occurred parallel to a dramatic increase in the academic pursuit of forensic science leading to conjecture that this is related. There has been a 70% increase in forensic science courses in the UK over the last 10 years 'driven on by popular culture and the 'bums on seats' phenomenon' (Paton, 2008). The popularity of studying forensics has not been limited to forensic science but has also shown an expansion within forensic anthropology and the use of the term 'forensic' within subjects ranging from engineering to sport science, and psychology to computing. A search on UCAS (Universities and Colleges Admissions Service) in the UK in April 2014 revealed 119 undergraduate degrees and 2728 postgraduate courses available based on the search term 'forensic science' which excluded the 133 undergraduate and 326 graduate courses listed under 'forensics' or the 6 undergraduate and 208 postgraduate courses for forensic anthropology. Studying forensics is popular not only in the UK but also the US as well as illustrated by the international student website<sup>1</sup> which reveals 1024 undergraduate forensic science programmes and 1238 graduate and doctoral courses. The popularity of forensic science is reflected in not just portrayals on television but also degree courses particularly since the turn of the twenty-first century.

In this article the focus will be upon televisual representation of forensic science and its impact on interest in explicit viewing of the dead which is partly reflected by growth of Higher Education in the forensic science field. The growth in the presence of the dead on television has led Foltyn (2008) to assert that the cadaver has become 'pop culture's new star' (p. 154). The multitude of cadavers on television seems to support this claim with seven of the top 10 most-watched TV dramas including *CSI* and *NCIS* regularly employing corpse actors (actors who play dead bodies) illustrating the television industry infrastructure which is in place to support the need for the 'dead' to appear in entertainment programmes (Chozick, 2011). This work expands upon Foltyn's claim of corpses being

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a new star in order to consider the origins of this cadaver popularity. Consequently it will be argued that pop culture's new star is actually not just the corpse but instead forensic science whose portrayals link the public gaze to the fictional dead. As a result it is suggested that popular culture representation of forensic science is providing a normalising and softening barrier via the gaze that truly allows us to 'see through a glass, darkly' (Bible, NIV). This softening lens makes gazing upon and consuming the dead often in a state of undress and openness (literally in the instance of autopsy portrayals) as socially palatable entertainment. It is the overly dramatic fictional yet apparently realistic representation of the corpse that allows the gaze to be firmly rooted in the safety of morbid space such as fiction or rather the 'glass, darkly' enabling control and security over death. Interestingly although the corpse is gaining visibility through the lens of popular culture it remains an item of revulsion and a reminder of human mortality outside of this fictional realm highlighting a tension between the acceptability of public obsession and consumption of death and the dead.

### **Forensic Science in Popular Culture**

We are living in an age of 'forensic noir' characterised by an almost fanatical belief in the powers of forensic science to solve crimes and a morbid interest in human dissection (Doherty, 2003, B15-16). The foundation for this forensic science and morbidity obsession is linked to Seltzer's (1998, p. 2) notion of wound culture that argues a wounded body occupies the public as a matter of routine, with its openness being normalised and unremarkable. Atrocity exhibition is manifestly evident in popular culture forms ranging from fashion to comic strips and from novels to video games along with television and film all of which embrace the realistic fictional corpse in some form. This manifestation of the corpse as entertainment has become part of everyday life. Seltzer's wound culture is transfixed with the serial killer as a celebrity superstar (1998, p. 2, 4) and how apparently senseless serial murders challenges the public sense of mortality, body, identity, desire, violence and intimacy. If the concept of wound culture is expanded beyond the serial killer it lays open an

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explanation for, and the consumption of, the corpse as an art form (Brown and Philips, 2014), a form of entertainment (Ferrell and Websdale, 1999) a celebrity such as the famous criminal corpse (Penfold-Mounce, 2009) and even as an educational tool as in Gunther von Hagen's *Body Worlds* touring exhibition. The celebration and consumption of fictional human remains is becoming a crossing point for pleasure and the fulfilment of fantasy in collective space, between the individual and the collective, the celebrity and the public (Seltzer, 1998, p. 254). The focus on the corpse in this wound culture emphasises contemporary societies' desire to be perturbed and titillated; it is a process of connecting with the inner darkness of what humans can be capable of and embodies a desire for the macabre and instils revulsion. Although there is an audience of butchery (Foltyn, 2008, p. 157) it would seem that wound culture is about 'more than a taste for senseless violence' (Seltzer, 1998, p. 21). Viewing the corpse in wound culture through popular culture representation or in the name of scientific education is a complex process of human engagement with mortality.

The importance of forensic science and its popular culture portrayals are central to feeding the morbid societal obsession with corpses, violence and death. Forensic science is the application of modern science and its techniques to address questions relevant to the criminal justice system and is the centrepiece to this article's focus on public fascination with death and corpses. It is important to note that the term 'forensics' can and is linked to a range of academic specialities and disciplines other than forensic science (in relation to crime solving) including forensic speech science located in language and linguistics, computer forensics in computing and engineering, digital forensics in computing and IT and most notably forensic anthropology within anthropology. However in this article forensics specifically refers to forensic science. The public embrace of forensic science coincides with Foltyn's (2008) claim that the 'corpse count has gone up' (p.154). Death and corpses as part of regular everyday life is intimately bound to the erosion of boundaries between crime news and crime entertainment which has been suggested to have become hazier with rise of reality crime shows (Dowler, Fleming and Muzzatti, 2006) and evidenced through more prolific representation from the 1980s onwards (McIlwain, 2005). Death and the dead are being 'constructed and circulated

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as...object[s] of consumption, knowledge, and desire' (Hearsum, 2012, p. 184) and the circulation process is largely through forensic science representation within popular culture. Consequently the corpse and forensic science are being transformed into an 'infotainment commodity' (Foltyn, 2008, p. 155) that is normalising the mediated viewing of the dead and death. .

Forensic images have entered our visual culture (Foltyn, 2008, p. 156) in multiple forms. The most common being in the form of police forensic examiners or crime scene investigators such as *CSI*, *NCIS*, *Cold Case*, *Without a Trace* (US) and *Silent Witness* (UK) although forensic anthropologists are also portrayed such as in the series *Bones* (US). The cadaver has become a forensic tool (Timmermans, 2006) as well as entertainment within popular culture and is central to understanding societal perceptions of death and scientific evidence. Nowhere is the normalisation process more evident than in the *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* (CSI) television show. Its longevity in prime time viewing as well as spawning two equally successful spin-off series (*CSI: Miami* and *CSI: New York*) in which it portrays an exaggerated dramatic vision of forensic science is so significant that 'the CSI effect' (Mopas, 2007) is often referred to existing. Mopas uses this effect to refer to the impact of forensic science representation on television upon public perception and how this has pushed the idea of forensic science along with terms and concepts into popular discourse. Forensic science in CSI reinforce the assertion that physical evidence is factorial, it cannot be wrong and is not absent or flawed like human witnesses (Thornton, 1997). CSI shows forensic science to be not only science but super science that helps convict murderers or rapists even after their death or that of the victim. The consequences of such popular culture portrayals according to Schweitzer and Saks (2007, p. 358) include that the public serving on juries are struggling to dispense judgements in some cases because they have been misled by television to think forensic science is more effective and accurate than it is and they are disappointed by unimpressive non-fictional forensic evidence. Forensic science on television such as in CSI has effectively diffused the sense that science and the police are virtually infallible (Deutsch and Cavender, 2008). Although ultimately television and reality are moving in opposing directions (Schweitzer and Saks, 2007, p. 359) with estimates that 40% of the

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science on CSI does not exist and most of the rest is performed in a way that crime lab personnel can only dream about (Cole and Dioso, 2005, p. 13).

The popularity of forensic science based television but also post-disaster and tragedy voyeurism amongst the public has been suggested by Foltyn (2008; 2008a) to be related to the formation of an ambivalence about the corpse. This ambivalence highlights the corpse is in a state of flux whereby it is caught in a process of 'displaying and hiding it, revering and defiling it, viewing it as useful and useless and a source of amusement and somberness' (Foltyn, 2008a, p. 100). The corpse and death continues to be embraced with conflicting attitudes and this can be connected to a failure to separate reality and non-reality. To assert that we are au fait with non-fictionalised portrayals of death, dying, corpses and violence is actually a process of fooling ourselves as actually we shroud ourselves from it (Davies, 2010). We are accepting of the normalisation of our exposure to opened, fake corpses within wound culture (Seltzer, 1998) highlighting a degree of being desensitized but this does not fully extend to real bodies. We are still shocked by real cadavers; they are too revealing and a graphic of reminder of mortality with some deserving more respect and attention than others. For example in July 2014 flight MH17 was shot down over the Ukraine killing all 298 passengers. As a result of the plane crashing in a war zone between government and rebel forces this has led to the disaster site being difficult to reach by foreign investigators. Particular concerns have been raised regarding the treatment, recovery and transportation of the corpses with only 282 and 87 body fragments reaching the city of Kharkiv for identification following the initial retrieval of the dead from rebel territory (Walker and Salem, 2014). Further controversy has pursued the corpses relating to stories and news report images of rebels not respecting the dignity of the victims and journalists interfering with the accident victims personal possessions at the disaster site prior to forensic teams arriving and thus undermining the integrity of the investigation and violating perceived corpse rights (Brazier, 2014). The actual corpse requires distance and respect even within a death desensitised society as we are still not shock proofed towards the real corpse. Public morbidity is channelled and fed by popular representations death and the corpse primarily via forensic science. The conflicting or

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ambivalent responses to morbidity poses intriguing questions as to what is the appeal of viewing abused, violated, wounded and open bodies? And how and why is our gaze directed at something that also revolts, disgusts and disturbs us?

### Watching the Dead

The ability to watch the dead is aided by our visually dominated contemporary society that directs and stimulates a plethora of morbid 'gazes'. The gaze in the context of this article draws upon Foucault's (1973) 'clinical gaze' where the patient's body is 'read' and interpreted by a physician creating a penetrating form of observation. Foucault emphasises the power and knowledge to be gained, for there is no such thing as 'just a gaze' (Foucault, 1980). A gaze can be:

An inspecting gaze, a gaze which each individual under its weight will end by interiorizing to the point that he [she] is his own overseer, each individual thus exercising this surveillance over, and against himself. A superb formula: power exercised continuously and for what turns out to be a minimum cost' (Foucault, 1980, p. 155)

Consequently 'the gaze is not the act of looking itself' it is about viewing characteristics in a particular set of social circumstances (Sturken, Cartwright and Sturken 2001, p. 76). The gaze is about the relationship between pleasure and images and there is no single gaze but a complex array of gazes for viewers. Pierson's (2010) framework of gazes - the voyeuristic, abject, forensic and aoptic - will be adopted to elaborate upon this multiplicity and blurring of gazes as a softening lens through which the dead are viewed.

Viewing the dead indulges the common drive for voyeurism, whereby the gaze focuses on viewing into the private lives of others often in their most intimate settings. It is where a person enjoys the pain and distress of others or is obsessively motivated to observe sordid or sensational subjects. The voyeuristic gaze can be conducted by different people with varying motivations including the

**Deleted:** a blurring of Benjamin's (1999) flâneur and Foucault's (1973) 'clinical gaze'. Benjamin wrote about the notion of the gaze through the flâneur who he described as a person who was not simply a stroller, idly wasting time in gazing about the city but rather a modern urban spectator. They were an investigator of the city whilst also remaining detached from the urban surroundings. Although Benjamin's flâneur perished with the triumph of consumer capitalism the notion of the gaze was highlighted as a powerful and significant position from which to consider the society around us.

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academic such as the archaeologist, the sociologist, psychologist, the anthropologist, the physician etc.; the investigative gaze of the police and the state; the informational gaze as possessed by the news media; the erotic peeping tom, predominantly men looking at the bodies of women; or the innocent bystander of an event or the inquisitive gaze of the tourist (Urry, 1990; Denzin, 1995). All these gazers are voyeurs. Typically voyeurism is associated with viewing others in an intimate setting such undressing or sexual relations but this can also include the intimacy of viewing the dead or violence. Reality television dating back to the 1980s began the normalising process of voyeurism towards not only victims of crime but particularly dead victims. TV programmes such as *America's Most Wanted* helped pioneer the notion of the public's voyeurism of the criminal. This voyeurism was complete with re-enactments of the crime, and vignettes of interviews with victims, family and friends as well as the police and also film and photographs of actual criminals and victims (Cavender, Bond-Maupin and Jurik, 1999, p. 646). The voyeuristic gaze upon corpses in popular culture goes beyond reality television settings. In popular culture the cadaver is viewed closely and intimately displaying and emphasising the vulnerability of the dead body. This is highlighted by the manner of coroner Alexx Woods (Seasons 1-6) in *CSI: Miami* who consistently talks to the corpses as she would a child using terms such as 'sweetie', 'honey', or 'baby boy/girl' and commenting that the victims were too young to die. In so doing she reflects the helplessness of the dead. The corpse is consistently portrayed in a violated state at the crime scene accentuating its defencelessness to the voyeuristic gaze and this is only exacerbated in a science environment such as the autopsy room where the corpse is naked and the gaze is invited to view inside the opened cadaver during the dissection. The voyeuristic gaze in forensics television dramas is dominated by necrophilia as the audience is invited to associate death and eroticism with many of the victims being young, attractive men and women frequently murdered during or after sex (Tait, 2006, p. 52-53) as illustrated in 'Empty Eyes' (*CSI*, Season 7, Episode 18) where six showgirls are sexually assaulted and murdered. Portrayals of the corpse within forensic dominated popular culture indulge and stimulate the

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voyeuristic gaze in order to comprehend the inner attraction and repulsion of television audiences to abject images of death (Pierson, 2010, p. 185).

The abject gaze is intimately connected with voyeurism in that it is both repulsive and attractive in its focus upon the death of the human body. The autopsy scenes in television shows such as *Silent Witness* or *CSI* foster an abject gaze toward the human cadaver whereby modern science chases the magic out of the world but re-enchants it through compelling visual spectacles (Slater, 1995, p. 220-227) of forensic work that extend into autopsy scenes. Autopsies are conducted in the CSI franchise in dramatic, stylised manner as evidenced in 'Hung out to dry' (CSI: New York, Season 3, Episode 4). The autopsy is dominated by the focus on the victims severed head and directs the gaze onto the procedure to discover if the victim had been drugged prior to being murdered. The camera focuses on the hands of Sid Hammerback, the medical examiner as he plunges a syringe into the eyeball, before shifting viewpoint to inside the eye to provide the audience with a view of the needle drawing liquid from inside the corpse. Viewing the corpse from inside and the retrospective playing out of injuries inflicted on the victim leading to their death is common in the CSI franchise. The gaze is given access to what the CSI characters can only imagine and speculate. The viewer is in a position of privilege to see science in action, to witness forensic data gathering techniques that cannot in reality be seen. The realistic simulation of corpses and dissection via autopsy indulges our abject gaze under the socially acceptable guise of science blended with stylised, fictional cinematic access into the dead.

The abject gaze focuses on the corpse as a 'profound, horrific reminder of one's mortality and physical materiality' (Pierson, 2010, p. 185) it is the omnipresent threat to self-identity and subjectivity (Kristeva, 1982, p. 4). To Kristeva (1982) the abject gaze is the human reaction of deep and revolting horror to the threat of a collapse in meaning between subject and object or rather self and other. The exemplar of this being the human corpse as it reminds the viewer of their mortality and physical materiality. However other items that stimulate disgust can also provoke a similar

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response such as a gaping wound, blood, excrement and news of paedophile crimes. The abject stimulates the drive to establish boundaries between human and animal. It is ambiguous and does not respect borders and rules it 'disturbs identity, system, order' (Kristeva, 1982, p. 4). Consequently the corpse is the ultimate in abjection. We are repulsed and attracted to it in order to immerse ourselves in it and thereby protect us from it (Pierson, 2010, p. 194). Forensic science television programmes promote an abject gaze towards the human body whilst glamourizing and eroticising in its dead state through the intimate examination of good looking corpses. While viewers may be repulsed by these abject bodies they are also attracted via the cultural fascination with the materiality of death and its effects on the anatomized body (Pierson, 2010, p. 195). It is mediated within popular culture representations of forensic work through the investigators which 'seeks to control and order crime, death and abjection' (Pierson, 2010, p. 185). The abject gaze focused on forensics in popular culture produces a compelling televisual forensic gaze.

The third gaze – the forensic gaze – is significant as it differs from the abject, voyeuristic and even the autoptic (shortly to be discussed) gazes. The forensic gaze is not directly the viewer's gaze but instead a lens through which the viewer sees. The viewer sees the corpse through the eyes of forensic scientists; it is the gaze of science. Shows such as CSI construct an accessible forensic gaze

for audiences (Pierson, 2010, p. 186) often blending scenes with dramatic visual graphics of fictional forensics equipment. For example in CSI: New York a virtual autopsy room and a holographic replica of a victim are introduced ('BattleScars', Season 6, Episode 5). The forensic gaze empowers the viewer by providing 'truth' through forensic science. The forensic gaze provides a contradictory experience of both intimacy and distance between the viewer and the dead. The forensic gaze allows the viewer to witness the dead through close ups of forensic pathologists autopsy techniques and visual graphics taking the viewer into the corpse interspersed with distancing camera shots such as viewing procedures via screens upon which the autopsy is being projected and recorded ('3.08 (Speed Kills)', CSI: Miami, Season 3, Episode 8). The corpse via the forensic gaze offers audiences an imagined sense of control over crime and criminality and ultimately death. It provides visual access

**Deleted:** by providing knowledge through the lens of fictional television forensic investigation. It is through the power of the forensic gaze that new forms of knowledge are generated and power is articulated onto the body.

**Deleted:** is mitigated and reinscribed within the realm of forensic science (Pierson, 2010, p. 197) it

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but separates the viewer from the reality of death. There is no smell of decay or burnt flesh; there is no drip of body fluid or squish of organs being removed or bones being severed by a bone saw.

Consumption is through the eyes and the sounds are edited and occasionally interspersed with music montages to make the corpse both separate and more palatable to the viewer. Importantly the forensic gaze is intertwined with the language in its investigation (Foucault, 1973; Pierson, 2010) contributing to the empowerment of the viewer. In popular culture representations of forensic scientists they are shown to verbally record their observations about the victim and the crime scene. This is particularly well illustrated in shows such as *Silent Witness* and CSI where the pathologists or medical examiners continuously describe and discuss proceedings and findings using the language and jargon of science. The forensic gaze adds to the science based lens that stands between the viewer and death as it softens and distances the viewer from the revulsion of dead flesh and aids the emergence of corpse and death as entertainment. The forensic gaze allows closeness without true intimacy with cadavers.

The final gaze - the autoptic gaze – is an interconnected combination of the other gazes. The autoptic gaze is abject, voyeuristic and forensically inclined focusing on the eroticising process of the cadaver as a visual spectacle. This is evident in the portrayal of the dead victims in forensic science driven television shows that are dominated by a gendered gaze. Mulvey's (1975) reflection on how woman is represented as 'other' and bound by a symbolic order where man imposes fantasies and obsession through her silent image is sheds light upon the autoptic gaze. The victim's corpse, who is predominantly female on forensic television shows, is a bearer and not maker of meaning. Forensic based television drama, like in film, codes the erotic into the language of the dominant patriarchal order. Subsequently women, even dead, are an objectified other whereby the victim's corpse is isolated, on display and sexualised and the spectator can indirectly possess her (Mulvey, 1975, p. 9, 13). The gendered gaze is a lynchpin for the autoptic gaze in that it highlights that 'the gaze' is in fact inescapably the male gaze which is also the female gaze, meaning that women look at themselves through the male gaze (Sassatelli, 2011, p. 127-128). This gendered dimension to the autoptic gaze

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reiterates the normalising processes that can be exerted through the gaze relating to gender and supporting the normalising process of the gaze upon death and the dead.

Visually consuming the victim's corpse through the autoptic gaze is predominantly conducted in two locations, the crime scene and the autopsy theatre. The corpse is consistently arranged in a stylised position that is reminiscent of pornography or as Pinedo (1997) writes 'carnography' where porn and horror expose the hidden recesses of the body. The corpse is passive and beautiful waiting to be dissected. Consequently the autopsy becomes a kind of rape (Sappol, 2002) which exploits the nude, young and beautiful relying on close-ups and exploration of every inch of the body which is presented as an outrageous sight (Foltyn, 2008) whilst the viewer is encouraged to gaze at the corpse as forensic experts discuss 'penile implants, missing nipples, S & M lash marks, tattoos, and intimate piercings' (Foltyn, 2008). The corpse becomes a prop that helps the science-as-detective narrative to unfold at the crime scene or in the morgue or autopsy theatre. This is particularly pertinent in the UK's *Prime Suspect* where the corpse often plays a motivational role for protagonist DCI Jane Tennison who seems to get 'the scent' of the crime by closely examining the victim's body either at the crime scene or in an examination theatre. Tait (2006) argues the performance of forensic science in CSI is used to conceal an 'autoptic vision' based on the erotic desire to 'see inside the body' and expose hidden secrets (p.49-50). Forensic science offers a 'refuse for the pornography of death' (Tait, 2006, p. 50).

The autoptic gaze suggests boundaries to the fascination with the dead body fixated upon the eroticism and fetishisation of the corpse. It also reflects Baudrillard's (2007) idea of technology (ie media technology in this instance) becoming a medium whereby reality collapses into hyperrealism as there is a:

meticulous reduplication of the real, preferably through another reproductive medium such as advertising or photography....[and subsequently] the real becomes volatile, it becomes

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the allegory of death, but it draws strength from its own destruction, becoming the real for its own sake...: the hyperreal. (p. 71-72)

There is no longer 'counterfeiting of an original' (Baudrillard, 2007, p. 56) the hyperreal world makes events and occurrences to be 'more real than the real' (Baudrillard, 1995, p. 99). Consequently through technologies especially digital media the capacity to know the world is increasingly shaped in order to be consumed. This is pertinent in understanding public morbidity through forensic science portrayals because experiences of the dead are edited and manipulated in fictional and factual portrayals whereby boundaries between what is real and what is virtual are becoming blurred. The impact of this boundary blurring is a significant contribution to public attitudes and perceptions of violent injury, death and the dead. Forensics within popular culture creates an image of the dead that becomes real despite being fictional with fake corpses. It encapsulates the normalisation of cadavers through a softening lens of science. Consequently public morbidity is being fed by the 'world where the highest function of the sign is to make reality disappear and at the same time to mask that disappearance...The media today do nothing else' (Zurbrugg, 1997, p. 12). Contemporary society is hallucinating reality as popular culture representations of forensic science convince the public to use voyeuristic, abject, forensic and autoptic gazes to see the hyperreal. Ironically according to Baudrillard (1996, p. 16) 'there is no crisis of reality. Far from it. There will always be more reality, because it is produced and reproduced by simulation, and is itself merely a model of simulation'. The simulacrum of popular culture forensic science portrayals is the message and the message is 'real' (Baudrillard, 1983).

### **Negotiating Morbid Space**

The rise of morbidity whereby popular culture portrayals of death, dying, corpses and the macabre is indulged is forming what this article proposes to be 'morbid space'. Morbid space is a

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conceptualisation of space and how it is moved through, lived within and consumed. It embodies how cadavers and death are becoming normalised whilst also becoming celebrated, popularised and eroticised alongside societal ambivalence. Morbid space has historical origins in the long tradition of public spectacles being made of body parts and cadavers (Foltyn, 2008a). Nowhere is this more evident than in the process of the public witnessing torture and execution of criminals and the public autopsies of said criminals which have occurred in the past in the western world (Penfold-Mounce, 2009) and the extensive range of superstitious tales claiming the mystical healing properties of the dead criminal body (Penfold-Mounce, 2010; Cannon, 1984; Stuart, 1999). Morbid spaces include not just execution sites but also science related spaces such as the mortuary and the autopsy theatre which create a new vision of immortality (O'Neill, 2008) and not simply a holding zone for the dead. This vision of immortality is because morbid spaces are not limited to physical locations of dead bodies but also include virtual and popular spaces in which public obsession with death and corpses can be indulged. Subsequently the corpse lives on beyond the extinguishment of life because it titillates public fascination and commercial value in mass culture. This means morbid space includes tourist sites and souvenirs (Potts, 2014), video gaming along with film and book noir (Atkinson and Rodgers, 2014; Millington, 2014), biological artwork (Brown and Phillips, 2014) or even the realities of corpse disposal in outer space (Benneworth-Gray, 2014). Morbid space is a way of explaining, exploring and conceptualising public fascination with the dead within a society fixated on the antithesis of death. It allows society 'to collectively stare death in the face' (Foltyn, 2008, p. 169) and grants the opportunity to transgress cultural norms, to titillate and outrage and gain public attention whilst also adding to the normalising process of corpses within popular culture.

Morbid space provides the space in which Lacan's (1992, p. 62) claim that beauty guides us to our own death can be fulfilled for our own sense of mortality is explored through public fascination with the dead particularly within popular culture's use and creation of morbid space. In a consumerist society focused on youth, beauty and sex, it would seem that death, via the corpse, is the new body to be explored (Foltyn, 2008). We are all 'rubberneckers' possessed with morbid curiosity (Hearsum

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2012) and when this is combined with Seltzer's wound culture and the various gazes that have been highlighted, death and the dead have become routine. It is normalised to the extent that death is no longer the body's 'most fouled form, something to hide and to disguise' (Foltyn, 2009, p. 382). The corpse in morbid space is being 'recoded, desacralized, and transacted by those who view it as a worldly commodity to exploit for profit' (Foltyn, 2008a, p. 100). As a consumable good, the corpse is being plundered through popular culture representations that subsequently reiterate the process of desensitisation of the consumer (or viewer) of cadavers and death. It has become normal to market death and the dead to adults and within eyeshot of the young as a dramatic entertainment. The potential of popular culture as a morbid space encourages the development and use of autoptic gaze. Not only is the corpse eroticised but also emphasises how viewing the dead can be 'depraved, disturbing, decadent, or edge, conceptual, and artistic; or some combination thereof' (Foltyn, 2009, p. 380). Morbid space invites consideration of what is acceptable contact between the living and the dead and what intimacy with the dead is suitable. Consequently it is a space in which society's ideas about the dichotomy between death and life can be explored in the safety of popular culture and fiction. This is particularly significant in contemporary society which is dominated by youth and beauty, individualism and capitalist consumerism which is a distinct contrast to active consideration of mortality and the end of life.

A culture of fear of death and the corpse is not so much evident as a culture choosing to face death in a realm that is not real and softened by the lens of forensic science. Emerick (2000) focuses on America as possessing a fearful culture of death but this fear is not limited to this nation alone as many contemporary societies are trying to come to terms with death via popular culture and commercial exploitations, conflicting theologies and medical advancement. These societies have built their own death myths and developed their 'own way of coping with terror' (Rakoff, 1973, p. 150) particularly through the use of morbid space. Death is no longer restricted to popular nineteenth-century medical assertions of death being the separation of the soul and the body making death into pure negativity. Instead death has been rationalised, normalised, popularised and

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even celebrated and has become dominated by medical oriented scientific explanations such as through medicine and forensic science. The corpse as a repository of fear is now studied scientifically both in popular culture representations and within contemporary society in order to try and determine the unknown. Popular entertainment representations of forensic science within morbid space allow for not only negotiation between normalisation, novelty and titillation of death and the dead but also become a form of social glue. In the morbid space of *CSI* or *Silent Witness* 'Crimes are solved, victims are avenged, and order is restored' (Deutsch and Cavander, 2007, p. 48). Therefore criminal sanctions express society's condemnation of criminals and reaffirms moral boundaries that crime threatens. With punishment no longer being a public spectacle in contemporary society it is the media, including popular culture media forms that socially condemn fictional criminals (Schattenberg, 1981) thus creating public consensus within a shared morbid space.

By using science particularly forensic science within popular culture as a softening lens through which to view death and corpses a distraction is offered to viewers from the fears surrounding aging, dying and decay. The provision of a dazzling plethora of data surrounding the body aids in understanding the causes of death and the frailty of mortality combined with the visibility of the corpse in morbid space. This creates a morbid fascination that comforts and provides security regarding the inevitability of death. Controlling our engagement with dead bodies, which literally embodies fear about death and dying, and by viewing them through a lens of popular culture forensic science provides a normative distance from reality. This is supported by Atkinson and Rogers (2014) analysis of violent video gaming in the form of the 'murder box' where active participation in violent video games is creating a normative reaction to murder in the virtual world. The desensitisation to death and the dead leads to a normalisation process is beyond the provision of the hyperreal, whereby there is an inability to distinguish reality from a simulation of reality. The hyperreality of death and corpses within popular culture representation is recognised and yet there is a desire to believe in the simulation which is preferable to reality. Acceptance of the fake dead within our midst is part of the process whereby we embrace morbid space as infotainment. It

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provides control in a world which feels out of control; it grants a godlike power over death and enables the viewer to be able to see death from behind the safety of the hyperreal. Popular culture representation of forensic science is the safe and socially acceptable zone in which to engage with death and corpses in contemporary society.

The emergence of morbid space as a normalising phenomenon seems to extend over popular culture representations of death, dying and corpses but it remains controversial for the public to see real corpses and autopsies even under the rhetoric of science, knowledge, art and education. The *Body Worlds* exhibition where real corpses are on display outside of a funeral or morgues continue to divide society as to what is and is not acceptable regarding death and corpses. The morbid space in which *Body Worlds* negotiates its way is unique in that it helps maintain distance from the real as the corpses are clearly exhibits (albeit in the name of science) and are dehumanised in their skinless state. Consequently gazing upon the dead outside of popular culture and the safety of the forensic gaze both of which allows death to be explored in a safe, controlled and stylised way continues to be controversial and socially unacceptable. Despite the corpse gaining visibility within forensic science popular culture portrayals it still remains an item of distaste, controversy and social division. People are not comfortable talking about dead bodies; they react with discomfort to this reminder of human mortality. It appears that contemporary society continues to be more comfortable denying and trying to control the prospect of death by experiencing and normalising death via entertainment.

## **Conclusion**

The human body has long been perceived as a window into, or a metaphor for, society. It is saturated with meaning and can function as a method of viewing humanity (Posel and Gupta, 2009). Consequently even when the body is dead it still has something to say. Corpses speak of the past,

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the present and our joint future making them key in providing understanding and insight into culture, society and humanity. This article has sought to explore the impact of popular culture representations of forensic science particularly through the CSI drama series that is encouraging and nurturing public fascination with the dead. Consequently it is not just the corpse that is popular cultures new star but also forensic science in popular culture portrayals. The range and number of corpses on fictional television shows suggests a desensitisation and normalisation process is occurring where gazing upon the dead, often in an intimate state, such as during autopsies, is ordinary and usual. This plethora of cadavers encourages and stimulates the gaze by actively projecting death within morbid space but from the acceptable position of fiction. Consequently a culture engrossed in morbidity is highlighted where '[r]ealistic death imagery has moved into mainstream visual culture' (Foltyn, 2009, p. 387).

The cultural focus on the visualisation of death is balanced with strong evidence of fascination being motivated and fixated on fictional, populist images of death, which become substituted for real ones. To gaze upon overly dramatic, yet apparently realistic, representation of corpses and death is acceptable from the safety of fiction and the boundaries of a story narrative enable control and security in morbid space. In contrast morbid space encourages reflection upon the complexity of the visibility of factual death and the dead confirming that society is far from ambivalent towards the dead. This is illustrated by factual media representation of death and corpses embodied by the release of atrocity film footage online such as ISIS beheadings in Syria in 2014. Mediated portrayals of death and the dead raise the question of appropriateness regarding visibility and highlights a continuing discomfort with factual representations of death and the corpse. The gaze is affected by the real cadavers and death which remain shocking and disturbing in contrast to the normalisation of death and corpses in popular culture. Gazing upon death continues to be acceptable and appropriate only by proxy. Consequently fascination with the dead remains something that is primarily experienced and made pleasurable and entertaining through the controlled safety of gazing through the popular culture 'forensic science' glass, darkly.

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### Acknowledgments

Many thanks to Robin Wooffitt, Vanita Sundaram and the anonymous reviewer for their constructive feedback on earlier versions of this article.

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<sup>i</sup> <http://www.internationalstudent.com/school-search/school/search/>