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Corpses, Popular Culture and Forensic Science

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Summary

The dead body has a history of being a source of fascination for the living with ancient narratives relating to mysterious corpse powers that have fed into how the dead are portrayed and consumed by society. Corpses are graphically visible within the twenty-first century in not only news coverage of natural disasters, war and human inflicted trauma but most prominently in popular culture. Popular culture in this context is used to refer predominately but not exclusively to film and television as these are key visual sites consumed on mass by the public. The sheer range of locations and forms that death and the dead are now present within popular culture makes it unavoidable and visually vivid as a form of entertainment. Consuming the corpse within popular culture is dominated by portrayals of corpse parts via organ transplant mythology, the undead (i.e. zombies and vampires) and the authentic dead (fake corpses in 'realistic' fiction) within forensic science. Viewing death within the fictional context of the undead and forensics has made the corpse, particularly the opened and violated corpse, into an acceptable entertainment commodity. Accusations have been made that these dead bodies within forensics based television shows and films border on pornographic in that they seek to be shocking and deviant whilst meeting the expectation to be entertained by violated, wounded bodies. However we are no longer shocked. We are acclimatized and the

undead and the authentic dead within forensic science in popular culture has been central in this process. Death and the dead are safe when consumed through popular culture which provides us with a softening lens. Popular culture portrayals particularly of forensic science enable distance between the dead and the consuming viewer. It is a point of safety from which to explore death and human mortality.

Keywords

Corpse, CSI, Dead body, Death, Forensic Science, Gaze, Popular Culture, Undead, Vampire, Zombie

The corpse is a vivid reminder of mortality and has an ancient and intriguing relationship with the living. The historical relationship with the dead particularly through associations with mystical healing powers as embodied by corpse medicine and the asserted powers of the criminal corpse has led to a vibrant tapestry of narrative surrounding the dead. Contemporary society has seized these narratives and myths and transformed them into entertainment within popular culture. As such the dead are consumable in bits (i.e. organ transplantation myths), as the fictional undead (i.e. zombies and vampires) and perhaps most prominently as the authentic dead where they convince the viewer of their authenticity despite being a dummy or a live actor playing dead. The authentic dead are preeminent in forensic science television shows and film guiding the viewer's gaze to consume the dead as entertainment. The exposure of the corpse in various popular culture genres to the consumer feeds an apparent desire for the dead. However notably this desire to consume the corpse is not physical like a cannibal but instead through the entertainment capabilities of popular culture which provides

a controlled and safe environment to explore death. Popular culture provides space in which to explore human mortality without having to face the full reality of death and the corpse in person.

The Powers of the Corpse

There are many accounts between the middle ages up to the 18th century in the Western world of corpses being linked to mystical powers and qualities. These powers are particularly connected to criminal corpses which have been used for corpse medicine, where the cadaver is used as medicine in the belief of its healing power. Corpse medicine has historically been a widespread practice even used by royalty (Sugg, 2011). It revolved around the belief in the power of the predominantly, but not exclusively criminal, corpse to cure the living of various illness, disease and maladies. This included the conviction that skin from the dead criminal could cure skin diseases and their blood could stop a variety of complaints including epilepsy, whilst they could also heal scrofula, warts, sores, neck and throat problems and even cancer (Cannon, 1984, p. 98). The preference of using the corpses hand to stroke the afflicted body part largely fell out of use by the 18th century and corpse medicine declined but some instances have been identified right up to the 1940s in Cambridgeshire (Porter, 1974, p. 47). Access to the criminal dead in order to benefit from healing powers meant attendance at public executions were popular and led some hangmen to charge a fee for access to the criminal corpse (Black, 1882, pp. 100-1) all of which is reflected in Thomas Hardy's 1928 short story [*The Withered Arm*](#). [Insert figure 1 – Gallows]

Notably the power of the criminal corpse is not restricted to just healing but also includes other mysterious properties such as the hand of glory which was a talisman supposedly popular among thieves and robbers (Penfold-Mounce, 2010). In recent years this item has been brought to the forefront of popular imagination in JK Rowling's Harry Potter series

where Draco Malfoy uses it as part of his plot to assassinate Hogwarts Headmaster Albus Dumbledore. The hand of glory consists of a dried and pickled human hand (predominantly the left one) severed from a hanged murderer who had not been long dead. It was used to either hold a lit candle or was lit as a candle itself with a wick made of the criminals' hair and was believed to possess a range of functions:

- the power to paralyse all those to whom it was presented rendering them unable to awake from sleep
- could only be put out effectively by milk
- the ability to unlock all doors
- the provision of light only to the bearer of the hand

One of the only actual examples of this form of talisman is located in the Whitby Museum, North Yorkshire in the UK which claims that its hand of glory is one of its most popular exhibits. Although the powers of the hand of glory are dismissed in contemporary society it remains symbolic of not only the power associated with the criminal dead but also as evidence of a long standing macabre fascination with the corpse, or at least parts of the cadaver belonging to a criminal. [Insert figure 2 - Whitby Museum's Hand of Glory – with kind permission of the Whitby Museum, UK]

The perception of the power of the corpse extends to a more symbolic form power, whereby the corpse stimulates people's fascination and desire to consume the dead on the grounds of leisure, entertainment and education. This is evident within the tourist industry where consumption of the dead occurs as 'dark tourism' or 'thanatourism'. Seaton (1996) provides one of the most effective definitions of 'thanatourism' in which he describes it to entail travelling to: 'a location wholly, or partially, motivated by the desire for actual or symbolic encounters with death, particularly, but not exclusively, violent death' (1996, p. 15). The lure

of the dead is so strong that the site of death or the invisible presence of the dead becomes symbolically powerful. It draws morbid curiosity and malicious indulgence of other people's suffering (Seaton and Lennon, 2004) as well as a collective sense of identity or survival (Rojek, 1997). Dark tourism sites have varying shades of darkness as classified by Philip Stone (2006), who set up the [Institute for Dark Tourism Research \(IDTR\)](#), in 2012. Stone identifies a dark tourism spectrum ranging from dark fun factories to dark conflict sites and from dark shrines to dark resting places. In all these dark tourist locations the dead are present even if not visible particularly if an atrocity or criminal act has been conducted at the site. However if the corpse is actually present and is infamous in some way or can be consumed as a souvenir an additional layer of macabre tourist consumption emerges. For example a huge range of macabre souvenirs and keepsakes associated specifically with the criminal dead have been collected over the years. Most are now in museums but include artefacts such as a severed skull cap taken as a souvenir from an autopsy and used as an ashtray; medical bags, shoes and books made of criminal corpse skin; a dried scalp and ear for a book shop window display; criminal skeleton's displayed in hospitals; a mummified arm kept by the doctor doing the autopsy of a murderer; and vast numbers of members of the public viewing the criminal dead before burial (Penfold-Mounce, 2010). This macabre souvenir consumption is only reinforced by instances of tourist like behaviour by the public at crime scenes. For example members of the public were noted to have dipped their handkerchiefs and skirts into pools of blood as keepsakes at the scene where bank robber John Dillinger was shot to death by the then fledgling Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) in the 1930s. Even government officials such as J. Edgar Hoover the original head of the FBI have not been immune to this tourist like consuming behaviour. Hoover kept a collection of Dillinger artefacts including his hat, gun, reading glasses and the pocket change taken from the corpse (Penfold-Mounce, 2010). [Insert figure 3 - Keeping corpse souvenirs] Keeping bits

of the famous dead or associated with them has played a significant role in dark tourism and reflects the enduring symbolic power of the corpse to stimulate fascination with death, the dead and the macabre.

An important component of the power of the criminal corpse lies beyond the macabre drive for souvenirs of the criminal dead. The criminal corpse also wields an influential and symbolic power as a 'hero' that is hard to quench. Instances have occurred where the burial site of the criminal dead has become a tourist destination or a shrine with tombstones being chipped away as souvenirs. A range of methods to destroy the symbolic power of the famous criminal dead has resulted. The choice of President Barak Obama in 2011 regarding the corpse of founder and head of the Islamist militant group al-Qaeda Osama Bin Laden reflects this drive to undermine criminal corpse power. Bin Laden, who is perceived by many as a terrorist and therefore a criminal but a hero and freedom fighter to others, posed a problem regarding the disposal of his corpse. It was anticipated that there would be difficulty in finding a country that would accept the burial of Bin Laden in its soil and who would not draw on the corpse's symbolic power to make him into a martyr. Under Obama's leadership it was decided that photographs of Bin Laden's death were not to be released and neither was DNA evidence. Meanwhile the corpse was [buried at sea](#) creating a site that was not readily identifiable or accessible. It prevented the criminal corpse from being a focus of attention or creating a potential shrine. Similar to the need to undermine the symbolic power of the criminal corpse is related to the site of infamous criminal acts. Efforts are now made to remove the potential of forming contemporary dark tourist destinations. Consequently such sites, often houses where serial murders have occurred, are completely destroyed such as British serial murderers Fred and Rose West's house on Cromwell Street whilst Soham murderer Ian Huntley's home (the site of the murder of Holly Wells and Jessica Chapman in 2002) was also [demolished](#). This process was conducted behind large screens and the house

remains crushed and the dust and debris removed to prevent souvenirs from being collected.

It would appear that strategies have developed over time to prevent any celebration or heroisation of high profile criminals and their crimes.

Popular Culture and the Corpse

Popular culture portrayals make the corpse a universal medium of connection between the living and the dead (Quigley, 1996). This can be taken further for the dead go beyond being merely a connection. Instead 'the living hover around the dead, demand that they entertain them, and [try to make] the corpse into manageable, useful entities' (Foltyn, 2008a, p. 103).

Nowhere is this more apparent than within popular culture (here focused upon film and television) which surrounds the consumer with death and the dead. The power of the corpse is not limited to those with a criminal past. The power exerted by the corpse within popular culture is identifiable in the mythology surrounding the body parts of a corpse and two key forms of popular culture cadaver: the undead and the authentic corpse.

The Corpse in Bits

The corpse since the mid twentieth century faces the opportunity of an afterlife through the donation of body parts to patients in need of new organs. Organ donation and transplantation has a mythology dating back to before it was medically possible and rooted in deeply held cultural beliefs, fears and concerns about the body and bodily integrity. The gothic novel *Frankenstein* by Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley is a catalyst for transplantation myths which have become used as a springboard to explore cultural fears and beliefs of the possible afterlife of body parts. It is these fears and superstitions rooted within the concept of the monstrous and science that play a fundamental role in the development of transplantation mythology within popular culture representations during the twentieth century. Popular culture representations of transplantation play a key role in educating and influencing public

perceptions of both body part transplantation. It is in the realm of television and film that fears about the dark side of science rooted in superstition and anxiety with man playing God and science out of control (O'Neill, 2006) that body part mythology emerges. Transplantation mythology flourishes in mediated times in the form of entertainment with a hint of fact.

O'Neill (2006) provides a coherent chronological development of film representation of transplantation and in doing so uncovers a range of myths that have taken hold of the public imagination in film between the 1930s-2000s. He highlights a range of themes with four dominating myths.

1. The threat of science – exploring the idea of man playing God where science is used to create life and suggesting human attempts to improve or replicate humans is an affront to Nature.

This is portrayed from the 1930s and peaks in the 1950s-60s where science is shown to be obsessed with creating life and doing the impossible. It reflects the idea of man as God. The threat to science myth in popular culture shares the same underlying message that any human attempt to improve on or even replicate humans is an act of unforgivable arrogance and an affront to Nature (van Riper, 2003). [insert figure 4 - Science playing God] Nowhere is this more effectively portrayed than in fictional (but believable) accounts of compulsory organ donation, xenotransplantation (transplantation from animals), eugenics and cloning that are connected to elements of truth in varying degrees and thereby granting apparent validity to fears. For example pig and cow tissue is now successfully used in some [heart valve replacements](#). At the heart of the threat of science myth is the reinforcement of concerns that social inequality will extend as far as the sanctity of our own bodies. The wealthy can buy the organs of the poor, the cloned or demand them from the young (see *The Island*, 2005 and *Never Let Me Go*, 2010).

2. Misplaced trust – suggesting the existence of corruption in the medical system as well as in the procurement and allocation of organs.

The misplaced trust myth emerges from the late 1960s regarding corruption in the medical system and the procurement and allocation of organs. This myth is particularly strong with continuing organ shortages and reflected in films such as *Coma* (1978) where organs are being retrieved from comatose patients for transplant. The myth often has a story resolution involving an ethical discussion between medics – a senior figure and a young idealistic doctor – ending with the senior figure being discredited or killed off and the young doctor left to carry on their ethical career. Even *The Simpsons* explore this corruption theme when Marge receives a coveted T-shirt from a television programme she is approached by the Springfield town doctor, who offers to put her at the top of the heart transplant waiting list in exchange for the T-shirt. She points out she doesn't need a transplant but the doctor warns her that she might one day (*My Mother the Carjacker*, Season 15). [insert figure 5 - The Simpsons explore social fears and corruption] For organ donation and transplantation to work it is crucial that donation is voluntary and bodies of potential donors - living and dead – are protected and not exploited by those charged with their care (Scheper-Hughes 2001, p. 59). This is undermined in popular culture with doctors often shown to be manipulating the organ allocation system to favour their patients or lying to hospital committee members about the eligibility of a patient for a transplant thus placing their judgement over medical realities or fairness of organ allocation (Morgan, Movius, and Cody, 2007).

3. Forced donation - relates to tales of [organ theft and the black market for human organs](#).

This myth propagates tales of 'forced donation' relating to organ theft and the black market for human body parts. Anxieties and the ethics of acquiring organs within the fictional realm

reflect wider societal concerns about organ donation particularly due to the noted growth in the twenty-first century for a black market for organs. Fictional accounts of illicit or illegal procurement of organs have created a new set of narratives relating to organ theft. These narratives include a healthy young individual being drugged by a stranger and waking up in pain with surgical wounds and discovering a kidney has been removed. Organ theft narratives are spread via global rumour and urban legends of body part stealing and have provoked resistance to presumed consent in respect of organ harvesting, attacks on foreigners, trafficking children's bodies and body parts, coerced gifts from prisoners in exchange for a reduction in prison sentence (Scheper-Hughes 2001, pp. 32, 35). Organ transplantation within this myth is seen as exploitation involving illicit procurement, grave robbing, trade in organs from powerless donors and allocation of organs to the privileged fuelling fear that people will be killed for organs (Youngner, 1996).

4. Losing control - where an organ recipient finds their new body part exerts influence over them following a transplant.

Tales regarding the transplantation of gross anatomy from donors who have committed murder or rape are common from the earliest films O'Neill (2006) identifies such as limb transplants for example in *The Hands of Orlac* (1924) and in *Mad Love* (1935) where a pianist is given a hand transplant, not knowing the hands once belonged to a murderer. The hands take on a life of their own and take control with murderous consequences. Meanwhile in *The Amazing Transplant* (1970) a man begins raping women wearing gold earrings and it is revealed he had a penis transplant from a serial rapist who preyed on women with gold earrings. In all this popular representation of the limb transplants the solution is to 'amputate the organ, to somehow kill the rebellious body part' (O'Neill, 2006, p. 224). What is notable in this myth of 'losing control' as a result of the donor being criminal is its predominant portrayal to be largely visible, non-neutral body parts such as hands. [insert figure 6 - Loss of

control] There are no tales for instance of a liver donated by a criminal causing the organ recipient to become a murderer. Notions of the body part retaining power to control or influence the recipient continue to the present day and have evolved beyond the simplistic idea of conflict between the graft and the host and a battle for dominance. Instead the myth of losing control is shifting towards understandings of [cellular memory](#) where the dead organ donor lives on via their donated organ through mysterious behavioural symptoms and feelings of intense identification with their unknown donors.

The power of the corpse is encapsulated by the continuance of body part mythology within popular culture that contains few positive or even accurate portrayals of the process. This is supported by studies of television shows with organ transplantation story lines and their impact on viewer's attitudes, knowledge and behaviours regarding organ donation and transplantation (see Morgan, Movius, and Cody, 2009). Transplantation continues to be represented as exploitative and corrupt underpinning myths linked to fundamental concepts of control. However what is most notable about these popular culture driven myths is that they would not spread and continue to exist unless people found the core ideas credible (Campion-Vincent, 2002).

The Undead

Narratives and fears within the social world are explored through not only popular culture representations of body part myths but through depictions of the fictional undead. The undead (i.e. zombies and vampires) and their relations to the living provide valuable insight into the contemporary social world. Two key illustrations demonstrate what the undead offer in understanding our social world. Firstly, zombies who undo, and render visible, many of the social norms that sustain the contemporary western way of life and secondly vampires who depict social threats and how the monstrous can become sympathetic.

Zombies

The [undead can be sociologically useful to think with](#) for “to say that the zombie is fictional is not to say that it does not comment on the real” (Muntean and Payne, 2009, p. 245). This is pertinent to the upsurge of zombies in popular culture in the early 21st century which has been dubbed the ‘zombie renaissance’ (Hubner, Leaning and Manning, 2015). The term zombie is contested but “zombies do all share a common characteristic: the absence of some metaphysical quality of their essential selves” (Boon, 2011, p. 7). They have no free will and become part of a horde focussed on eating humans – who, when bitten, or infected, also become zombies. This version of the zombie is typically traced back to George Romero’s films in the late 1960s and 1970s – *Night of the Living Dead* and *Dawn of the Dead*. It is most useful to think of zombies as a recurring cultural motif that is recognisable, but which varies in precise form. This is particularly evident in the role zombies play in broader work theorising fictional monsters as important social constructions and how they threat social norms. [insert figure 7 – zombies as the monstrous body]

Cohen (1996, p. 4) argues that the ‘monstrous body is pure culture’. In other words, while the precise form may vary monsters are always the product of the particular cultural context in which they are created. Monsters are used as a vehicle to construct and represent abject Others. They are social constructs that are used to represent various kinds of lives as Other than the norm which are considered as monstrous and deviant non-subjects. So, on the one hand, the production of monsters can be read as an attempt to fix and control what is different because:

The monster is difference made flesh, come to dwell among us. In its function as dialectical Other... the monster is an incorporation of the Outside, the Beyond – of all those loci that are rhetorically placed as distant and distinct but originate Within. Any

kind of alterity can be inscribed across (constructed through) the monstrous body, but for the most part monstrous difference tends to be cultural, political, racial, economic, sexual (Cohen, 1996, p.7).

On the other hand the very existence of the body of the monster poses a challenge to social norms and conventions. Monsters' such as zombies exist beyond social norms and represent a permanent threat to these norms. It forces us to question and reflect upon the social and cultural context that creates particular kinds of monsters and to consider why it is that we find them threatening. In this sense the social construction of monsters can be read as both an oppressive move and one that is potentially revolutionary for monsters that have the potential to destabilise social norms:

Monsters are our children. They [...] ask us how we perceive the world [...] They ask us to reevaluate our assumptions about race, gender, sexuality, our perception of difference, our tolerance toward its expression. They ask us why we have created them. (Cohen, 1996, p. 20)

As a particular type of undead monster, zombies threaten multiple boundaries to the human subject. They threaten social norms many of which are linked to conventional understandings of death. Zombies are a graphic reminder of mortality which is often repressed in order to live namely an understanding of ourselves and our bodies as rotting corpses. [Zombies confront us with this view of ourselves](#) as rotting and decayed bodies. Moreover, as Austin (2014) points out, they confront us with this view in social spaces where death is never visible. In popular culture zombies do not stay confined to graveyards and crypts they invade cities, homes and the landscape. [insert figure 8 - Zombies are mobile and spread throughout the lived environment] Zombies are literally a living death in that they are neither fully dead nor fully alive. They are immortal, although they can be killed. They are dead bodies, but

they walk and move as though they were alive. Lauro and Embry (2008) argue that in shattering the division between dead and alive, zombies make both categories meaningless for the value that we place on life is understood socially in terms of not being dead. If death is no longer death, but a kind of living death, namely a corpse reanimated, then how are we to understand the meaning of life? Zombies as animated corpses systematically lack an essential feature of themselves, they are effectively mindless and, moreover, rather than being individuals they are part of a seething mass driven only by bodily desire to consume others. They are effectively bodies without minds and as such threaten Western understandings of what makes us individual subjects, namely a body controlled by its separate, rational conscious mind. This mindlessness is being challenged in more recent zombie genre contributions such as [Warm Bodies](#) and [In the Flesh](#) where zombies regain a sense of self and guilt for their actions. Another key facet of zombies that challenges social norms is rooted in their cannibalistic tendencies. They feast on human flesh constructing human bodies as consumable, as well as highlighting the potential for humans to eat other humans. Both of these are threats within the social world we inhabit. Human beings are constructed as non-edible, and the consumption of human flesh is a social taboo with cases of cannibalism stimulating particular disgust and concern. By disrupting the division between consumable and non-consumable flesh, zombies ask us to reflect on why is this the case and how we maintain these norms that humans are distinct from other animals, and that while it is acceptable for humans to consume the flesh of other animals humans themselves cannot be consumed?

Zombies as a threat to social norms of human subjectivity reflect the socio-historical context in which they are created and released to the public. One classic zombie film that has been subject to a great deal of analysis on the basis of its portrayal of the relationships between humans and zombies is Romero's 1978 film [Dawn of the Dead](#). The film follows a group of

survivors of the zombie apocalypse who take refuge in a shopping mall surrounded by zombies. Jones (2002, p. 163) argues that the film is a satire on emerging consumer capitalism of the 1970s where capitalist society produced mindless, endless and destructive consumption causing no clear difference between the reanimated corpses and the human survivors. Meanwhile Muntean and Payne (2009), argue that depictions of zombies changed fundamentally in the wake of the events of 9/11 and that zombies are being portrayed as a new kind of threat because what is considered a threat to western human subjectivity has changed fundamentally. Specifically, they argue that Western populations are now constructed as vulnerable to death and violence through the actions of individual, cultural Others who live, hidden in their midst. Contemporary zombies are therefore used to represent and contain this particular threat. This is illustrated by the shift from slow shuffling zombies of the 1970s to being fast and lethal in [28 Days Later](#) in 2002. Additionally Pifer (2011) suggests [Shaun of the Dead](#) offers a critique of working conditions under late capitalism where zombies are often undistinguishable and unnoticeable in relation to the human workers.

An alternative perspective offered by zombie texts includes that they are productive of social inequality (Behuniak, 2011). Behuniak suggests that while these texts may be reflective of social anxieties, they do not simply offer a mirror to the social world but also construct it and have negative real world effects. She sees the construction of monstrosity – the portrayal of difference in the body of horrific Others – as something that reinforces social inequalities. Her concern is with the way in which the fictional figure of the zombie has been explicitly imported into scholarly and popular representations of patients with Alzheimer’s disease. As a result we are witnessing that:

the frightening celluloid images of fictional characters called zombies have leaked into the popular and scholarly discourse about real people who have Alzheimer’s

disease, constructing them as animated corpses and their disease as a terrifying threat to the social order. [...] The zombie instils fear by drawing from cultural anxieties, and then reflecting them back to the population that in turn breaths life and strength into them by applying this fictional representation to social realities. (p. 72)

Behuniak highlights several different ways in which zombie metaphors are used in relation to Alzheimer's disease including Alzheimer sufferer's physical appearance and their loss of the self as the illness destroys the brain making it a literal living death. [insert figure 9 - Alzheimer's strips away the sense of self] Alzheimer's has also been described in terms of cannibalism – both in terms of the brain feeding upon and destroying itself and in terms of the toll that the high dependency of Alzheimer's patients exacts on those who care for them. The disease is also described as an epidemic that is ravaging an ageing population, placing an intolerable burden on the young and the healthy. Behuniak (2011) argues these links between zombies and Alzheimer's patients stigmatises them by evoking disgust and placing those who suffer from this disease in the category of being a monstrous Other who are a disgusting burden upon society, as opposed to a group of human beings worthy of support and respect. So far from celebrating zombies as socially transgressive Behuniak's is an argument against the production of monsters, she views this as a social mechanism by which particular groups become socially disadvantaged.

Vampires

Vampires have a much longer history as the undead than zombies both in terms of literary texts and on-screen popular culture portrayals. Vampires in the West seek to frighten us into acquiescence, reassert patriarchy, racial superiority, family values and chaste heterosexuality (Williamson, 2005). As with zombies, it has been argued that vampires may be fictional but that as social constructs they both reflect and produce aspects of the real social world. For

Vampires are both textual and extra-textual creatures; one can even ‘know’ about them [...] without actually reading vampire fiction or watching vampire films. In this sense, they are ‘in’ culture; and they may well have (or be mobilised to have) ‘real’ effects (Gelder, 1994, p. x)

In other words, like zombies – vampires are theorised by social science and humanities scholars as social texts. Scholarly analysis of vampires have been interpreted as a depiction of all manner of social threats and Othered identities ranging from gender, homosexuality and AIDS to class relations. Like their undead zombie relatives, portrayals of vampires, “have enacted a host of anxieties and desires, shifting shape as the culture they are brought to life in itself changes form” (George and Hughes, 2013, p. 1). The vampire is liminal, they are marginal, in between and dead, making them ‘available as a metaphorical figure for the representation of otherness’ (Campbell, 2013, p. 100). [insert figure 10 - Traditional vampire portrayal]

A key issue that those studying social representations of the vampire have drawn attention to is the way that contemporary vampires in popular culture have changed from the historical origins of vampires as monstrous, terrifying creatures whose lust for human blood was destructive and dangerous. Today, vampires are often portrayed as very sympathetic creatures who try to contain their monstrosity and who are often extremely desirable to humans. Contemporary vampires are more sympathetic and conservative regarding social norms than earlier vampires:

As will be apparent from this collection and other studies, and from one’s own immersion in contemporary culture, the sympathetic vampire rules. Little remains of Stoker’s monstrous Count or the bestial bloodsuckers of East European folklore. (George and Hughes, 2013, p. 5)

The international bestselling Stephanie Meyer's [Twilight Series](#) is an exemplar of the contemporary sympathetic portrayal of the vampire. Bella the main (human) character builds relationships with the sympathetic vampire family the Cullens. They are a group of vampires who are effectively vegetarian in that they drink animal blood and focus on not killing or actively trying to transform humans. The lavish, luxurious lifestyle of the Cullens and the portrayal of vampires as a group who have monstrous and lethal desires but who try to exercise self-restraint and refuse to act on them is encapsulated by a scene in *New Moon* where the [Cullens hold a birthday party for Bella](#). They are a desirable, conservative Other.

As an 'Other' vampires have been used to explore different forms of death particularly in the Twilight Series where it is not just the notion of mortality and death that is explored but also the manner of death. The Twilight books have been accused of romanticising suicide (McKay and Maple, 2013). In tackling suicide within the new sympathetic vampire genre it is argued that it is romanticised into something that is unrealistic and over-simplistic. The vampire matriarch of the Cullen family Esme transformed into a vampire after attempting suicide. She was 'saved' by becoming immortal. The lead human protagonist Bella has her suicidal tendencies downplayed and described as being a search for an adrenalin rush and to hear the voice of Edward (the vampire who abandons her in *New Moon*). For example the [cliff jumping scene](#) where Bella jumps from a cliff for 'recreational purposes' does not reflect the true reality of such an activity or her mental state. In real life jumping from a high cliff into water can cause death or injury even if it is for recreational purposes i.e. tombstoning. It is not painless or to be taken lightly. As highlighted by jumpers from the Golden Gate Bridge who: 'fall over 200 feet and hit the water in 4 seconds at 75 mph. They die from massive cardiothoracic and CNS injuries or by drowning. The fatality rate is about 99%' (Blaustein and Fleming, 2009, pp. 1111-1116). In this instance Bella is saved not by a vampire or by becoming one but by a werewolf's speed and strength. Here the Twilight books and films

teach that if someone loves you, you will always be saved from death, in real life Bella would have most certainly died.

Beyond challenging social norms surrounding death and mortality vampires have a long and established history of desirability and links to sex as well as gender and sexuality.

Contemporary vampires continue the tradition of the undead being erotic creatures conflating sexuality, sex and death and inspiring opposing positions to be adopted by scholars. Some scholarship argues that vampires are a tool that destabilises contemporary understandings of gender and sexuality. Vampire's otherness has the ability to embody subverted cultural norms, of repressed sexuality, the heteronormative and the gender binary that dictates traditional male and female roles (Vincent, 2015) such as in [True Blood](#). However in complete contrast the Twilight Series propagates an unapologetic patriarchy, the nuclear family and the traditional role of women in that family (Silver 2010). Two examples illustrate this neatly. Firstly through the representation of motherhood which becomes a source of power that is not experienced by single women but which enables Bella to become a self-sacrificing warrior mother which grants her pleasure, satisfaction and authority. As such the model of male/female relationships continues to reflect past traditional understandings of identity, gender and sexuality rather than offer a challenge. Secondly, it is the sexual relationship or rather abstinence of the two main protagonists, Bella and Edward which fails to challenge traditional roles and values. For as Edward, exerts self-control over his blood lust he consistently refuses Bella's pursuit of sexual contact outside of marriage (Silver, 2010).

The Authentic Corpse

The authentic corpse within popular culture refers to visual imagery of the dead (who are either life-like models or actors) but who are not the undead. The authentic dead are those

who are fictional but within a non-fantasy setting. If the dead do rise and talk it is part of a surreal scene or characters imagination. Using the dead within popular culture particularly in television and film is commonplace. However some instances of engaging with the dead and death within television are more notable than others. For example a landmark popular culture engagement with the dead is through the award winning HBO television series [6 Feet Under](#) which ran for five seasons from 2001- 2005. The show portrays the life and relationships of the Fisher family who run a Los Angeles funeral home over a five year period. To a large extent the show is a conventional family drama, tackling issues such as interpersonal relationships, infidelity, and religion. However it also has an unremitting focus death, which is explored in an assortment of ways including personal, religious, and philosophical. Each episode opens with a death which ranges from a heart attack to murder and from a sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS) to death in an industrial dough making machine. The death usually sets the tone for each episode, allowing the characters to reflect on their current fortunes and misfortunes in a way that is illuminated by the death and its aftermath. A recurring plot device consists of a central character conversing with the person who died at the beginning of the episode, while they are being embalmed or planning or during the funeral. This surreal engagement with the authentic dead to explore key issues such are relationships or cultural fears defined 6 Feet Under as a fearless cultural engagement with death and corpses.

Through the shows focus on human mortality and the lives of those who deal with death and the dead on a daily basis it unflinchingly uses popular culture to approach societal questions.

As show creator Alan Ball reflects in relation to the concept of the show:

Who are these people who are funeral directors that we hire to face death for us?

What does that do to their own lives – to grow up in a home where there are dead

bodies in the basement, to be a child and walk in on your father with a body lying on a table opened up and him working on it? What does that do to you?ⁱ

The Fisher family are consistently shown to experience various crises that are in direct relation to their environment and the grief they have experienced. They are used to explore wider cultural and societal issues in relation to and through death and loss. Once again Alan Ball effectively encapsulates the purpose of *6 Feet Under* and the connotations of the show saying:

Six Feet Under refers not only to being buried as a dead body is buried, but to primal emotions and feelings running under the surface. When one is surrounded by death – to counterbalance that, there needs to be a certain intensity of experience, of needing to escape. It's Nate with his womanizing – it's Claire and her sexual experimentation – it's Brenda's sexual compulsiveness – it's David having sex with a male hooker in public – it's Ruth having several affairs – it's the life force trying to push up through all of that suffering and grief and depression.ⁱⁱ

6 Feet Under is not the only television show to use death and the dead explicitly with other shows including *Pushing Daisies* (2007-2009) which blurred genres by creating a [forensic fairy tale](#) which played with the boundaries of authentic corpses whereby life and death could be granted and taken away at the touch of Ned, the pie maker. Meanwhile movies use corpses as a dark comedy slapstick tool such as in [Weekend at Bernie's](#) (1989; 1993) and more recently in [Swiss Army Man](#) (2016) where a corpse is a main character and key to the survival of a man marooned on an island.

The corpse is also being used and popularly consumed in a variety of still images ie photographs. This is largely unquestioned other than acknowledgement that it is provoking and somewhat disturbing. For instance [Entertainment Weekly magazine](#) used an image of

Gone Girl (2014) with the two lead characters on its front cover in January 2014. The two characters are lying on a gurney in a pathology lab with the woman looking clearly dead with the tag on her toe, her right wrist at an unnatural angle due to rigor mortis and the eyes open glazed and staring. Meanwhile the man is curled around the corpse in an affectionate, intimate manner, his leg and arm wrapped over the corpse in an embrace with his eyes closed in apparent contentment and pleasure at being with her. This image was not questioned as inappropriate; it was not challenged as promoting sexual intimacy with a corpse or potential necrophilia but hinted at love beyond death.

Fashion has also played a role in using the authentic dead but in a controversial capacity. In 2007 *W Magazine* released images of a fashion shoots featuring a model in fetishized semi naked poses often appearing dead. This was followed in the same year by [America's Next Top Model](#) television series with an episode where contestants had to pose as if they had just been killed. Comments from the judges included that one contestant who had been stabbed did not look dead enough whilst another was told 'death becomes you, young lady' and still another was told: 'the look on your face is just extraordinary. Very beautiful and dead.' The show effectively illustrated the fetishisation of the female corpse within the fashion industry within a popular culture format. This was only reinforced by [Marc Jacobs in 2014](#) where singer Miley Cyrus posed alongside models faking death and [Victoria Beckham's 2015 Autumn fashion line](#) which used models in corpse like poses playing homage to the 1990s heroin chic. This use of models to 'play dead' encapsulates what Foltyn (2009) calls 'corpse chic', where the (largely female) dead are objectified. The controversy over this corpse chic is exemplified by [Vice](#) in 2013 who replicated famous female writer's suicides as a 'Last words' photoshoot. Ultimately this led to Vice apologising and removing the images from the website but they had already spread beyond their control. Representing death and corpses in popular culture forms creates a morbid space in which to engage with wider issues and

understandings of death and life. Although it would appear that society remains uncomfortable with viewing the death and the dead it is the popular culture context and also the type of death and corpse that is portrayed that truly challenges social norms of mortality.

Forensic Science and the Corpse

Nowhere in popular culture is the corpse and death more naturalised, visible and acceptable than in the plethora of forensic science television shows. This prevalence has led to the corpse being heralded as ‘pop culture’s new star’ (Foltyn 2008). [insert figure 11 - The corpse as the star] In forensic science based shows science is used to engage with death and the dead whilst maintaining a distance between the viewer and the dead. It provides a normalising and softening barrier between the corpse and the consumer of death and the dead. The acceptance of viewing the dead in an often graphic fashion within a forensic science setting connects with Seltzer’s (1998) ‘wound culture’ where he suggests a wounded body (predominantly the corpse) is a matter of routine, with its openness being normalised and unremarkable. Such atrocity exhibition manifests itself 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 notion of the open wounded body as normal and acceptable for consumption allows the corpse to become an art form (Brown and Philips, 2014); a form of entertainment (Ferrell and Websdale, 1999); a celebrity (Penfold-Mounce, 2009); and even an educational tool (see Gunther von Hagen’s’ [BodyWorlds](#) exhibition). [Insert figure 12 - Blood Splatter as Art] The corpse therefore emphasises a crossing point between pleasure and being disconcerted and disturbed. It encapsulates the morbid and the macabre and is ‘more than a taste for senseless violence’ (Seltzer, 1998, p. 21). Consequently viewing the corpse through forensic science driven popular culture representation allows for a complex process of human engagement with mortality.

Forensic images have become integral to our visual culture (Foltyn, 2008) in multiple forms and highlight a fervent belief in forensic science capabilities to solve crime and bring perpetrators to justice (Doherty, 2003, B15-16). The most common being in the form of police forensic examiners or crime scene investigators such as portrayed on *CSI*, *NCIS*, *Cold Case*, *Waking the Dead*, *The Body Farm* and *Silent Witness* although forensic anthropologists are also portrayed such as in the series *Bones*. The cadaver has become a forensic tool (Timmermans, 2006) as well as entertainment within popular culture and contributes to societal perceptions of death and scientific evidence. [Insert figure 13 - Fingerprint] Nowhere is the process of normalisation and desensitisation to death more evident than in the [CSI: Crime Scene Investigation](#) television show. Its longevity as well as successful spin-off series (*CSI: Miami* and *CSI: New York*) portrays an exaggerated dramatic vision of forensic science. These portrayals have led to the so called '[the CSI effect](#)'. This effect refers to the impact of forensic science representation in popular culture upon public perception and how this has pushed the idea of forensic science along with terminology and concepts into popular discourse. Popular perception of the capabilities of forensic science as portrayed in popular culture is not reflected in reality. It is estimated that 40% of the 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). Further misperceptions of forensics can be connected to popular culture portrayals of forensic science which reinforce the notion that physical evidence is reliable and always present unlike absent or flawed human witnesses (Thornton, 1997). Forensic science on television such as *CSI* is shown to be not only science but super science that can aid in the conviction of murderers or rapists even after their death or that of the victim. As a result science and the police are virtually infallible (Deutsch and Cavender, 2008).

Forensic science investigation into death on television is often very realistic suggesting society is comfortable with facing death and the dead. This is not the case for non-fictionalised portrayals of death, dying, corpses and violence remain controversial and uncomfortable viewing. We are accepting of the normalisation opened, fake corpses highlighting a degree of being desensitized to atrocity, violence and death but this does not 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 2015 the drowned body of three year old [Aylan Kurdi](#) on a Turkish beach provoked widespread horror and demands to help Syrian refugees. Kurdi's corpse came to stand for all the Syrian refugee bodies washing up on European beaches. The need for dignity and respect for the dead is highlighted by the July 2014 [flight MH17](#) which was shot down over the Ukraine killing all 298 passengers. Concerns were raised over the treatment, recovery and transportation of the corpses (Walker and Salem, 2014) and stories and news report images reflecting a lack of respect towards the victims corpses with journalists interfering with personal possessions at the disaster site (Brazier, 2014). The actual corpse requires distance and respect - we continue to be shocked and distressed by the real corpse. In our visually dominated contemporary society the ability to watch the dead is simple and unavoidable. However reactions to viewing the dead are rooted in whether the corpse is real or fictional and if, either the real or fictional corpse is located within the forensic science realm. If it is then gazing upon the dead gains a degree of respectability and acceptability.

The Corpse and the Gaze

The gaze is about the relationship between pleasure and images and there is no single gaze. When combined with the corpse the gaze is revealed as a complex plethora of morbid scrutiny by viewers. Pierson's (2010) framework of gazes - the voyeuristic, abject, forensic and autoptic - explores this multiplicity of gazes in relation to the corpse. These gazes have

been used to suggest that the gaze can be a softening lens through which the dead are viewed (Penfold-Mounce, 2015). Viewing the dead indulges the common drive for voyeurism, whereby the gaze focuses on seeing intimately into the private lives of others. Often this is where the viewer can revel in the pain and distress of others or simply observe repugnant or sensational subjects. The voyeuristic gaze can be conducted by different people with varying motivations including:

- the erotic peeping tom (predominantly men looking at the bodies of women)
- the academic researcher
- the police and the state
- the news media
- the innocent bystander of an event
- the tourist (Urry, 1990; Denzin, 1995).

All these gazers are voyeurs. Typically voyeurism is associated with watching other people without them knowing when they are in an intimate setting such as whilst they are undressing or having sexual relations. [insert figure 14 - The voyeur - watching others without their knowledge] This idea of being watched without knowing in private moments of our lives can be extended to include the intimacy of viewing the dead. The corpse within forensic science television indulges and stimulates the voyeuristic gaze. It focuses on the dead body and as such it emphasises its vulnerability to being visually consumed by the voyeur. For example the corpse is regularly portrayed in a violated state at a crime scene accentuating its defencelessness to the voyeuristic gaze. This is only exacerbated by another key setting for gazing upon the corpse in forensic science television shows where it is shown in a science environment such as a pathology lab or morgue. Here the corpse is naked and exposed to the

voyeuristic gaze which is invited to see not just the dead body but often actually inside the opened cadaver.

The abject gaze is interwoven with voyeurism and is fixated specifically upon both the repulsive and attractive components of the corpse. The abject gaze upon the corpse is where modern science, which has undermined the magic and unexplainable out of the world, seeks to re-enchant the viewer through compelling visual spectacles (Slater, 1995, pp. 220-227).

For example in autopsy scenes in television shows such as *Silent Witness* or *CSI* the realistic simulation of corpses indulges the abject gaze under the socially acceptable guise of science.

The abject gaze focuses on the corpse as a 'profound, horrific reminder of one's mortality and physical materiality' (Pierson, 2010, p. 185). Or as Kristeva (1982) writes it 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 abject gaze does not respect boundaries and it transgresses identity and notions of order and social norms (Kristeva, 1982). Consequently the corpse becomes the ultimate in abjection. We are repulsed and attracted to it in order to immerse ourselves in it and in doing so protect us from it (Pierson, 2010, p. 194). Forensic science in popular culture promotes this abject gaze through glamourizing and eroticising the corpse in its dead state. Viewers may be revolted or disturbed by these abject bodies but also culturally fascinated with death and its effects on the anatomized body (Pierson, 2010, p. 195).

The abject gaze focused on popular culture forensic science produces the forensic gaze. The forensic gaze differs from the voyeuristic, abject, and even the autoptic (shortly to be outlined) gazes. This is because this gaze is not directly the viewer's gaze instead the forensic gaze is like a lens through which the viewer sees. The viewer via the forensic gaze sees the corpse but through the eyes of forensic scientists. The forensic gaze is the gaze of science. Forensic science television shows construct an accessible forensic gaze for audiences which

maintains distance between the viewer and the dead. This distance means the viewer is not going to be directly affected by the 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. It offers audiences a sense of control over crime and criminality for forensic science on television represents truth and the killer being caught however perhaps more importantly it offers a sense of control over death. The forensic gaze is intertwined with the language of science and investigation (Pierson, 2010). Forensic scientists record their observations through speech about the victim at the crime scene and in the pathology laboratory during autopsy. For example in *Silent Witness* pathologists continuously describe and discuss proceedings and findings and answer questions from police detectives who are present and from colleagues. The forensic gaze enables the viewer to experience closeness without true intimacy with cadavers. The three gazes so far are difficult to separate and are intricately interwoven with one another - this interconnectivity is particularly evident within the final gaze - the autoptic gaze – which is constructed from a combination of the other gazes. [insert figure 15 - The corpse in a scientific setting]

The autoptic gaze is abject, voyeuristic and forensically inclined by focusing on the eroticising process of the cadaver as a visual spectacle within a forensic science setting. Forensic science television shows heavy stylisation reflects how the victim's corpse is consistently 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 whilst the viewer is encouraged to gaze at the corpse while forensic experts discuss 'penile implants, missing nipples, S & M lash marks, tattoos, and intimate piercings' (Foltyn, 2008). The performance of forensic science is characterised by an autoptic gaze that is based upon the erotic desire to 'see inside the body' and expose hidden secrets (Tait 2006: 49-50). As such 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). Consequently popular culture portrayals of forensic science offer a contradictory space to engage with death and the dead.

Review of Literature and Primary Sources

Despite a plethora of research touching upon popular culture, corpses and forensic science the work is surprisingly fragmented and cross disciplinary. Empirical research into the connections between these popular culture, corpses and forensics remains limited and disconnected from each other. Data that has been gathered has largely been conducted by psychologists seeking to make connections between the effect of media on the viewer and CSI has commonly been used as a case study (see Schwietzer and Saks, 2007). The role of the corpse within popular culture particularly within forensic science still requires further research.

There is substantial work conducted into death and corpses in the past which focuses on the treatment and role of the dead in society and is dominated by historians and archaeologists. This work such as by Tarlow (2015) and Sugg (2011) engages with the power of the corpse and how it was used, feared and disposed of. However there is limited links to popular culture and forensic science. Interweaving the corpse with popular culture has been done by O'Neill (2006) regarding organ donation and transplantation but much of the literature in this field of corpse parts focuses predominantly on transplantation rates, ethics and legal disputes. In contrast to this less rich vein of scholarly work on corpses and popular culture there is a wealth of research into the undead such as zombies and vampires from a variety of academic disciplines but particularly Theatre, Film and Television and Sociology (see Tenga and Zimmerman, 2013). Like the undead much work has been conducted into forensic science

within popular culture with particular attention paid to *CSI* and which has attracted vast attention from sociologists and criminologists to theatre, film and television researchers and even legal scholars over the last 15 years (see Jermyn, 2013; Cole & Dioso-Villa, 2009).

However there is a general lack of consideration of the actual corpse with a great focus on other issues such as use of music and lighting and links to gender and sexuality and the ‘CSI effect’.

Subsequently it is clear that there remains much research to be done in joining together the interrelated research themes of corpses, popular culture and forensic science in a more coherent and systematic fashion. More work into the use of the authentic dead within popular culture and its potential capacity to desensitise the viewer to death and the dead would be particularly beneficial. Interestingly this has received far less scholarly attention than the role of the undead in the construction of social norms and identity.

What is clear from the research that has been conducted into popular culture, corpses and forensic science is that popular culture provides a safe, controlled and stylised way in which to engage with human mortality. Through the undead and the authentic dead popular culture provides a safe arena from which to explore death and the dead in relative comfort and security. The distance that is created and maintained between the reality of mortality and popular culture portrayals of mortality form a safe space in which to gaze and thereby consume death and corpses. Popular culture portrayals of the undead and the myths surrounding body part transplantation provides a tool that embodies various ‘threats’ to social norms. It facilitates a critical interrogation of these norms whilst also reinforcing them and aiding in the marginalization of Others. This allows for exploration of our society in a ‘safe’ if somewhat visually graphic fictional genre. In contrast popular culture representation of forensic science and the authentic dead provides something different to the undead. They provide a space to encourage and nurture public fascination with death and the dead through

the lens of science which makes consuming the dead acceptable and potentially educational and realistic compared to undead monsters pursuing human flesh.

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