

## 5 The power of death in life

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### Between the solitary and the social

Death is a solitary, individual and incommunicable event, perhaps the most private and intimate moment in the cycle of human life. Whether it marks, in religious terms, an exchange – whereby the dissolution of the body is contiguous with an entry into a new spiritual existence and, thus, the return to divinity – or whether, in the more secular encoding of what Sigmund Freud calls ‘the death drive’, it merely initiates the return to that tensionless, undifferentiated state of the inanimate that is beyond, grounding and prefiguring biological and social human existence, in either case the finality of death is generally acknowledged as the one certainty in any given life. It is the powerful fact against which, and in relation to which, all mortal existence is measured. At the same time it is impossible to know in advance what the experience of dying will be like, as it is also impossible to transmit any precise and definitive knowledge of this event to those who survive the death of another. In that sense death is also the powerful limit of all mortal knowledge; its ground and its vanishing point.

Yet dying, burial and commemoration are always also public matters. As cultural anthropology has shown, death, in that it removes a social being from society, is conceived as a wound to the community at large and a threatening signal of its own impermanence. The dying person, and then the corpse of the deceased, occupy a liminal<sup>1</sup> place, no longer fully present in the world of the living and about to pass into a state inaccessible to them. Rituals of mourning, falling into two phases, serve to redress the disempowering cut that the loss of a group member entails, creating a new identity for the deceased and

<sup>1</sup> *Liminal*: from the Latin word *limen*, meaning *threshold*.

reintegrating her or him back into the community of the survivors. On the one hand, a phase of disintegration marks the dangerous period of temporal disposal of the corpse and the mourners' separation from everyday life, celebrating loss, vulnerability and fallibility. On the other hand, a phase of reinstallation or second burial reasserts society because it emerges triumphant over death. Thus rituals of mourning, acknowledging the wound to the living that death entails, always also work with the assumption that death is a regeneration of life. In particular, the conceptual translation of death into sacrifice serves as a cultural ruse that works against death. The sacrificial victim, representing the community at large, but placed in the position of liminality between the living and the dead, draws all the evil or pollution of death onto its body. Its expulsion is then, in turn, contiguous with purifying the community of the living from death. While the loss of a cherished family or community member evokes grief and the pain of loss for the survivors, viewing and commemorating the death of another is also a moment of power and triumph. Horror and distress at the sight of death turn into satisfaction since the survivors are not themselves dead. Visual or narrative representations of death, meant to comfort and reassure the bereaved survivors, as is the case in tragic drama and elegiac poetry, ultimately serve to negotiate a given culture's attitudes to survival. Signalling such a gesture of recovery after the disempowering impact of loss, a given society will perpetuate stories about sacrifice, execution, martyrdom and commemoration so as to affirm its belief in retribution, resurrection or salvation, much as an individual family will generate stories about its deceased ancestry to express its coherence after the loss of one of its members.

For this reason it is one of the great plot conventions to use the funeral statue of a deceased as the catalyst for a tale about his or her symbolic reinstallation within the community of the survivors by virtue of the commemorative narrative this calls forth. For, within the funeral ritual, the actual corpse has been removed from its community and replaced by a piece of sculpture resembling it. At the same time, this uncanny doubling of decomposing body and inanimate body elicits a second type of representation – the tale the survivor has to tell. As a particularly salient example for the exchange between life and death that is publicly performed by virtue of such funerary representation one might take Joseph L. Mankiewicz's film *The Barefoot Contessa* (1954). The film significantly begins at a cemetery, where the friends as well as the fans of the late Hollywood star Maria Vargas (Ava Gardner) have come together one rainy morning to take

part in her burial. As the camera moves from an establishing shot, showing the crowd gathered in front of a marble statue of the deceased, to a close shot of the director Dawes (Humphrey Bogart), who had initially discovered the young woman while she was still dancing in a bar in Spain, his voice-over begins. We hear him recall how he had first met her in a bar in Madrid, convinced her to return with him to Hollywood, and directed her in the films that came to make her international fame. In the course of *The Barefoot Contessa*, Mankiewicz shifts between several narrators, moving from the director to the husband of the deceased as well as to others who knew her, so that over the dead body of the Hollywood glamour icon each of the survivors is able to weave the story that will let him go on living, precisely by explaining his relation to Maria Vargas, and to a certain degree thus also explaining the implications her death has for his own survival. To support this shift in narrative perspective, Mankiewicz returns to the establishing scene at the cemetery after Dawes has finished his part of the tale, as though to emphasise not only that Maria Vargas' death functions as the catalyst for all the narratives that commemorate her, but also that, like the funerary statue standing in for the dead body buried beneath the grave plate, these tales help the mourners to reinstall the dead woman into the symbolic community of the living precisely by turning her into a sign, namely a narrative they can share with others. It is, thus, also significant that her death – she is shot by her jealous husband, the Conte Vincenzo Torlato Favriani – occurs after the funerary statue, which we see at the very beginning rising high above the heads of the mourners during the funeral ceremony, has been completed, as though this aesthetic representation were already the mark of a death *avant la lettre*.

In discussing the more personal aspects of grieving the loss of a beloved person, Freud has suggested that the normal affect of mourning bears resemblance to melancholia. In both cases the response to the loss of a loved one is a turning away from all worldly activity such that the mourner instead clings almost exclusively to the deceased love object. However, whereas melancholia describes a pathological condition that arises because the afflicted person is unwilling to give up his or her libidinal investment in the lost love object, in the case of mourning, the lost love object is ultimately decathected<sup>2</sup>, but only

<sup>2</sup> *Decathected*: psychoanalytic term meaning the removal of psychic energy from a specific goal. From *cathexis*, a concentration of psychic energy.

after an extended period during which the survivor works through the memories, expectations and affects attached to the dead. In this sense the type of narrative commemoration cinematically performed by Mankiewicz functions analogously to the liminal period, in the course of which remembering the dead allows those who knew Maria Vargas to work through their libidinal investment in her, so that at the end of each of their stories a disinvestment of sorts has been accomplished. Because, as Freud insists, with worldly reality once more gaining the upper hand, the process of mourning comes to an end and the afflicted subject is again liberated from the painful unpleasure that was cultivated during the mourning process. The narratives told in the course of *The Barefoot Contessa* thus structurally double the exchange between corpse and statue, in that they, too, allow the survivors to draw a clear boundary between themselves and the deceased precisely by exchanging her bodily presence into an absence, referred to by a narrative commemorative text. Within the larger context of memorial practices, rituals such as attending wakes and séances were designed as further ways meant to assist such a working-through process, for they allow the mourner to enter into a dialogue with the deceased, but under the condition that this exchange will ultimately find closure, in the first case when the body is buried, or, in the latter, when the spirit is once again released. Visits to cemeteries, or in the case of those who died as a result of wars and other political catastrophes, to memorial sites of collective commemoration, furthermore, work with the presupposition that the living no longer harbour a libidinal investment in the lost love objects, even while they are meant to assist the survivors in preserving their memory of the dead. Therein also lies the power of aesthetic representations, revolving around incidents of death; they preserve a recollection of the dead, indeed function as a conversation with the dead, even while ensuring that, at the end of the aesthetic experience, closure is put onto this uncanny exchange.

#### Historicizing death

Any discussion of the aesthetic rendition of death is thus fraught with contradictions. On the one hand, it must account for the fact that dying is always a solitary act, a highly ambivalent split both for the person dying and for the survivors. It can elicit both psychic distress and serenity, induce a sense of burden and relief and fulfil both a desire for and an anxiety about ending, so that any images or narratives of mortality inevitably touch emotional registers in

relation to an event of loss that enmesh the terrifying with the uplifting as well as with the inevitable. What emerges is a highly complex interplay of grief, anger, despair, acceptance and commemoration of the deceased; an interplay so highly personal, individual and specific that it is seemingly performed outside historical and social codes. Indeed, because the transitory nature of human existence and the possibility of an afterlife have always preoccupied the living, because all earthly life is directed towards death and one's conduct is fashioned in view of death and the possibility of salvation, representations of death seem to be an anthropological constant that refuses to be situated historically.

On the other hand, precisely because burial rites are used to reinforce social and political ideas, with tombs and funerary sculptures endorsing concepts of continuity, legitimacy and status, historians have also been eager to demonstrate that different periods are characterised by different cultural images of death and attitudes to it. The most prominent, Philippe Ariès, offers a linear development that begins with an early European acceptance of death as an inevitable fact of life, as an organic and integral part of a harmonious reciprocity between living and death. With the emergence of individualism, however, the destiny of each individual or family takes precedence over that of the community and a new emphasis is placed on the funeral as a sign of social status and material wealth. At the same time the focus on the self provokes a passionate attachment to an existence in the material world and hence a resentment of death. By the mid eighteenth century, for Ariès, an attitude of denial, which links the fear of death to a fascination for it, becomes the norm. While cemeteries are symbolically removed to the outskirts of the city, the dying person and the corpse become objects of erotic, mystic and aesthetic interest. Ariès calls this the 'period of beautiful death', and, in a sense that has permeated well into the late twentieth century, aestheticisation hides the physical signs of mortality and decay so as to mitigate the wound that death inflicts on the survivors. In explicit reference to the iconographic domain of Ophelia and her many visual refigurations serving as an example *par excellence* for such a beautification of death, Charles Laughton stages the beautiful corpse of the young mother Willa Harper (Shelly Winter) in *The Night of the Hunter* (1955), killed by Revd Harry Powell (Robert Mitchum). The psychotic self-styled preacher had discovered from her husband, who had been his cell-mate in prison, that the latter had hidden the money from a bank robbery somewhere in his home, and has now decided to infiltrate the Harper household so as to capture this

loot, even if this requires the destruction of the entire family. After showing us the murder, Laughton cuts to a seemingly idyllic scene. A fisherman is sitting in his boat, singing to himself as he is waiting for a fish to take his bait, and then bending over the edge of his boat, once his hook seems to have taken hold of something. Significant about the *mise-en-scène* Laughton has chosen is that Willa Harper seems to be floating in a liminal zone between life and death. For what the fisherman finds beneath the water's surface is not the sought-for fish, but rather a woman, sitting in an open car, dressed in a white night-gown, her long blond hair waving about her. She is suspended between life and death, not yet decomposed but also no longer of the living. She is, above all, a body on display, as though the car she is sitting in were her frame, the water around her a liquid of preservation. As such, she seamlessly turns from an actual figure on the diegetic level of the film into an aestheticized object, notably that of the fisherman's astonished and transfixed gaze. Because Laughton offers us her image initially through the fisherman's perspective, only to shift to a close shot of her, taken as though from inside the water she has been submerged in, Willa Harper readily transforms for us, the viewers, into an eerie body that is no longer located in any realistic space, and has instead – by virtue of this staging of her dead body – been transferred to a zone of aesthetic refiguration. The violence of her death has been mitigated. She is no longer the victim of a devious madman but rather a figure of timeless beauty, arrested by death but also preserved by the cinematic image.

Yet, there is a seminal contradiction inscribed in strategies of beautifying death aesthetically. Whether through spiritualism, which offers a male-centred domestication of heaven as a continuation or repetition of earthly existence, or through a cultivation of burial and mourning insignia – consolatory literature, elaborate tombstones and pompous cemetery monuments – aesthetic beautification renders the terror and ugliness of death's reality palatable by placing it within the realm of the familiar as well as the imaginary. By the mid nineteenth century, visits to morgues, houses of mourning and wax museums had become comparable to visiting a picture gallery. This death so lavishly represented was, however, no longer death but rather an illusion of art. Yet a seminal contradiction came to be inscribed in this allegedly modern attitude towards death, persisting today in our visual, narrative, cinematic and cyber-representations of violence, war and destruction as well as in the sentimental stories about victims our cultural discourses engender so as to idealise and make into heroes

those smitten by death. The more Western culture refuses death the more it imagines and speaks of it. Aestheticisation, meant to hide death, always also articulates mortality, affirming the inevitability of death in the very act of its denial. With death's presence relegated to the margins of the social world, representations of death also turn away from any reference to social reality, only to implant themselves firmly in the register of the imaginary. Reflexivity comes to be inscribed in images of death in that, because their objects of reference are indeterminate, they signify 'as well', 'besides', and 'other'.

Locating at the end of the eighteenth century the epistemic shift that reinstalls a discourse of mortality, which insists that all knowledge is possible only on the basis of death, Michel Foucault has highlighted the contradiction at issue. Death, which is the absolute measure of life and opens onto the truth of human existence, is also that event which life, in daily practice, must resist. The metaphor Foucault uses to illustrate how death is the limit and centre toward and against which all strategies of self-representation are directed, is that of a mirror to infinity erected vertically against death: 'Headed toward death, language turns back upon itself. To stop this death which would stop it, it possesses but a single power: that of giving birth to its own image in a play of mirrors that has no limit' (1977: 54). As death becomes the privileged cipher for heroic, sentimental, erotic and horrific stories about the survival and continuity of culture, about the possibility and limits of its knowledge, it self-consciously implements the affinity between mortality and the endless reduplication of language. What is called forth is a literature where aesthetic language is self-consciously made into a trope<sup>3</sup> that refers to itself, seeking to transgress the limit posed by death, even as it is nourished by the radical impossibility of fully encompassing this alterity. In a similar manner Martin Heidegger has argued that all life is a 'being toward death', with all existence forcing the human subject into recognition of this abyss, into a realisation that one is never at home in the world. Such an encounter with the nothingness of the veiledness (*Verhülltheit*) of death, although it initially calls forth anxiety, ultimately leads to the recognition of the truth of being, namely, an experience of the ontological difference between being (*Sein*) and beingness (*Seiendes*), with the former overcoming the latter. Representation for Heidegger is authentic when it bows into the silence evoked by the measurelessness of death, while any language that avoids death is for

<sup>3</sup> *Trope, tropic*: in literary theory, a rhetorical or figurative device.

him mere idle chatter. Similarly, Georges Bataille describes the trajectory of human existence as a move from a discontinuous state of earthly fracture and difference to a state of unlimited continuity through death.

Speaking of the aesthetic rendition of death thus ultimately brings into play the question of power residing in misrepresentation, for the paradox inherent in representations of death is that this 'death' is always culturally constructed and performed within a given historically specific philosophical and anthropological discourse on mortality, resurrection and immortality. Since death lies outside any living subject's personal or collective realm of experience, this 'death', which is always already representation, can only be rendered as an idea, not something known as a bodily sensation. This idea, furthermore, involves imagery not directly belonging to it, so that it is always figural, and the privileged trope for other values to boot. Placed beyond the register of what the living subject can know, 'death' can only be read as a signifier with an incessantly receding, ungraspable signified, invariably always pointing back reflexively to other signifiers<sup>4</sup>. Death remains outside clear categories. It is nowhere, because it is only a gap, a cut, a transition between the living body and the corpse, a before (the painful fear, the serene joy of the dying person) and an after (the mourning of the survivor); which is to say, an ungraspable point, lacking any empirical object. The final images of Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon* forcefully illustrate the power of the state of suspension that is at stake, given that figurations of death necessarily oscillate between an ungraspable point of reference in experience and signs that reflexively point back to themselves. The young noblewoman Jen Yu, whose recklessness has made her responsible for the death of the master warrior (Chow Yun Fat), has come to a monastery, high up in the mountains, with her forbidden lover, the robber prince Lo Dark Cloud (Chen Chang). Because she is at an impasse in her life, unwilling to marry the nobleman her father has designated for her, unable to simply run off with the robber prince she loves, but also guilty because of the death she has caused, she decides to perform this psychic and social border-situation bodily. She turns to Lo and asks how he wishes their story to end, and, after he has assured her that all he wants is for them to return to the desert, where they were once so happy together, she jumps off the mountain. In so doing, she has

<sup>4</sup> *Signifier*: in Saussurean linguistics, the *signifier* is the written or spoken word, arbitrarily chosen, which represents the *signified*, or concept referred to. The letters 'c-a-t' refer to, but have no natural link to, the actual animal.

recourse to a legend claiming that, if one's belief is strong, miracles can happen. Yet significant about Ang Lee's mise-en-scène is the fact that the final image of Jen Yu is fundamentally ambivalent. All we see is her body, floating with outstretched arms and legs through the sky, so that it remains unclear whether the myth will hold, and she will survive, or whether she has chosen a valiant mode of death – as a gesture of ethical self-sacrifice. For the viewers the closure of *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon* is both a beautification of death – and thus a protective image, covering over the real symbolic and bodily destruction of a person – as well as an eternal image – pointing towards death and averting death at one and the same time. Jen Yu's body is arrested in death, but because Ang Lee leaves her suspended between heaven and earth, and thus between life and death, between the ephemeral and the eternal, his cinematic representation also arrests death. Though death is explicitly invoked by virtue of her sacrificial jump as well as the staging of her floating body, it is also completely absent from the image.

From this, a further aspect of the contradictions underlying representations of death can be deduced. Though death is nowhere, it is, of course, at the same time everywhere, because death begins with birth and remains present on all levels of daily existence, each moment of mortal existence – after the cutting of the umbilical cord – insisting that its measure is the finality towards which it is directed. Death is the one privileged moment of the absolutely real, of true, non-figurative materiality as it appears in the shape of the changeability and vulnerability of the material body. On the one hand, then, it demarcates figurative language by forcing us to recognise that, even though language, when faced with death, is never referentially reliable, it also cannot avoid referentiality. Non-negotiable and non-alterable, death is the limit of language, disrupting our system of language as well as our image repertoire, even as it is its inevitable ground and vanishing point. On the other hand, signifying nothing, it silently points to the indetermination of meaning, so that one can speak of death only by speaking other. The impasse at issue can be formulated in the following manner: as the point where all language fails, it is also the source of all allegorical speaking. But precisely because death is excessively tropic, it also points to a reality beyond, evoking the referent that representational texts may point to but not touch. Death, then, is both most referential and most self-referential, a reality for the experiencing subject but non-verifiable for the speculating and spectating survivor.

Yet the numerous literary depictions of deathbed scenes also illustrate that representations of death not only attest to the fallibility of aesthetic language and the impermanence of human existence, but also confirm social stability in the face of mortality precisely by virtue of a language of death. The force of these narratives resides in the fact that in their last moments the dying have a vision of afterlife, while at the same time the aesthetic rendition of the deathbed ritual includes the farewell greetings from kin and friends and the redistribution of social roles and property that serve to negotiate kinship succession. Thus a sense of human continuity, so fundamentally questioned in the face of death, is also assured in relation to both ancestors and survivors. Indeed, as Walter Benjamin argues, death is the sanction for any advice a storyteller might seek to transmit. Speaking in the shadow of one's own demise, as well as against this finality, is precisely what endows these stories with supreme authority. The death of the Afro-American woman Annie (Juanita Moore) in Douglas Sirk's last Hollywood melodrama, *Imitation of Life* (1959), serves as a poignant illustration for the power of the deathbed scene. Having returned from Hollywood, where she has found her daughter, passing as a white showgirl, and having been unable to convince Sarah Jane (Susan Kohner) that she should come home with her, Annie finds herself fatally ill. Lying in her bed in her room in the home of Lora Meredith (Lana Turner), a Broadway star for whom she has been working for the past fifteen years, she comes to enact the solidarity between her surrogate family and the members of the black community, to which she has also always belonged. For the sentimentality unleashed by the anticipation of her death allows the survivors to reconfirm their alliances amongst each other, while Annie uses her final leave-taking not only to determine how her possessions are to be redistributed, but also to confirm the image she wants herself to be remembered by.

Indeed, the melodramatic power of this deathbed scene on the one hand feeds off the belief that in dying Annie has advice to give, which seems to be irrevocably inscribed by authority. On the other hand, Sirk uses this narrative convention so as to disclose the way in which the authenticity of emotions deployed here are nothing other than an imitation of life. Her doctor, her priest and the Afro-American butler Kenneth have all gathered around Annie's deathbed, while Lora has sat down by her. Between her head and Annie's we see a photograph of Sarah Jane smiling radiantly, propped up against the lamp on the bedside table. While Annie explains to those assembled how to

pay her their last respects, how she wishes to divide up her possessions, she individually calls upon each one of her grief-stricken friends, and entrusts each with a particular concern. Although the most important task is entrusted to the entire group gathered around her bed, she has already turned her gaze from them, before she begins to explain to them how she imagines her funeral to be. If, in a prior scene, she had told Lora that our wedding day and the day we die are the great events of our lives, she now publicly elaborates on the dream she has been harbouring as her seminal fantasy all these years, namely that of finally reaching a more noble home than the one she has been inhabiting on earth. As Mahalia Jackson will sing in the scene of the funeral, immediately following upon this deathbed scene, the dying woman firmly believes that 'I'm going home to live with God.' The funeral ceremony she has planned down to the last detail, and for which she has saved all her life, is the ritual meant to show those surviving her one last time the fantasy which has allowed her to bear the unhappiness of her real living conditions as an Afro-American woman, relegated to the backrooms of the glamorous home of the Broadway star. From her deathbed she can now orchestrate this funeral, as though it were the one moment of power available to her. Lora responds to her description of her funeral with indignation and despair, and tries to convince her not to leave her. But, explaining 'I'm just tired Miss Lora, awfully tired', Annie leans back one last time onto her pillow with exhaustion and quietly closes her eyes.

According to Sirk, the 'no' with which Lora responds to her friend's sudden demise, is the one good line Lana Turner has in the entire film, the only moment in which her performance appears real. Indeed, Douglas Sirk has Lora call out in vain twice to the deceased, only to let her fall forward onto the bed in distress, thus lying next to the dead Annie. All we still see on the screen at the end of this scene is the face of Sarah Jane on the photograph, now framed by two mother figures, who have both turned away from her. With this *mise-en-scène*, Sirk undermines the grand emotions which Annie's speech aroused in the spectators, because the daughter, on whom her entire emotional life had depended, is not merely absent. Rather, her radiant smile is nothing but an image. Annie's conviction that her funeral will represent her proud transition into God's glory in worldly terms is as much a protective fiction as the boundless love for her daughter which she proclaimed on her dying bed. Furthermore, the emotional melodrama of this performance clearly exceeds its mark; its sentimentality is over the top in a programmatic way. For Sirk

deploys an excessive *mise-en-scène* so as to illustrate that death exceeds any representation, even as it proves to be the catalyst for a grand performance, such as the funeral ceremony and the final restitution of the family, with which the *Imitation of Life* ends. Sarah Jane will return just in time for the funeral, will finally publicly acknowledge the Afro-American mother she has been trying all her life to deny, only to discover that the Afro-American community burying Annie excludes her. She will thus end up sitting in the car with a surrogate family – Lora Meredith, Lora’s lover and her daughter – cut off from the dead mother she refused to acknowledge during her lifetime, yet also haunted by her spirit.

Representations of death, one can thus say, ground the way a culture stabilises and fashions itself as an invincible and omnipotent, eternal, intact symbolic order, but they can do so only by incessantly addressing the opposition between death and life. As the sociologist Jean Baudrillard argues, the phenomenon of survival must be seen in connection with and contingent upon a prohibition of death and the establishment of social surveillance of this prohibition. Power is first and foremost grounded in legislating death, by manipulating and controlling the exchange between life and death; indeed by severing the one from the other and by imposing a taboo on the dead. Power is thus installed precisely by drawing this first boundary, and all supplementary aspects of division – between soul and body, masculinity and femininity, good and bad – feed off this initial and initiating separation that partitions life from death. Any aesthetic rendition of death can be seen in light of such ambivalent boundary drawing. This is, of course, precisely Douglas Sirk’s point at the end of *Imitation of Life*. After Annie’s death, social power – notably the law of racial segregation dominant in the USA in the 1950s – is reinstalled. Her corpse and the boundaries drawn around it and in relation to it serve to renegotiate other boundaries, primarily involving the question who can be included and who must be excluded from both the cultural fantasy of the happy family as well as that of an allegedly intact black community.

#### Between the tropic and the real

Referring to the basic fact of moral existence, these representations fascinate because they allow us indirectly to confront our own death, even though on the manifest level they appear to revolve around the death of the other. Death is on the other side of the boundary. We experience death by proxy, for it

occurs in someone else's body and at another site, as a narrative or visual image. The ambivalent reassurance these representations seem to offer is that, although they insist on the need to acknowledge the ubiquitous presence of death in life, our belief in our own immortality is nevertheless also confirmed. We are the survivors of the tale, entertained and educated by virtue of the death inflicted on others. Yet, although representations of death may allow us to feel assured because the disturbance played through in the narrative ultimately finds closure, the reader or spectator is nevertheless also drawn into the liminal realm between life and death, so that partaking of the fantasy scenario often means hesitating between an assurance of a reclaimed mastery over and submission before the irrevocable law of death. It is an ambivalent power that is attributed to the survivor – and spectator – of the death of another. But therein also resides the power of myth, which according to Barthes (1956) entails depleting a body of its historical context and raising it to the level of a mythic signifier. One might take the ending of Elvis Presley's first Hollywood film, *Love Me Tender* (1956), as an example of the power contained in such a figurative relationship between death and iconic resurrection. The film, set in the backwash of the Civil War, involves a fatal rivalry between the two Reno brothers. Both are in love with Cathy (Debra Paget), and when the older brother Vance doesn't return after the war, Clint (Elvis Presley) decides to marry her instead. Once his brother returns, of course, the fraternal feud requires the sacrifice of one of them for the family peace to be restored, and it is the younger one who literally takes the bullet. He dies in the arms of the woman, who had never really loved him, assured by the brother he implicitly betrayed that everything will be all right. The director Robert D. Webb then cuts to the funeral ceremony, during which we hear Elvis Presley's voice-over, singing the title song. So as to emphasise the fact that, though dead, the young cowboy lives on as an image in the minds of the survivors, the final shot of the film shows the family ranch, with an image of Elvis Presley, singing while strumming his guitar, superimposed on this emblem of family unity.

But of course the film image is more complex. As the story of this film's production history has it, both Elvis Presley's mother and his fans were horrified at the thought that their idol would die at the end of the film. Thus the producers came up with the idea of a 'singing corpse' superimposed over the closing images. The reel character Clint Reno dies, but not so that the real actor, Elvis Presley, can live on. Rather the power of the icon 'Elvis Presley' that was being

installed with this first Hollywood film resided precisely in the fact that the actual historical person Elvis Presley came to die 'figuratively', in order to be re-born as a mythic creature – a dead body resurrected as a cinema image, greater than life, beyond the boundary that delimits normal mortals from celestial creatures; forever singing somewhere in a site above our heads. This was to be a fatal exchange, as we know, for the young hillbilly from Memphis, Tennessee, who was to suffer all his life under the 'image' that had made him an international star and a millionaire in 1956, but also so powerfully had frozen him into an icon.

One might surmise that any representation of death, therefore, also involves the disturbing return of the repressed knowledge of death, the excess beyond the text, which the latter aims to stabilise by having signs and images represent it. As these representations oscillate between the excessively tropic and a non-figurative materiality, their real referent always eludes the effort of recovery that representations seek to afford. It disrupts the system at its very centre. Thus, many narratives involving death work with a tripartite structure. Death causes a disorder to the stability of a given fictional world and engenders moments of ambivalence, disruption or vulnerability. This phase of liminality is followed by narrative closure, where the threat that the event of death poses is again reclaimed by a renewed return to stability. Yet the regained order encompasses a shift because it will never again be entirely devoid of traces of difference. Ultimately these narratives broadcast the message that recuperation from death is imperfect, the regained stability is not safe and the urge for order is inhabited by a fascination with disruption and split. The certainty of survival emerges over and out of the certainty of dissolution.

Ultimately, the seminal ambivalence that underlies all representations of death thus resides in the fact that, while they are morally educating and emotionally elevating, they also touch on the knowledge of our mortality, which for most is so disconcerting that we would prefer to disavow it. They fascinate with dangerous knowledge. In the aesthetic enactment, however, we have a situation that is impossible in life, namely, that we share death vicariously and return to the living. Even as we are forced to acknowledge the ubiquitous presence of death in life, our belief in our own immortality is confirmed. The aesthetic representation of death lets us repress our knowledge of the reality of death precisely because here death occurs in someone else's body and as an image or a narrative. Representations of death, one could say, articulate an anxiety

about and a desire for death, functioning like a symptom, which psychoanalysis defines as a repression that, because it fails, gives to the subject, in the guise of a ciphered message, the truth about his or her desire that he or she could not otherwise confront. In a gesture of compromise, concealing what they also disclose, these fundamentally duplicitous representations try to maintain a balance of sorts. They point obliquely to that which threatens to disturb the order but articulate this disturbing knowledge of mortality in a displaced, recoded and translated manner, and by virtue of the substitution render the dangerous knowledge as something beautiful, fascinating and ultimately reassuring. Visualising even as they conceal what is too dangerous to articulate openly but too fascinating to repress successfully, they place death away from the self at the same time that they ineluctably return the desire for and the knowledge of finiteness and dissolution, upon and against which all individual and cultural systems of coherence and continuation rest.

### Epilogue

As Stephen Greenblatt compellingly claims in his introduction to *Shakespearean Negotiations*, he was initially driven by the desire to speak with the dead, only to discover that if – in uncovering social energies that have culturally survived – he had wanted to hear one voice, he found himself confronted with many voices of the dead instead, and that if he has wanted to hear the voice of the other, he had heard his own voice resonating in this exchange of power as well, because the speech of the dead is not private property. To illustrate how we are haunted by culture in the sense of being haunted by the voices of the dead, or, put another way, in the sense that as cultural analysts we inevitably enter into an exchange with the dead – the dead text, the world it emerges from and which it survives, but also, of course, the different shapes its cultural circulation has taken on – I will conclude with a final poignant example of the haunting power of a conversation with the dead – Baz Luhrman's radically post-modern performance of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* (1996). In the final death tableau, we find precisely the oscillation between tropic and real that has been at stake in my discussion, even while Luhrman's performance of this haunting is complex. Not only are the two star-crossed lovers from the start haunted by a desire for death that is stronger than any desire for survival, with their erotic self-expenditure always already fatally marked, in part because it is a transgressive, forbidden love, but in part because it is so clearly suicidal.

Rather, any performance today of this text is itself haunted by the voices of the dead, which is to say the many performances preceding it that have turned this final death tableau into a cultural cliché. Faced with this problem, Baz Luhrman's solution is to address precisely what is at stake if one enters into the powerful exchange between life and death.

After Juliet has shot herself in the mouth, only to collapse on top of the corpse of Romeo, who had taken poison after finding his beloved lavishly laid out in state amongst candles and flowers in the church he had meant to marry her in, the two dead bodies are staged as an allegory for a beautification of, but also as a mixture of voices of, the dead. For Baz Luhrman replaces the Shakespeare text, spoken by Claire Danes and Leonardo diCaprio, which has now fallen silent, with an intonation of Wagner's 'Liebestod' motif that takes over the spoken text on the sound-track. At the same time Luhrman also conjoins the Shakespearian text with another convention of how unhappy endings might be depicted, namely the composite of all romantic scenes leading to this tragic resolution. Over the dead bodies of his star-crossed lovers Luhrman shows us the scenic moments that made up their romance, only to counter these highly tropic – one might even say kitsch – images with the images of their corpses as seen on TV. Indeed, one might read this shift from aesthetically staged corpses, to flashback images commemorating the scenes of their ill-fated love, to quasi-realistic depictions of the bodies the ambulance is taking away, as a deft transformation of real bodies (dead) into mythic signifiers (the Shakespearian figures that were always already fictional creatures), so as to signal that they can now live for ever as icons over and against their real death. This is a moment where the power of death as a moment of transfiguration is used to ward off the power of death's inescapable reality. The eternity of a fiction is pitted against real death, even while this is not just another idiosyncratic interpretation of Shakespeare's actual end, where Montague declares: 'I will raise her [Juliet's] statue in pure gold that whilst Verona by that name is known, there shall no figure at such rate be set, as that of true and faithful Juliet.' Rather, Luhrman performs his version of the monument, and does so significantly in reference to his own film; i.e. to the medium he has chosen to enter into a dialogue with death, with the dead Shakespeare's text and with the dead lovers of the story Shakespeare immortalised. The power in his cinematic images, as he negotiates the boundary between life and death, is that of commemorating and keeping eternal our memory of Juliet and Romeo, as tropes that both supersede and at

the same time feed off a death they can gesture towards but never fully touch. Death, once more, proves to be both solitary and public; a supremely unique event yet also fully codified and always already culturally negotiated.

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