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DEATH IS SERVED

The Serialization of Death and Its Conceptualization Through Food Metaphors in US Literature and Media

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> The end of man would seem then to be that which cannot be *lived* by any man.
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> In that sense death is also the powerful limit of all mortal knowledge; its ground and its vanishing point.
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A film called *Happy Death Day*, directed by Christopher Landon, arrived in American theatres in 2017. The film was advertised with the tagline *Get Up. Live Your Day. Get Killed.* ***Again.***

Illustration 1: Poster Happy Death Day, 2017

The fact that the tagline culminates in the emboldening of 'again' highlights the repetition of death, which provides the motion picture's forward momentum. In the film, protagonist and quintessential final girl, Teresa "Tree" Gelbman finds herself captured in a Groundhog Day-esque loop in which she keeps being murdered, on her birthday (Monday the 18th), only to wake up *again* the morning of that very same day. The established repetitive dynamic circles around the serialized demise of Tree Gelbman and the film indulges in examining the plethora of ways in which she dies. We witness the same young woman being murdered ten times by a masked killer who, through the repetitive structuring of the film, inadvertently becomes a serial killer. Her murder plays out differently each time, even though it is the same day over and over again, as we bear witness to the young woman getting stabbed, drowned, thrown from buildings, burnt, and beaten to death with a baseball bat, all while the film takes apparent pleasure in visualizing her death over and over *again*. Ultimately, the plot hinges on the continuous killing off of its own protagonist who, upon waking up, maintains the knowledge of the previous (birth)days in which she had lived and had been killed. This stagnant state of immortality allows Gelbman sufficient

time to begin to solve her own murder in order to overcome her own demise, which she eventually does. Ornamented with a coming-of-age undertone, the film not only highlights the moral journey towards perfectibility, which the protagonist undergoes, but also illustrates her move from a passive, traditional female victim to an active pursuer and avenger of her own murder(er) when she states that: "I will just have to keep dying until I figure out who my killer is."

While Gelbman remains immortal and keeps waking up only to be killed again, her body nevertheless carries the physical trauma of the previous deaths that she has endured. As her physician confirms, "technically you should be dead", it becomes evident that death has been imprinted on her body, which becomes canvas for different versions of the corpse that are written upon her reinstated, living body. Gelbman's research misleads her to believe that the escaped serial killer John Tombs is her murderer as she becomes stuck in a repetitive loop that feeds off of her demise while simultaneously advancing the narrative; after she murders Tombs, she is lulled into a false sense of security and, for the first time on the aforementioned date, Monday the 18th, she indulges in the cupcake that her roommate Laurie has baked for her. It is this simple celebratory act that marks her crucial error. Unbeknownst to her, it is the poisoned cupcake, and thus the jealous roommate taking revenge, that kills her, with Tombs having served as a mere scapegoat. Needless to say, Tree wakes up again and has both the opportunity to correct her error in judgment and to take revenge on her roommate Laurie. Having finally eliminated her murderer, the established circularity is broken, and Tree Gelbman is reinstated to the land of the living, waking up on Tuesday the 19th.

This example showcases the primary argument that this book will make, namely that the American cultural imaginary is insatiably hungry for death, caught in a repetition compulsion that renders the serial depiction thereof its logical conclusion. While death, according to Elisabeth Bronfen's "The Power of Death in Life" "[…] is the powerful fact against which, and in relation to which, all mortal existence is measured" (77), at its root we also find a dynamism of linguistic inaccessibility which results in what will be subsequently referred to as the *death paradox*. The *death paradox* builds upon French philosopher Michel Foucault's assertion in his text "Language to Infinity", which states that:

> [h]eaded towards death, language turns back upon itself; it encounters something like a mirror; and 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 limits. (90)

What becomes evident here is the proposition that language temporarily stagnates when faced with death, only to become inherently productive in "a play of mirrors that has no limits" in the formation of death's seemingly limitless aestheticized renditions which are drawn in and from the cultural imaginary. It is this paradoxical

productivity, triggered by the linguistic ingraspability of death (that which I call the *death paradox*), that this book seeks to analyze in an American context, proposing that what Foucault highlights as limitlessness is reiterated by serial narration in American culture which predominantly produces death as serialized text.

The reason that this dynamism becomes particularly significant in an American context is based on a rudimentary parenthesis of death in American optimism. While the Declaration of Independence constitutionalizes the right to liberty, *life*, and the pursuit of happiness, in doing so it simultaneously neglects the universal necessity of death. Put otherwise, the American project was fueled by such hope and prosperity that its promise adopted the form of impossible deathlessness. In *This America: The Case for the Nation*, Jill Lepore highlights this notion of an underbelly, referencing that which lies 'underneath' the Promised Land:

> But a nation founded on ideals, universal truths, also opens itself up to charges of hypocrisy at every turn. Those charges do not lie outside the plot of the story of America, or underneath it. They are its plot, the history on which any twenty-first century case for the American nation has to rest, a history of struggle and agony and courage and promise. (46)

America's cultural imaginary is what comes to perform an American hunger for death and Lepore debunks the idea that America is a purely optimistic nation, arguing that the charges of hypocrisy are not only underneath the American plot, but *are* in fact its plot. Founded on a trajectory of deathlessness, it appears that American cultural soil is particularly fertile breeding ground for the continuous reiteration of the *death paradox*, the parenthesizing of death and the creation of "a virtual space where speech discovers the endless resourcefulness of its own image" which "can represent itself as already existing behind itself, already active beyond itself, to infinity" (Foucault, 90). The ensuing repetition compulsion, which dictates the constant reiteration of an aestheticized death, illustrates the fetishization of death-as-imagination alongside its seemingly inherent strive for seriality. It is this formula of seriality, in which imaginations of death appear to be at their most comfortable in American culture, that this volume seeks to analyze with the aid of a versatile food metaphor intended to lend tangibility to the proceedings.

The reason why variations of a food metaphor become an apt figuration for the conceptualization of death in the American cultural imaginary is rooted in America's optimistic promise; according to Scott W. Poole, the New World is crafted as a "[…] new republic, [that would] seemingly, live in a sunlit world without shadows, a place where no monster could hide" (9). A gluttonous desire for aestheticizations of death can then be traced back to the way in which American optimism tends to cover up death in favor of life. In the ideological development of the American fantasy, death, in simple terms, has been all but forgotten. In *The Myths that Made America*, Heike Paul reminds us that:

> The Mythology of the 'new world' begins with the discourse of discovery and with powerful European projections that envision a new kind of paradise, a utopia somewhere across the Atlantic that alleviates the grievances of the 'old world' and that promises boundless earthly riches. (43)

It is this ideology that develops an optimistic coloring that emphasizes hope and prosperity as an emblem of creation and life and that suggests a shedding of the past as an act of alleviation. The repressive pressure that this optimistic coloring of the New World exerts, reemerges as a collective unconscious, one triggered by an *appetite* that aestheticizes that which is lacking, namely death. The way in which this pure optimism becomes artistically productive in its repression of death further manifests as a repetition compulsion, a *serialization* of imaginations. While a declaration of independence insinuates the concept of a clean slate, a break from a (European) past also neglects that same past. It is this past that also takes on a haunting quality that emerges within its cultural imaginary, all while the new nation lays its focus on the future, on movement, and on progression.[1] A life-affirming gaze to the future may cover up the universal presence of death; however, it fails to eliminate it altogether. It is here that a form of American 'pessimism' takes precedent in artistic reproduction and reiterates the resulting insatiability for aestheticized images of death by means of relentlessly (re)performing death. The American appetite for the serial depiction of death is rooted in the parenthesis of its actuality; this is a lack that results in its overt cultural fetishization and in the dynamism of repetitive encoding.

Lauren Berlant identifies America's optimistic promise as 'cruel', defining this conceptualization of *cruel optimism* as "a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility whose realization is discovered […] to be impossible, sheer fantasy […]" (24). A parenthesis of death, in favor of life and prosperity, is such a fantasy that involves the "condition of maintaining an attachment to a significantly problematic object" (Berlant, 24). When rendered in its full cruelty, the universality and inevitability of death clashes with a rationale of a constitutional right to life. It is a right to life that cannot be separated from a subconscious, libidinal desire for death which is, therefore, inherently written into the fabric of America and emerges as an appetite in its cultural imaginary. Any discourse of an in-experienceable death, the unsolvable enigma, is axiomatically problematic, as the *death paradox* illustrates. The *death paradox* emerges as a particularly productive perspective, given that it is embedded in an American context that so avidly prioritizes life that it covers up death in favor of life. A focus on death rather than life as a cornerstone of the American cultural imaginary allows for a rethinking of the American project from a different perspective, which positions death rather than life at the center and, therefore, is able to

1 This book opens with the American gothic that picks up on the spectral qualities of a neglected past because of said haunting's dynamism.

uncover the dangers of America's (cruel) optimism. It is this aspect, in combination with the previously outlined *death paradox*, that forms this book's core argument. I claim that the covering up of death by American optimism, in turn, reappears as a repetition compulsion in its cultural imaginary and is marked by an insatiability that culminates in a serialized narrative that is governed by a serial killer.

Circling back to our initial, performative example, it becomes evident that *Happy Death Day* touches upon many aspects that this monograph also reflects. First of all, the film implements a flirtation with the supernatural, through the impossible repetition of the protagonist's birthday. This not only creates distance between an actuality of death and its aestheticized imagination, but also ultimately allows for Gelbman's reinstatement of herself as a living entity. This aspect of textual distancing from, as well as an overwriting of death in favor of, life will be reiterated in this book's analysis of the American gothic. Secondly, Gelbman can be read as a form of zombie figure, given that she keeps coming back from the dead. Pushed into a space of liminality, her body becomes a site of negotiation, similar to the figure of the zombie and this marks the second aspect of analysis in this book. Furthermore, the film plays out as a revenge plot that, ultimately, lies at the heart of murderous desire and is staged in a serialized manner. Vengeful desire motivates her roommate Laurie to repeatedly kill her and, moreover, it is actually a serial killer who becomes the scapegoat for her murderous agency. The emotional justification of murder in the form of revenge, which in itself conceptualizes seriality, will be addressed in this volume's third chapter.

The fact that a poisonous cupcake turns out to be the actual harbinger of death pertains explicitly to the food metaphor that this book aims to set into place along the structuring of the argument. Laurie cannot compel Gelbman to, in essence, *eat* her own death like a cannibal, so she starts to overcompensate and fetishize Tree's death in serialized form and this hints at a dynamism of insatiability. The cannibalistic fetishization of murderous desire is the topic of this book's fourth chapter. Ultimately, Laurie is unable to kill Gelbman in the way that she initially intended, namely through feeding her a poisoned cupcake and is, thus, forced to masquerade herself as a serial killer. It is also the figuration of the serial killer that will be the fifth and final object of analysis in this monograph. Structurally echoing the argument that this monograph makes, it is the serial formula of the narrative in *Happy Death Day* that trivializes the seriousness of Gelbman's demise, rendering it negotiable in its aestheticized serialization; only by means of overtly re-performing her death will she, ultimately, be able to overcome her own demise. Similarly, the audience becomes equally hungry to watch Gelbman die, thereby rendering her gruesome murders whimsically spectacular. While witnessing her first murder might instill shock, once the narrative establishes that she will wake up again, her demise takes on a playful quality. It then becomes a question of *how else* she *could* die, rather

than whether or not she *will* die. This is how the film showcases an American repetition compulsion for an aesthetically staged death.

What is at stake in the exemplary *Happy Death Day,* and what will be further cemented by this volume's objects of analysis, is that death (rather than life) seems to harbor an incessant narratological productivity in the American cultural imaginary, which is to say that there is a form of insatiability at play. In *Dead Girls: Essays on an American Obsession*, Alice Bolin highlights the quest for the murderer as that which is triggered by the corpse, i.e. death, and that which becomes productive when stating that ""Who killed Laura Palmer?" spawned a genre – *Veronica Mars, The Killing, Pretty Little Liars, Top of the Lake, True Detective, How to Get Away with Murder*, and *The Night Of* are all notable descendants of *Twin Peaks*[2]" (14). The plethora of serial narratives that center on the murderous desires of Americans suggests that the underlying American 'pessimism' indeed appears more productive than American optimism, narratologically at least, even forming its plot in Lepore's words. This cruel optimism echoes Berlant's aforementioned "attachment to a significantly problematic object" (24) that forms fruitful ground for the *death paradox*. The reiteration of death being axiomatically problematic, it is the compensation of a temporary linguistic stagnation against the backdrop of a *cruel optimism* that reappears in a particularly creative, compulsive plethora of aestheticized images of death. If Berlant is correct in asserting that "a relation of cruel optimism exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing" (1), then the in-experienceability of death (tied to a utopic fantasy of a New World) is almost preconditioned for a narratological productivity that lends a voice to this doubled repression of death in its cultural imaginary. The aestheticization and serial encoding of these images, which pertains to a specifically American repetition compulsion, forms this book's central area of investigation.

American optimism manifests as a craving in its cultural imaginary when rendered in its full cruelty, which displays an overt hunger or compulsion for the telling of death, finding its most comfortable form in serial narration. Attempting to grasp the aforementioned insatiable productivity, this book proposes variations of a food metaphor as a useful tool for the reification of the proposed American appetite for death. In *The Rituals of Dinner*, Margeret Visser reflects on said rituals becoming avid metaphors for artistic rendition, ingraining the ritualized preparation of a meal with a narrative status when stating that "[…] a meal can be thought of as a ritual and work of art, with limits laid down, desires aroused and fulfilled, enticements, variety, patterning and plot" (19). The food metaphor lends a graspability to the ways in which the *death paradox* manifests itself in American culture. The proposed food metaphor furthermore becomes twofold when read against the backdrop of American optimism and its parenthesis of death, which triggers a culture's imagination to

2 David Lynch's *Twin Peaks* will be discussed in chapter 1.

turn towards death. On the one hand, it accurately characterizes the insatiability for an aestheticized death, which further picks up on the overt symbolism of food surrounding images of death – a symbolism that can be read as a form of amplification of the proposed hunger for death. This hunger is oftentimes textually reiterated, or *doubled*, by means of aligning food and death. On the other hand, though, it is this exact insatiability, the repetition compulsion, that not only becomes serial, but also structurally formulaic as such. The textual recipe for imaginations of death is its serialization. Death's narratological productivity, resulting from a doubled absence, its linguistic ingraspability, as well as its lack in American optimism becomes the fabric of its cultural imaginary in which it is repeated compulsively, insatiably, and serially.

In *America in the Movies*, Michael Wood makes the assertion that any cultural imaginary serves as a platform for the visualization and reorganization of our problems into tangible forms rather than existing as pure escapism:

> It seems that entertainment is not, as we often think, a full-scale flight from our problems, nor a means of forgetting them completely, but rather a rearrangement of our problems into shapes which tame them, which disperse them to the margins of our attention. (18)

This aspect of rearrangement in favor of taming becomes salient regarding two dynamisms that are at play in this volume. First of all, it serves to illustrate the importance of the food metaphors that can be found throughout the analyses of serialized renditions circling around death. On the one hand, this notion places an emphasis on an observed tendency of food literally being staged vis-à-vis death. On the other hand, the food metaphors aid in the act of re-shaping and taming these aestheticized renditions of death in the manner that Wood describes. Harking back to the *death paradox*, which outlines the textual difficulty of grasping death, it is these aestheticized imaginations which spur after linguistic stagnation that performs the aspect of *taming*, which is to say of rendering death graspable.

Secondly, Wood's observation is also important regarding the distinction between the actuality of death, which is mostly reified in the corpse itself, and its aestheticized imagination. It is here that Julia Kristeva's elaborations on the concept of the abject and abjection in *The Powers of Horror*, and her chapter on "Approaching Abjection" in specific, provide a further lens for this analysis. In simple terms, what Kristeva terms the abject, something that is elusive by nature, forms that which the (living) subject rejects in order to maintain its subjectivity. The abject, technically, is a non-object of disgust and repudiation that "[…] has only one quality of the object – that of being opposed to I" (230). Tamed towards objectivity, Kristeva comes to outline a few instances in which objects serve as designated abjects. Beginning with food loathing, she concludes that the abject is, ultimately, particularly present within the corpse, which can be seen as forming a non-abstraction of the abject:

> The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject. It is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object. Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us. (Kristeva, 232)

It is significant to note that Kristeva makes a point of stripping the corpse of narrative, "without God and outside of science", when aligning it with "the utmost of abjection". Thus, the aspect of the corpse that causes repudiation seems to be its pure actuality, that which cannot be put into words, which renders language stagnant. Its *actual* stench, its *actual* ugliness, and its *actual* decomposition forms the abject. Kristeva further emphasizes this notion when stating that:

> […] as in true theater, without makeup or masks, […] corpses show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly with any difficulty, on the part of death. (231)

The corpse's reality, death as abject, is that which needs to be thrust aside in order to maintain life; its aestheticized rendition, then, is not the same. The aestheticized rendition of the corpse showcases or *masquerades* the abject as narrative, with "makeup and masks", in an attempt to rearrange and to tame it, to use Wood's words. Distinguishing between these two different conceptualizations of death is crucial here. Its abject actuality marks that which can never be re-experienced, absolute death, which remains non-negotiable and is, thus, repudiated. This cannot be grasped by language. Its position in the cultural imagination marks the paradoxical productivity that insists upon stagnation, that which I call the *death paradox*. Death becomes tangible as an aesthetic rendition and the narrative able to tame it into shape and to render it seemingly negotiable. Death is insatiably, compulsively productive as an aesthetic rendition. It is this later form that becomes a serial compulsion in the American cultural imaginary.

Scott W. Poole emphasizes the importance of placing an emphasis on American shadows that give new answers to old questions when stating that:

> [s]eeing America through its monsters offers a new perspective on old questions. It allows us to look into the shadows, to rifle through those trunks in the attic we have been warned to leave alone. Not all of our myths will make it out of here alive. (xvii)

In the context of this book, these monsters mark the serial narratives that incessantly, compulsively circle around death. The commonality that they share is that they are always aestheticized based on the axiomatic impossibility of an experienceable death. This constant aestheticization may be seen as a symptom of two individual aspects. Firstly, the general in-experienceability of abject death

demands a re-shaping in textual form in order to be tamed and, thus, becomes productive through the *death paradox*. Secondly, the inherently American backdrop of a deathless optimism, which becomes cruel, adds an additional layer to the in-experienceability of death through the act of covering it up in favor of life. As a result, limitless renegotiations of death are assumed in the form of a compulsive repetition that is geared towards the comfort of predictability and perpetuity; in other words, seriality is what is desired. Ultimately, we find death and the dead body depicted as a serial that provides a form of tangibility through its staging as persistent repetition, formally as well as with regard to content, and in a manner dominated by the ensuing repetition compulsion that manifests as a metaphorical hunger. The serial death in an American context builds upon the *death paradox* that, in turn, becomes significantly productive based on its repression of death. It is this dynamism that takes on a largely paradoxical nature; its serial aestheticization showcases the inevitability of death; however, it also neglects death as absolute and final, insinuating instead a sense of security in its repetitive character, by means of repeatedly stating this exact inevitability. The serial narrative is limitless, given that it is based on endless perpetuity, and highlights constant reappearance, rather than the absolute end of any individual piece in the circular chain. The serial reproduction and its consequential repetition of death, then, deceitfully stages death in a manner that implies a heightened level of acknowledgment of its abject reality only to repudiate said level by means of immediately superimposing another, subsequent rendition of demise upon the previously deceased. It is that appetite for death that manifests as compulsive repetition and that comes to dictate the aesthetics of death in America.

Governed by this artistic productivity of the *death paradox*, these serial representations of death are an aestheticized form, but "[…] horror and abjection, remain tied to simulation" (Botting, 6). This monograph is interested in exactly these simulations. Reflecting on the popularity of the horror narrative in *Limits of Horror*, Fred Botting further asserts that "violent consumption looks back to darkly idealized times, […] re-pulses from the sanitization to search for a fantasized reality of blood and death" (6). This illustrates why the artistic landscape becomes a platform for the simulated confrontation with an aestheticized death. Furthermore, this confrontation, which is tied to illusion, becomes an act that generates pleasure, a formula which permeates the appetite for more. In "Thoughts for the Times on War and Death", Sigmund Freud asserts that "[w]e welcome illusions because they spare us unpleasurable feelings, and enable us to enjoy satisfactions instead" (280). It is this aspect that exemplifies the paradoxical insatiability for a parenthesized death that is generated in the cultural imaginary of the seemingly contradictory American understanding of optimism. In terms of the desire to experience death, there appears to be a tendency towards the metaphorical ingestion thereof by means of writing death into its cultural imaginary as "[i]n the realm of fiction we find to plu-

rality of lives which we need. We die with the hero with whom we have identified ourselves; yet we survive him, and are ready to die again just as safely with another hero" (Freud, 291). Repressed by its optimistic fundament, death reappears in transference where it is greedily devoured. This greedy quest, to experience death without dying, results in the aestheticized representation thereof. Manifold in reproduction, it is these representations that will be read alongside a dynamic of hunger, which in turn produces the aesthetics of death as a food metaphor. Aligning the politics of food consumption with the politics of death in an American context lends tangibility to the *death paradox* and serves to aptly illustrate the dynamisms that are at play in death's serialized aestheticization.

Concluding what has been outlined here, an American hunger for the imagination of death, which is to say the renegotiation of death in America, is ultimately tied to the textual necessity of serial narration which tames its cultural insatiability or, in Foucault's words, its limitless mirroring. Based on this argumentation, this book's proposed trajectory follows the chronological development and approximation of an aestheticized death in its various forms, as well as in terms of an increase of velocity, proximity, and seriality. This eventually culminates in serial content that doubles the serial form and which will serve as a guide through the entirety of this volume. Structured along mirroring serial narratives, which allude to the Emersonian idea of circularity, the argument will be reified by means of the translation into a hunger metaphor; this endows the *death paradox* with tangibility, as mentioned previously. Reflecting on the potential universality of food metaphors, Margaret Visser asserts that:

> [f]ood can be shared, abstained from, used as a weapon or a proof of prestige, stolen, or given away; it is therefore a test of moral values as well. Everyone understands exactly what going without food will mean: food is the great necessity to which we all submit. (3)

It is my intention to demonstrate that aestheticized renditions of death in the American cultural imaginary work in a very similar fashion, marking the other great necessity to which we all must submit. Thus, the argumentation will employ different versions of these food metaphors as a way to cement the analyzed tropes of deadly desires. We are reminded of the epigraph to this work, in which Bronfen states that death "is also the powerful limit of all mortal knowledge; its ground and its vanishing point" (77). If Visser is right in her assertion that food is a test of moral values, a great necessity to which we all submit, then its consumption becomes a site for the aforementioned limitations of mortal knowledge. Discussing the dinner ritual as metaphor, Visser maintains that "[t]he main rules about eating are simple: if you do not eat, you die; and no matter how large your dinner, you will soon be hungry again" (2) which highlights an underlying compulsion to repeat the ritual. It appears that, with regard to its aestheticized rendition, death in America displays a dynamism

similar to these rituals of dinner and Barbara Johnson is correct in claiming that "[t]he end of man would seem then to be that which cannot be *lived* by any man" (3, my emphasis). No matter how plentiful the observation of an aestheticized death, you will soon be hungry again. It is this notion that accounts for the narrative of death becoming a compulsively serial narrative. In the context of this volume, this means that the urge and necessity to eat over and over again, as well as the cultivation of these metaphorical meals, shall serve as a fitting feature of life to shed light on what has seemingly been overwritten in the design of a New Nation and in its optimistic pursuit of happiness: the absolute necessity of an ultimate death.

This book uses the *serialized text* and the performance of insatiability as its primary objects of analysis. The serialized text ought to be understood as any form of storytelling in which the narrative is structured alongside an episodic format that employs dynamic repetition.[3] Implementing the dynamism of seriality, which according to Bronfen's "Seriality" "places the focus on the way any text can be thought of as part of a succession of previous texts; returning to and thus repeating prior texts, albeit with difference inscribed" (275), each chapter, apart from chapter three, analyzes an anchoring, primary text against which I read a contemporary rendition of a television serial. The third chapter employs a similar structure while exclusively focusing on film, however. The first chapter begins with the American gothic. In 1798, Charles Brockden Brown wrote what would come to be known as the first American novel, the tale of *Wieland: or the Transformation: An American Tale*. Marking only the first in a plethora of stories circling around corpses, Brown's novel tells the tale of a family who is obliterated gruesomely; this is a text which has become deeply woven into the fabric of America's cultural imaginary. The first chapter of this book traces the origins of this emerging hunger for death. Seminal voice of gothic gloom, a topological selection of three short stories of Edgar Allan Poe, serve as the cornerstone for the subsequent analysis of the seemingly insatiable presence of narrative, triggered by the *death paradox*, within American culture. Anchoring the death debate with an exemplary selection of Poe's works, the first chapter reads David Lynch's contemporary gothic television series *Twin Peaks* (as well as its continuation twenty five years later, *Twin Peaks: The Return*) alongside Poe in order to highlight a formula for the serial reproduction of narratives surrounding the dead that, ultimately, overwrite death with life, thereby reinstating an impossible order, countering the absoluteness of death by means of the reestablishment of life through the production of text. This first chapter lays the groundwork for the ensuing discussion of the manifestation of the *death paradox* as serialized text and borrows from Ralph Waldo Emerson's transcendentalist notion of expansive circularity, as well as Philip Fisher's contestation of an implicitly American trend of *creative destruction*.

3 See Bronfen "Seriality", 2019.

The second chapter tackles a more graspable manifestation of what has been figuratively reified in both Poe's as well as Lynch's – the embodiment of Laura Palmer's seminal assertion that "I am dead yet I live": the undead body of the zombie. Following decades after the ensuing renditions of an aestheticized corpse in the American gothic, it is these metaphorically obliterated corpses, thought to be dead, which rise again in the form of the insatiably life-craving figure of the zombie. Simultaneously contesting the borders of both death and life, the body of the zombie emerges as a threat for the living having been forced to manifest due to spatial necessity; as Romero's initial tagline claims, "[w]hen there is no more room in hell the dead will walk the earth."[4] Implicitly, this tagline also maintains that the living rest uneasily on an amount of corpses too excessive to remain discarded. Marked with an insatiable, ravenous hunger for the living, the sheer mass of the zombie horde (as well as the previously quoted tagline) both point to the relentless (re-)production of the corpse. The traditional zombie, produced by the American project, explicitly marks the zombie as an American materialist monster, their renaissance re-appearing as the unwanted debris of American optimism. The American optimistic project has so avidly and actively thrust aside mortality's leftovers that a suddenly inconvenient surplus is eerily re-emerging from its grave in the form of a zombie. Unlike the American gothic text, the zombie-as-text superimposes itself onto the living; its relentless hunger and reproductive stance, tied to lacking subjectivity as such, also marks the figure as *serial*; a doubling of both life and death. Death returns, drawn as monstrous, in the figure of the zombie and is cloaked as a fragmented double; hungry for the living, it reinstates itself somewhere in the liminality between life and death. Often read as a war metaphor, this chapter explicitly focuses on the recent development of the figure of the zombie towards a form of subjectivity. Beginning with George A. Romero's zombie narratives, the figure of the zombie will be read as a heterotopic site, as both an echo of life as well as death, which develops its own narratological subjectivity. This aspect will be reiterated by means of reading Romero alongside the television serial *iZombie*, which stages the figure of the zombie as protagonist. Initially crafted as anti-subject, it is the zombie's hunger that becomes its marking characteristic and produces the narrative. As such, the figure perfectly exemplifies the hunger metaphor that this book proposes to use as an exemplification of the American death debate.

The third chapter focuses on the serial dynamism of revenge and cements both the aspect of serially overwriting the dead as well as the figure of the zombie as

4 Reading the zombie as an explicitly American figure, the earth here mainly connotes America as: "[o]ne of [the zombie's] defining characteristics […] is that it is a distinctly modern creation: urban, consumerist, cinematic, American – the ultimate materialist monster" (Venables, 208), see chapter 2.

a haunting manifestation thereof. Predicated by a previous action, revenge becomes performative of the serial, vengeful desire itself and is rooted in a repetition compulsion that emerges as an insatiability of vengeance. This volume reads revenge as a serial action, which permeates murderous desire, by analyzing Quentin Tarantino's popular revenge narratives. The act of revenge epitomizes the serial aspect of imaginations of death through its formulaic adherence to repetition and pertains to a hunger for an aestheticized death. The concept of revenge is preconditioned on a previous act, which is to be avenged, thereby producing (more) murderous violence in the same manner as in the serial narrative. Endowed with explicit direction, Tarantino's revenge tragedies inscribe vengeance with a strict formula that is geared towards death's reduplication in the form of ritualization. This chapter highlights the way in which Tarantinian revenge narratives follow the recipe of imitation in the form of vengeful reduplication and is read alongside the proposed food metaphor, which adds a structuring pillar to this argumentation. The analogy of vengeful murderous agency, and the concoction of a meal in particular, illustrate the way in which deadly agency becomes thoroughly formulaic when read as a recipe for murder; nourishing, adaptable, and excessively repeatable. Following the same recipe, this volume's third chapter reads these Tarantinian revenge films as stunt doubles of one another, thereby becoming reiterative of the repetitive formulaic encoding of an American aesthetics of death. The subject of the fourth chapter is this repetition compulsion, which also comes to signify the hunger of the cannibal as well as the agency of the serial killer, which will be the subject of the fifth chapter.

The fourth chapter then traces the evolution of this hunger's literalization by focusing on the figuration of the (serial) cannibal who further develops the metaphorical insatiability for death that the revenge narrative sets into motion. This chapter juxtaposes *American Psycho*'s Patrick Bateman, crafted as a rudimentary cannibal, with the more sophisticated Hannibal Lecter of the television serial *Hannibal*. Driven by a need to fetishize the corpse towards ingestion, cannibalism is drawn as the overcompensation of that absence of which death is ultimately resonant. Displaying different stages of cannibalistic desire, the analysis of the proposed primary texts demonstrates the reification of the American cultural tendency to not only stage death as serial, but also explicitly performing a hunger for the corpse which becomes particularly significant in the figure of the cannibal. Devouring the corpse, the cannibal becomes the carrier of an American compulsion to metaphorically ingest death. Fetishizing the corpse as a meal and, ultimately, as a dinner ritual, this codification which picks up on the recipe-esque formula that the revenge narrative sets in motion and serves as a connecting piece to the final chapter which focuses on the serial killer.

The fifth and final chapter then reads the figure of the serial killer as the logical culmination of these previously outlined predecessors. Stripped of the actual

consumption of the corpse, the serial cannibal's literal appetite becomes the serial killer's metaphorical appetite. As such, the serial killer also mirrors that metaphorical desire for death which American culture weaves into its imaginary through the continuous repetition of its aestheticization. Haunted by the same fetishization of that absence which death bears so heavily on the cannibal, the serial killer becomes a logical development of the American death debate in their structural compulsion to continuously reduplicate death. As such, the figure of the serial killer culminates as the inevitable evolution of that debris which is produced by American optimism, the dark underbelly of the New World. Rooted in what Mark Seltzer terms *wound culture*, the serial killer is a seminal component of the murderous narrative in the serial form, even becoming the entirety of its spectacle. This final chapter reads Wes Craven's *Scream* franchise as a blueprint for the serial (killer) narrative. The second part of this final chapter will focus on the artistic figuration of the assassination of fashion mogul Gianni Versace at the hands of serial killer Andrew Cunanan in *American Crime Story's* television serial *The Assassination of Gianni Versace* which serves to endow the serial killer not only with narratological productivity, but also with an element of the spectacular. Structured as such, all of these chapters illustrate that repetition compulsion that the American cultural imaginary produces around aestheticized renditions of death. The *death paradox* illustrates the way in which language is stagnant when faced with the abject reality of death, only to become paradoxically productive with regard to aestheticized versions of death, and it is intended to analyze that which lies underneath America's blind optimism. It is this serial tendency (which is codified towards the formula of the serial narrative) which is best reiterated through the invocation of a hunger metaphor that accounts for the insatiability on display. The serialized text becomes the death narrative's structuring force; it is able to absorb the plethora of imaginations that it serves up as the ritualization of death. This is a death that is served in the American cultural imaginary. Over and over. ***Again***.

1. The Text Devouring the Dead: Edgar Allan Poe and David Lynch's American Gothic

> To understand American literature, and indeed America, one must understand the Gothic, which is, simply, the imaginative expression of the fears and forbidden desires of Americans.
> *Charles L. Crow, American Gothic*

In a New World, built on the promise of optimism and fueled by the hope of continuous progress and prosperity, the genre of the gothic "exposes the repressed, what is hidden, unspoken, deliberately forgotten, in the lives of individuals and of cultures" (Crow, 2) and employs the cultural imaginary as a canvas for the revelation of that which remains parenthesized. Based on the precondition of an American optimism that neglects death in favor of life, it is not at all surprising that gothic tradition blossomed in an American cultural context from which authors such as Charles Brockden Brown, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Henry James, Emily Dickinson, and Edgar Allan Poe emerged, to name only a few. It appears that we find ourselves in a New World that neglects stagnation and affirms growth, given that "[i]n the United States, a belief in progress is almost an article of faith" (Crow, 2); what seems to resonate here is the looming suspicion that what was initially set out to become progressively grand might have already failed. Challenging the aforementioned American optimism with, what Crow terms, a "deeply skeptical" stance, the gothic tradition "insists that humans are flawed and capable of evil, and that the stories we tell ourselves in our history books may leave out what is most important for us to understand" (Crow, 2). In *The Puritan Way of Death*, David E. Stannard further maintains that:

> Americans sought a return to their lost sense of community in the graveyard and the heavenly world of the dead; in the process, paradoxically, they effectively banished the reality of death from their lives by a spiritualistic and sentimentalized embracing of it. (12)

Death's sentimentalization finds its initial voicing in the American gothic and this provides a fruitful breeding ground for the *death paradox*, a concept which builds

upon Foucault's work and outlines the idea that language when faced with actual, abject[1] death, stagnates only to become paradoxically productive in the telling of death's aestheticized rendition.[2]

The flipside of American optimism, and its reluctance to admit defeat (which involves an acknowledgment of the limitations of an initial optimistic promise), culminate in the denial of an actual, abject death for which there is little room in the Promised Land. We are reminded of the epigraph, in which Charles L. Crow asserts that the gothic manifests as the "imaginative expression of the fears and forbidden desires of Americans" (1). Whereas transcendentalist tendencies highlight self-reliance, independence, and a strive to move forward, the American gothic gazes fondly at a seemingly forgotten past which is revitalized in its cultural imaginary through the gothic mode, thereby becoming the voice of an optimism rendered cruel.[3] We find an obvious affinity towards death within this discourse, which lays its focus upon that which is parenthesized by a promise of optimism. In *Gothic*, Fred Botting asserts that, "[a] negative aesthetics informs gothic texts […]. Darkness – an absence of the light associated with sense, security and knowledge – characterizes the looks, moods, atmospheres and connotations of the genre" (1). It is important to note here that it is a negative form of *aesthetics*, i.e., "a system of principles for the appreciation of the beautiful" (OED) that produces the gothic's appeal, thereby rendering pleasurable that which in actuality is negatively tainted; it is here that abject death, repudiated in its actuality, reemerges as an aesthetic in the American gothic.

The American gothic is infused with an obsessive depiction of death that is made manifest as the dark underbelly of an enlightened optimism that continuously strives to (re)create project America. It is this repetition compulsion, fueled by the *death paradox*, which ultimately develops as a serial dynamism. In order to illustrate this aspect, this chapter will focus on an exemplary selection of three short stories by Edgar Allan Poe as well as the entirety of David Lynch's television serial *Twin Peaks* alongside its reboot, *Twin Peaks: The Return*. The plethora of short stories that Poe devoted to manifold, aestheticized renditions of death speaks to the productivity that the *death paradox* sets in motion, particularly when examined against the backdrop of American optimism. Poe's short stories, while technically not devised as a serial, are independent of one another; however, they are tied together by their aesthetics of death and this becomes so overtly anthological that it reveals a repetition compulsion. Poe's short stories present, as a collection or *series* of individual pieces held together by a common theme, showcases its own

1 See Introduction for an in-depth discussion of Julia Kristeva's conceptualization of death as the abject.

2 See Introduction for detailed explanation of what I call the *death paradox*.

3 See Introduction regarding Lauren Berlant's *Cruel Optimism*.

potential for serial productivity in its continuous renegotiations of an aestheticized imagination of death. Anchored in the reproduction of figurations of death, these stories circle so obsessively around death that they become serial in their depiction; they serialize aesthetiziced renditions death and, in their variability, illustrate the productivity that the *death paradox* harbors. It is this notion that David Lynch then explicitly reifies in staging the American gothic, fed by Poe's legacy, as a television serial in *Twin Peaks* and in *Twin Peaks: The Return*. The television show explicitly picks up on a death-as-serial content by cementing it within its episodic serial format.

The mode of the American gothic, thus, offers a manifestation of a revised conceptualization of death in which its abject actuality is superimposed by a plethora of an imaginary (un)real. The repetition compulsion that we find in the incessant circling around the aesthetics of death of Poe's stories is marked by variability. It is this mode of creation, rooted in the American gothic, that Lynch reinvigorates through the staging of seriality which is generated by the interpretability of gothic irrationalities. The supernatural undertone, which can be found throughout the works of both Poe and Lynch, serves as a way for the narrative to establish distance from the actuality of an abject death by means of the depiction of the unconscious and fantastic which is aimed at disturbing stasis, rather than establishing order. Botting claims that

> […] gothic styles disturb the borders of knowing and conjure up obscure otherworldly phenomena […] arcane and occult forms normally characterised as delusion, apparition, deception. (2)

He makes a case for the supernatural tendencies that feed the American gothic's narratives. It is here that the aspect of artistic rendition is epitomized as a form of visualization of that which cannot be grasped otherwise: abject death.[4] Botting further reflects on the limitless possibility of imaginations (we are reminded of Foucault's "limitless play of mirrors" which I have developed into the *death paradox*[5]) when stating that "[n]ot tied to a natural order of things as defined by realism, gothic flights of imagination suggest supernatural possibility, mystery, magic, wonder and monstrosity" (2). The gothic fixation with the irrational, which is to say with that which disturbs order, offers itself to the temporary stagnation of language when faced with the task of representing death specifically. The American gothic is rendered productive in the attempt to overcome its own stagnation,– in terms of the previously outlined *death paradox* – and tries to overcome a linguistic incapability to grasp death by means of superimposing an aestheticized death that is tainted by the supernatural. The resulting productivity manifests in a cornucopia of texts, each attempting to negotiate the absoluteness of death. It is this turn to the supernatural realm that

4 See Introduction for Wood's discussion of *taming*.

5 See Introduction for a detailed explanation of the *death paradox*.

ultimately allows for the serialized American gothic to overwrite death and to reinstate life, which will become evident in the analysis of *Twin Peaks*.

A tendency towards the serial emerges within the American gothic, which speaks to the hunger metaphor that this volume also aims to establish. It is the American gothic that whets the appetite, emphasizing the American cultural imaginary as being hungry for death.[6] The plethora of Poe stories indicate both an aestheticized death and an insatiability for figurations of death and this seemingly limitless repetition finds its home in the same serial format that is, ultimately, found in *Twin Peaks*. Codifying insatiability towards an episodic format, in serializing the mode of the American gothic, the continuous superimposition of a subsequent episodic instance ritualizes the consumption of aestheticized images of death. It is within this ritual, the serialized narrative, that an aestheticized death resists absolution. Catering to an unwavering appetite for an aestheticized death, the serial appears to become the only appropriate format for this repetition compulsion precisely because it superimposes a continuous 'next' onto a state of pure inexistence. In the serialized American gothic, it is the text that is hungry for figurations of the dead that feed the narrative by filling the linguistic silence which otherwise would cause language to stagnate. What will become evident in the subsequent analysis is that the serialized text remains limitlessly productive against the supernatural backdrop of the American gothic where it comes as far as *devouring* the deceased and, ultimately, of reestablishing them as living.

In order to illustrate this development, this chapter opens with the analysis of three select short stories by Edgar Allan Poe; "The Fall of the House of Usher", "The Masque of the Red Death", and "Ligeia". While this selection highlights the variety of depictions of an aestheticized death, thereby serving as an exemplary topology, these three stories have further been specifically chosen in order to emphasize an ultimate passivity regarding the deadly agency which is at play in early American gothic texts. It is this form of reluctance that will come to be challenged by the episodic serialization of the American gothic text, which then allows for death to be overwritten. While Poe remains anthological, the reading of Lynch alongside Emerson's transcendentalist notion of circularity will illustrate the way in which the formally serialized gothic format becomes expansive to such an extent that it cancels itself out, which is to say that it overwrites death. This will become evident when reading David Lynch's *Twin Peaks* and its logical continuation *Twin Peaks: The Return* television serials as a direct inheritance of Poe's plethora of gothic representations of death. Contemporarily continuing the tradition of the American gothic, an analysis of David Lynch's 1990 TV series *Twin Peaks* as well as with its 2017 reboot *Twin*

6 See Introduction for an in-depth discussion of the way in which the American cultural imaginary develops the serialization of an aestheticized death in a manner that is analogous to an appetite.

Peaks: The Return will cement the argument that, ultimately, the serialized American gothic text overwrites the dead in favor of the living.

Harking back to various gothic elements, Lynch inherits and incorporates the American gothic within a serial context of contemporary tragedy that was adapted for the television screen. Unsurprisingly, the American Gothic has become a canonical genre of television, seamlessly lending itself to the hunger for the repetition of serial narration. In "Twin Peaks and the Television Gothic", Lenora Ledwon elaborates on the reconceptualization of the gothic in televised form when stating that:

> [t]his new Television Gothic utilizes familiar Gothic themes and devices such as incest, the grotesque, repetition, interpolated narration, haunted settings, mirrors, doubles and supernatural occurrence […]. (260)

It is these gothic motifs that Ledwon correctly characterizes as apt for the serialized text of television when stating that "these elements undergo a sea change once they are immersed in the "currents" of television" (260). It appears that the voices of irrationality find themselves at their most comfortable within a format of the serial by playing on the uncanny spatiality that the television obtains within the familiarity of a home. Allowing for potentially endless repetition, the serial also facilitates an endless multitude of depiction, in particular concerning the metaphorical imagination of death. With *Twin Peaks* not only re-conceptualizing the American gothic within the format of television, but also returning 25 years later as a reboot of its original we find its own potential for seriality being performed explicitly. The fact that murderous entity "Bob", ultimately, manifests specifically as a *serial killer*[7] further reiterates the American gothic's subconscious tendency towards serialization. In *Natural Born Killers*, David Schmid highlights that:

> [o]ne of the most striking features of much contemporary discourse on serial murder is the fact that the complex public reaction to the serial killer is often managed through the *language of the gothic*. […] What can explain the prevalence of ancient gothic metaphors in making sense of a figure why is in so many ways emblematic of American modernity? (6, my emphasis)

This book develops towards an analysis of the serialized serial killer narrative; to that end it must begin here with the American gothic. It is a cruel American optimism that serves a precondition for an insatiable hunger for death, which initially emerges in the mode of the American gothic. The mode of the American gothic feeds off of a negative aestheticism that produces that repetition compulsion which continually recreates aestheticized imaginations of death and is still resonant, according to Schmid, in the language surrounding the serial killer. It is this aestheticization of

7 See also chapter 5 which explicitly focuses on the serial killer in American culture.

death in particular that becomes a catalyst for the development of the (gothic) narrative as serialized text, when viewed through the lens of the *death paradox*. Figurations of death feed the stories of Poe just as Laura Palmer's corpse feeds the narrative of *Twin Peaks*. This is, ultimately, illustrated with the final reinstatement of Palmer as living, which eliminates the progression of the narrative. It is thus that the serialized gothic text ultimately swallows and devours its own dead, reinstating them as living within the American cultural imaginary in the process.

1.1 Edgar Allan Poe – Various Figurations of the Same Death

Edgar Allan Poe's aestheticized representations of death are seminal in the development of the American gothic, but they remain at a sufficient remove from any actuality of abject death by means of othering the corpse. This form of othering marks a form of overwriting that will later develop into episodic serialized narration with *Twin Peaks*. With most of Poe's short stories bordering on the supernatural, these repeated aestheticizations of death tend to obtain a passive albeit haunting quality; murderous agency is attributed to a supernatural, spectral agency. Within the early mode of the American gothic, therefore, the confrontation with death lacks tangibility and manifests itself in abstraction through the supernatural mode, thereby crafting a significant metaphorical distance from any actual, abject death. What follows is an analysis of three exemplary short stories by Poe, all of which illustrate a different manner of aestheticizing abject death. It is this variation that also marks the productivity of the *death paradox* in gothic imagination, and on fruitful American soil in particular.

The first object of analysis, Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher", revolves around the cadaverous body's haunting quality and presents a metaphorical account of facing death that engages with fatality on an almost exclusively figurative level. The house within the story becomes a metaphorical figuration, an *aestheticization* of death, and exemplifies the repetition of the decaying body transferred to the House of Usher upon which death is written. This transference can be read as a form of repressing death by means of overwriting it. Not only is death othered, but it is furthermore ascribed to a different entity entirely: an inanimate object. The story's opening lines feed on the poetics of death that, in its sublimity, contains overtones of horror and awe as the unnamed narrator states:

> [...] within view of the melancholy House of Usher. I know not how it was – but, with the first glimpse of the building, a sense of insufferable gloom pervaded my spirit. I say insufferable; for the feeling was unrelieved by any of that half-pleasurable, because poetic, sentiment with which the mind usually receives even the sternest natural images of the desolate or terrible. (231)

The narrator, when faced with death's looming, indefinable power, is caught in a state of sublime anxiety. The picture of the house in decay puts the narrator ill at ease and, reading the House of Usher as a metaphorical corpse, this can be related to the confrontation with mortality i.e., with abject death. The house becomes emblematic of the corpse as a metaphorical repetition of death and, thus, sparks the narrator's insufferable gloom.

As the narrator continues his description, we can see echoes of the cadaverous body within the House of Usher, which is simultaneously both a crumbling mansion, serving as metaphor for the abject corpse, and a representation of the dying Usher family. Epitomized as an aestheticized figuration of death, the House of Usher emerges as a metaphorical corpse; this is evident in the narrator's description outlining human features and characteristics:

> [...] I looked upon the scene before me – upon the mere house, and the simple landscape features of the domain – upon the bleak walls – upon the vacant eye-like windows – upon a few rank sedges – and upon a few white trunks of decayed trees – with an utter depression of soul which I can compare to no earthly sensation more properly than to the after-dream of the reveller upon opium – the bitter lapse into everyday life – the hideous dropping off of the veil. There was an iciness, a sinking, a sickening of the heart – an unredeemed dreariness of thought which no goading of the imagination could torture into aught of the sublime. (231)

Death is not only aestheticized, but pushed towards an abstraction of the corpse by means of transferring the cadaverous body on the house. Death is not only euphemized in writing the cadaverous abject upon an inanimate object, but is also disarmed to a degree. This transference, then, works as a repression of abject death and, by extension, marks the manifestation of the textual productivity of a fictionalized death which, intangible by nature, is doubled or *repeated* when inscribed onto the more graspable house. The fact that the metaphorical corpse emerges as an object, rather than a subject, further creates distance between the individual and death, thereby suggesting a heightened level of aestheticization that simultaneously lends tangibility to an ungraspable death by rendering the abject pleasurable in its imagination.

The affective quality of death is also elevated to a figurative level through the story's opening lines, which mirror the narrator's unconscious fear of death which is reiterated through his anxious reaction towards the house. At the same time, the narrator speaks of the sublime and this implies both an indulgence in dangerous beauty and a fascination with that which he knows is about to come to an end. This paradoxical state of emotion, inhabiting both fear and fascination, repulsion and desire, is made even more evident in the following excerpt, which further draws on that sentiment which Sigmund Freud refers to as 'the uncanny': "[...] There can be no doubt that the consciousness of the rapid increase of my superstition [...] served mainly to accelerate the increase itself. Such, I have long known, is the paradoxical

law of all sentiments having terror as a basis" (232). This paradoxical law of sentiments with terror as a basis – a fear of death becoming the epitome of this terror – triggers the desire to abstract and textualize as a means to neglect an acknowledgment of the actuality of death. This dynamism is further illustrated in the narrator's depiction of the House of Usher in which he states that:

> [...] I had so worked upon my imagination as really to believe that about the whole mansion and domain there hung an atmosphere peculiar to themselves and their immediate vicinity – an atmosphere which had no affinity with the air of heaven, but which had reeked up from the decayed trees, and the gray wall, and the silent tarn – a pestilent and mystic vapour, dull, sluggish, faintly discernible, and leaden-hued. (232 – 233)

Cloaked in a pestilent and mystic vapor, the House of Usher's cadaverous personification evokes the supernatural and this creates a distance from the abject reality of death. It is this gothic discourse that shrouds death in an air of gloom, thereby rendering it intangible in a way which allows for the othering or overwriting of death through its aestheticization. The extent of this repressive gesture is illustrated through this form of othering itself – not only is it another person and not the narrator himself undergoing death, but dying is further transferred to another object. Furthermore, the House of Usher is repeatedly connected to the aforementioned silent tarn throughout the story. Like a metaphorical inkblot, it is its black liquid which awaits to eventually engulf, which is to say, *swallow* the House of Usher. Read as a metaphor of the production of text, then, the image of ink as a form of self-referentially, hints at the notion of authorship, which not only allows for the writing of the cadaver upon the House of Usher, but ultimately also becomes that same ink that engulfs and, thus, overwrites death.

The cadaverous body's duality can be read as the euphemistic depiction of an aestheticized, abstracted version of death that is triggered by the underlying repression of its actual, abject nature. In this instant, the narrator transfers reality – the pending death of his friend Roderick Usher – to the mansion, a transference that manifests in the house becoming the metaphorical cadaverous body of the Roderick ancestry. Roderick's impending demise is written upon the House of Usher as the narrator elaborates on an omnipresent, figurative death when he laments that "I felt that I breathed an atmosphere of sorrow. An air of stern, deep, and irredeemable gloom hung over and pervaded all" (234). The invoked metaphor serves to neglect the abject, the actual body that is in decay, through the superimposition of the actuality of death upon an inanimate other. The narrator's perception of his dying friend illustrates both his fascination with repudiating, as well as his need to repudiate, mortality because the dying evokes pity as well as awe: "I gazed upon him with a feeling half of pity, half of awe. Surely, man had never before so terribly altered, in so brief a period, as had Roderick Usher!" (234). As the narrator goes on, he claims

that Usher was suffering from "[a] cadaverousness of complexion" (234). In anticipation of death, he ascribes Roderick with the features of a cadaver, projecting the inanimate onto the (still) animate. In partly reversing the process of aestheticization, projecting the cadaverous onto the living and not vice versa, the narrator seems to facilitate Roderick's acceptance of his eventual demise, while also superimposing the image of his own dead self onto another canvas; this is a process in which Roderick's cadaverous complexion is reversed into the imagination of the narrator's own demise.

However, death's imminence, as well as the acknowledgment of its certainty which Roderick has to face, does not appear to decrease the narrator's repression, but instead merely amplifies his fascination with it. As he copes with his own mortality reflected in (which is to say othered onto) Roderick, Roderick begins to transfer his own death onto the mansion:

> He was enchained by certain superstitious impressions in regard to the dwelling which he tenanted, [...] obtained over his spirit – an effect which the *physique* of the gray walls and turrets, and of the dim tarn into which they all looked down, had, at length, brought about upon the *morale* of his existence. (235)

Evidently, the house not only serves as an object of transference to the narrator, but also becomes a reflective mirror for Roderick himself. As the house starts decomposing, so does Roderick's health. As a carrier of both Usher's legacy and the personification of the corpse, the House of Usher becomes resonant of a personal and a collective haunting of death. As Roderick's mirror image, it stands as a manifestation of the decay of Roderick's animated-yet-cadaverous body. Mortality ascribed to an inanimate object, then, becomes something that is ultimately uncanny and that has the ability to contain death-as-distanced-metaphor in a tangible vessel.

Finally, looking at the demise of Lady Madeline, Roderick's sister, we see the passivity of illness overcoming life, rather than an active form of murderous agency: "[...] when, one evening, having informed me abruptly that the lady Madeline was no more, he stated his intention of preserving her corpse for a fortnight [...] in one of the numerous vaults within the main walls of the building" (240). Resonant of the *death paradox*, it is after the lady has deceased that there is a moment of preservation, a stagnating pause, performing an "entombment" (240). Becoming productive upon stagnation, Madeline's abject corpse is henceforth elevated to a negative aesthetics, in the gothic tradition, which illustrates the corpse's aestheticization:

> The disease which had thus entombed the lady in the maturity of youth, had left, as usual in all maladies of a strictly cataleptical character, the mockery of a faint blush upon the bosom and the face, and that suspiciously lingering smile upon the lip which is so terrible in death. (240 – 241)

In its initial demise, Madeline's body is overcome by death without shedding a drop of blood. It is only in its supernatural resurrection that Madeline's corpse moves towards the abject, which is demonstrated through there being "blood upon her white robes" (245). Having transcended into the realm of inexistence, she temporarily comes back from the dead to grasp her brother when "[…] with a low moaning cry, [she] fell heavily inward upon the person of her brother, and her violent and now final death-agonies, bore him to the floor a corpse, and a victim to the terrors he had anticipated" (245). In doing so, Madeline becomes the metaphorical agent of death and is empowered by her position of intangibility, which allows her to resurrect herself and to end her brother's anticipation of death. This supernatural agency illustrates Poe's portrayal of death as a euphemized version of the abject, in which an aestheticized death largely suppresses an abject death. The house repeats Madeline's and Roderick's death while marked by the dynamic of overwriting and then Madeline superimposes herself onto her brother as the agent of death. This notion is, ultimately, reiterated by the ink-like tarn that engulfs both the last remnants of the Roderick family as well as the metaphorical manifestation of their demise itself, the now *fallen* House of Usher.

Death's elevation towards an aestheticized imagination, written upon the inanimate as a metaphor, also illustrates a heightened level of textual productivity that circulates around depictions of death. Aestheticized texts depictions of death become manifold and feed the production of the American gothic and become manifest in myriad, plentiful ways, which is to say in a manner embedded in a repetition compulsion. This dynamic of repetitive, serial productivity is picked up in the story's epigraph which reads: "Son Coeur est un luth suspendu; Sitôt qu'on le touche il" (231). Inscribed with a dynamism of echoing – résonne – this prelude already hints at an inscribed repetition and, by extension, a potential endless doubling. This aspect ties back to the notion of authorship, which is implemented as the imagery of the aforementioned "black and lurid tarn that lay in unruffled lustre by the dwelling, and gazed down […] upon the remodeled and inverted images of the gray sedge, and the ghastly tree-stems, and the vacant and eye-like windows" (231). The allusion to black ink that is situated above that which is falling to its demise – the cadaverous House of Usher – is then eventually concluded by the engulfment of the analogous ink upon the dead as the story concludes: "and the deep and dank tarn at my feet closed sullenly and silently over the fragments of the *House of Usher*" (254). If we accept the analogy of the ink-like tarn to textual productivity, it becomes evident that it is indeed textualization which is engulfing (and by extension overwriting) the dead. In so doing, the text is rewriting an abject death as a metaphor, which is superimposed onto the abject as one version of a multiplicity of aestheticized imaginations.

A further aestheticized imagination, which marks the second object of analysis in this exemplary topology of Poe's short stories, is the crafting of pestilence as a graspable murderous figure in "The Masque of the Red Death". The story works on a

similar level to "The Fall of the House of Usher" and draws a metaphorical picture of death, rather than outlining a literal representation of abject death. The story centers on a Prince whose land is devastated by disease, a disease that is personified as the Red Death. The presence of death, and the emotions triggered by it, is mirrored in the décor with which Prince Prospero adorns his castle, thereby illustrating the conflicting and multiple sentiments with which death is faced, evoking both beauty and terror as "[t]here was much of the beautiful, much of the wanton, much of the *bizarre*, something of the terrible, and not a little of that which might have excited disgust" (271). In comparison to "The Fall of the House of Usher", however, the opening lines offer a higher degree of physicality, raising images of blood and abjection:

> THE "Red Death" had long devastated the country. No pestilence had ever been so fatal, or so hideous. Blood was its Avatar and its seal – the redness and the horror of blood. There were sharp pains, and sudden dizziness, and then profuse bleeding at the pores, with dissolution. The scarlet stains upon the body and especially upon the face of the victim, were the pest ban which shut him out from the aid and from the sympathy of his fellow-men. (269)

The reader is immediately thrown into a scenario of blood and decay, an opening that J. Gerald Kennedy in *Poe, Death, and the Life of Writing* describes as Poe's "most lavish evocation of fatality" (201). In the story, we find death to be more physical and, therefore, as resembling its abject imagination more closely than the more aestheticized personification of the house in "The Fall of the House of Usher". In spite of its immediate evocation of fatality, the story employs the personification of a murderous disease as a figurative image, rather than as a literal murderer; it presents an imagination of death that is tied to the supernatural personification of pestilence as the Red Death and, thus, it remains heavily aestheticized.

The Prince, rather than facing the horrendous devastation of his land, a land haunted by plague, cloaks his fear and closes the doors against it. This lack of acknowledgment suggests that instead of looking death in the eye, he represses it in an attempt to overcome his own eventual demise; instead of engaging with the plague, he begins to simulate immortality. He constructs a fortress that contains the beautiful instead of the real, feeding that aforementioned illusion of immortality:

> This wall had gates of iron. The courtiers, having entered, brought furnaces and massy hammers and welded the bolts. They resolved to leave neither of ingress or egress to the sudden impulses of despair or frenzy from within. The abbey was amply provisioned. With such precautions the courtiers might bid defiance to contagion. The external world could take care of itself. (296)

The Prince's attempt at shutting out the Red Death can be read as being analogous to the repression of death; rather than facing the Red Death, he *creates* an aesthetic in order to *mask* the horror as "[t]he prince provided all the appliances of pleasure.

There were buffoons, there were improvisatori, there were ballet-dancers, there were musicians, there was Beauty […]. All these and security within. Without was the 'Red Death'" (269). Kennedy points out that "[t]he seclusion metaphorizes a denial of sorrow and death" (201) and this emphasizes the way in which the Prince crafts an illusion of immortality *within* which is superimposed onto the pestilent reality that lies *without*. The fact that the Red Death will eventually penetrate his sanctuary and, by killing him, reverse the superimposition of a crafted aesthetics onto the prevailing real then illustrates the ultimate inescapability of death, shattering American optimism's illusion of immortality. The Prince represses death and attributes it to an outside force, rather than acknowledging it within the walls of seclusion, a delusion that is bound to shatter as time progresses; this is a notion that Poe underlines by continuously drawing attention to an ebony clock which "with its disquieting chiming places the action within the framework of temporality and mutability" (Kennedy, 201), thereby highlighting the transience and ephemerality which interrupts the temporary illusion of stasis.

The Red Death is personified as an anthropomorphic, animate subject and remains uncanny in its characterization by features of the corpse; this is quite unlike the rendition of a cadaverous mansion in "The Fall of the House of Usher":

> The figure was tall and gaunt, and shrouded from head to foot in the habiliments of the grave. The mask which concealed the visage was made so nearly to resemble the countenance of a stiffened corpse that the closest scrutiny must have had difficulty in detecting the cheat. […] His vesture was dabbled in blood – and his broad brow, with all the features of the face, was besprinkled with the scarlet horror. (272)

Unfolding in gothic tonality, the personification of pestilence is ingrained with reluctant tangibility in this description. Inhabiting an uncanny nature of cadaverous animateness, caused by the Red Death's demeanor, the personified pestilence upholds a sly nature, slowly gripping the revelers with a terror that leaves them unable to escape: "[T]he rumor of this new presence having spread itself whisperingly around, there arose at length from the whole company a buzz, or murmur, expressive of disapprobation and surprise – then, finally, of terror, of horror, and of disgust" (272). It is not only the revelers, but also the Prince who appear unable to escape the Red Death's presence. As he is pursued by the Red Death, the Prince's reaction is one of abjection: "When the eyes of Prince Prospero fell upon this spectral image […] he was seen to be convulsed, in the first moment with a strong shudder either of terror or distaste […]" (272). This implies that the haunting quality of the aforementioned 'spectral image' can be read as the crafted aestheticization of the repressed death that finds its form written upon a personification of pestilence. The image of death remains metaphorical, despite moving closer towards the abject, given that the depiction of the Red Death resembles merely the "figment of the imagination, a

man's 'self-aroused and self- developed fear of his own mistaken concept of death'" (Kennedy, 202). This 'mistaken' imagination is rewritten however, in its pursuit of the Prince who finds his perceived sanctuary and feigned immortality infiltrated by the actuality of pestilent death.

This notion finds its peak in the death of the Prince who, after having been overcome by the personification of death, falls to his demise and finds himself overcome by his own repression of his own mortality: "There was a sharp cry – and the dagger dropped gleaming upon the sable carpet, upon which, instantly afterwards, fell prostrate in death the Prince Prospero" (273). Humanoid in appearance and equipped with a metaphorical dagger, the portrayal of the Red Death is certainly closer to images of the abject than those found in the figure of the House of Usher. However, the fact that death remains an ungraspable entity becomes apparent in the story's final lines, which describe death as a "tall figure [standing] erect and motionless within the shadow of the ebony clock, gasp[ing] in unutterable horror at finding the grave-cerements and corpse-like mask which they handled with so violent a rudeness, untenanted by any tangible form" (273). Kennedy comments on the intangibility being portrayed, stating that "[the Red D]eath itself has no essence; it cannot be seized, known, destroyed, or avoided. It is a presence-as-absence whose meaning is forever denied to presence and already accomplished in absence" (202). Poe's depiction of the Red Death remains aestheticized and the Red Death remains intangible. The short story, thus, showcases the variability that figurations of death adopt in the American gothic. Based on the *death paradox*, this constructive textual repetition of an aestheticized image of death hinges upon interpretability. Highlighting pestilence, as overtly aestheticized rather than moving towards a rendition of the abject, is reinforced by the Red Death's suggestive mask; according to Kennedy, this is a "sign without a proper referent; [it marks] the semiotic impasse in which writing has begun to locate its own activity" (203). The ensuing possibility of limitless figuration becomes resonant of the productivity of the *death paradox*. In "The Masque of the Red Death", this textual productivity is illustrated through this 'semiotic impasse' in particular, which renders aestheticized imaginations of death so very interpretable.

Poe's seminal text "Ligeia" serves to outline the potent passivity that aestheticized renditions of death take on in early American gothic and it serves as a final exemplum of his serialization of death imagery; this is a dynamic that will later be advanced by Lynch's reinvigoration of Poe's legacy. In the story, we encounter a melancholic narrator who finds himself caught up in a seemingly endless state of mourning. Having lost his one true love Ligeia to an illness, he finds her doubled in his second wife onto whom he projects and writes an idealized version of Ligeia: "I have spoken of the learning of Ligeia: it was immense – such as I have never known in woman. […] I have never known her at fault. Indeed, upon any theme of the most admired, […] have I *ever* found Ligeia at fault?" (657). Within this description, we find

the purely idealized memory of the deceased, as is described by French Philosopher Maurice Blanchot in "The Two Versions of the Imaginary": "[the deceased] is more beautiful, more imposing; he is already monumental […] this magnified being, imposing and proud, which impresses the living as the appearance of the original never perceived until now" (258). It becomes evident that the narrator clings to an image that is neither real nor accurate, figuring Ligeia as such. The real Ligeia, whose last name the reader never learns, is a formality that points to the fact that she is only present as a fantasy, rather than being an actual person, and becomes an idealized memory after her demise. The corpse that she has become, an abject version of a deceased former Ligeia, is repressed by the narrator and substituted, overwritten, with an ideal, a superimposition that points towards her absence rather than presence, something inherent in the elusive nature that she obtains. In his lamentations, the narrator states that he cannot remember her and when attempting to picture her face, finds it unattainable:

> […] that, in our endeavors to recall to memory something long forgotten, we often find ourselves *upon the very verge* of remembrance, without being able, in the end, to remember. And thus how frequently, in my intense scrutiny of Ligeia's eyes, have I felt approaching the full knowledge of their expression – felt it approaching – yet not quite be mine – and so at length entirely depart! (656)

In this instant, her demise finds language at a loss to grasp her features; this is a moment of stagnation that then becomes over-idealized in a performance of the *death paradox*; this emphasizes the textual productivity that is attained through the absence of the real and deceased Ligeia. The fact that the narrator has forgotten what exactly Ligeia looks like, and the resulting aestheticization of a lost love as well as the narrator's difficulties to escape his melancholy state, attribute Ligeia with a certain omnipotence that was acquired by means of her demise. The narrator comments on her firm grip, even from beyond the grave, stating that she is in a position of "infinite supremacy" (657). In *Over Her Dead Body*, Elisabeth Bronfen points out that:

> In contrast to the narrator's inability to present any external facts about his first wife, his memory never fails him in respect to 'the *person* Ligeia'. This description of her appearance also presents her in conjunction with death by emphasizing her ethereal being, her more than human, enigmatic perfection. She seems to be positioned between life and death. (331)

It is within this description that we find 'enigmatic perfection' being superimposed onto an abjected, actual cadaverous Ligeia. As Kennedy observes: "The insistence upon the beauty of the dead seems a mandatory reflex of belief, for the perceived loveliness of the girl's corpse operates as a sign of redemption" (66). The narrator's quest for redemption points to his refusal to accept Ligeia's demise. He begins to produce an image, as a means of overwriting the cadaver with a reassuringly beau-

tiful albeit ultimately non-existent ideal, in an attempt to overcome her death and in order to reinstate her as living.

It appears that the narrator falls victim to the Freudian concept of mourning as elaborated in "Mourning and Melancholia", in which Freud states that mourning is an "expression of an exclusive devotion to mourning which leaves nothing over for other purposes or other interests" (244). On a first level, the narrator is consciously mourning Ligeia's death, or rather is clinging to an aestheticized version of the woman that is no longer. On a second level, however, the narrator is also repressing his own mortality, celebrating the deceased and consequently obtaining a status of immortality as Freud states that: "we perceive that the self-reproaches are reproaches against a loved object which have been shifted away from it on to the patient's own ego" (248). The narrator that mourns the othered death unconsciously has a melancholic reaction towards their own demise and towards the acknowledgment of their own self, which is subjected to an eventual non-existence. Ligeia's demise forces the narrator to face his own mortality, which he has repressed. When watching Rowena, his second wife and Ligeia's double, fall ill and succumbing to death, we find a repetition of his initial loss and the narrator finds a further other onto whom he can project his own death. It is also this notion of doubling, a repetition geared towards compulsion, which hints at the serialization of aestheticized renditions of death.

As the narrator sits at Rowena's deathbed, looking upon her corpse onto which he writes his memory of Ligeia, the corpse begins to transcend death in a repetitious resurrection and demise, a "hideous drama of revivification" (665). We find the narrator's aestheticized imaginations challenged by the actuality of the abject within this "dreamlike repetition of a surreal back-and-forth movement between health and corruption" (Kennedy, 84); the added aspect of repetition heightens the resulting tension. Not only is the narrator repeatedly reminded of the corpse's actuality, but his sacred image of Ligeia is challenged further by the actuality of its doubling: Rowena's corpse. As Kennedy points out, "divested of sentimental illusion, the dead body has become a potentially revolting sight" (85). Partially stripped of "sentimental illusion", the corpse emerges as revolting, which approximates its abject reality. Yet, the corpse remains tied to its aestheticization with the narrator continuously re-invoking Ligeia's idealized image. He finds himself unable to accept human mortality and, in the end, he is overcome yet again by the fantasy of Ligeia even while repeatedly bearing witness to the demise of his female companions: "Here then, at last […] these are the full, and the black, and the wild eyes – of my lost love […] of the LADY LIGEIA" (666). We find a form of seriality written into these female deaths as Rowena, who serves as an initial filler-in for the absence of Ligeia, also falls to her demise. The narrator's ultimate lack of acknowledgment of abject death bears the implication of a potential future wife onto whom his lamentations could also be written.

This projection of a sentimental fantasy is evoked by the capitalization of "LADY LIGEIA" (666) which is juxtaposed with the simplicity with which Poe announces the decay of Ligeia – "Ligeia grew ill […]" (657). In lamenting the illusive nature of the deceased, the narrator speaks of Ligeia's purity – a purity that she only obtains in death, and which contrasts her abject actual corpse:

> My memory flew back, (oh, with what intensity of regret!) to Ligeia, the beloved, the august, the beautiful, the entombed. I revelled in recollections of her purity, of her wisdom, of her lofty, her ethereal nature, of her passionate, her idolatrous love. Now, then, did my spirit fully and freely burn with more than all the fires of her own. (661)

The reader is never presented with the 'real' Ligeia at any point in the story, but is instead always only a mere image, a character that is based entirely upon the narrator's idealization and interpretation. Hence, Ligeia created the grounds for interpretability, thereby becoming a canvas for his fantasy in her demise. The fact that she does not even have a proper name evokes a further intangibility, one that makes her a pure phantom of thought which simultaneously harbors the potential for endless repetition. As exemplified by Bronfen in *Over Her Dead Body*, "the idea that for the lover she is from the start always already a representation, her presence arising out of an originary absence" (331). This suggests that the unnamed narrator is constructing his own image of an impossible Ligeia as a means of denying her demise. He becomes the author of an imaginary Ligeia and creates text as a means to fill her absolute inexistence, "[f]or the narrating lover she is no body because of alterity, because a body-image and a name, reproduced by and dependent on his spectatorial gaze" (Bronfen, 331). As a fantasy, Ligeia becomes serial, becoming a screen for the narrator's projection of not only herself but also her double, Rowena. It is this doubling that repeats death, rather than life:

> Because she (the second woman) is used as the object at which the lost woman is refound or resurrected, the second woman's body also functions as the site for a dialogue with the dead, for a preservation and calling forth of the first woman's ghost […]. (Bronfen, 326)

The spectrality that Ligeia obtains is tied to the narrator's repetition compulsion and creates her as a fantasy, thereby serving as a "dialogue with the dead". The narrator's struggle, which we find portrayed in this rendition of death, is internal and psychological and hinges on the *death paradox*'s productivity. It is only *after* his love has passed away that his image of her becomes productive. Filling the void created by death, Poe's aestheticized renditions of deaths imply that the absence created by death fuels the survivor's imagination and flaunts its own textual productivity in its glorification. It is this textual productivity that Lynch translates to the serial currents of television with *Twin Peaks*, spurred on by the aestheticization of death that is

prevalent in the American gothic. While Poe's three exemplary short stories illustrate the variability of an aestheticized death, one spurred by the *death paradox* against the backdrop of American optimism, it is the figuration of death as an episodic television serial within a gothic discourse that highlights the ritualization of an American repetition compulsion to aestheticize death. In other words, it is Poe's variety of aestheticized images of death that caters to an American hunger for death, while it is Lynch's televised serialization that provides a format for a recurring and ritualized appetite.

1.2 Rewriting the Dead: *Twin Peaks*

> I don't necessarily love rotting bodies, but there's a texture to a rotting body that is unbelievable. Have you ever seen a little rotted animal? I love looking at those things, just as much as I like to look at a close-up of some tree bark, or small bug or a cup of coffee, or a piece of pie. You get in close and the textures are wonderful.
> *David Lynch, Catching the Big Fish*

This is how David Lynch, reflecting on the physicality of the corpse, describes 'texture' in *Catching the Big Fish*. Lynch implicitly draws an analogy, by means of its materiality, between texture – which he aligns with the corpse – and the text itself, the physicality of narration, that linguistically shares its roots with 'texture'. Lynch incorporates this level of materiality throughout his seminal television serial *Twin Peaks*, weaving together corpse and text and this comes to mark the show's texture. Inheriting Poe's legacy, the series immediately establishes its gothic overtones with its opening credits, which are uncomfortably long and offer a disturbingly colored apposition of gothic imagery. From the very outset, the series' eerie air is underlined by this choice of score. Inherent in the title of the series is also its hunger for repetition, i.e., its textual productivity. Hinging on metaphorical doubles throughout, the show's name itself begins with a double – 'twin' – the textual repetitiveness of its seriality and refusal of closure becoming inscribed in its titular paratext.[8] As Lenora Ledwon states: "a characteristic of the "new" Television Gothic (as exemplified by *Twin Peaks*) is that the genre does not assure the interpretability of the text. Rather,

8 We are reminded of the epigraph of "The Fall of the House of Usher" which also invokes repetition through *le luth qui résonne*.

the genre assures a multiplicity of possible interpretations" (266). A level of textual productivity – or *texture* – is generated as a consequence, which ensures a continuous hope that the narrative of the dead may be repudiated in its ritualistic expansiveness. Death is aestheticized as a repetition compulsion that is navigated through the mode of the gothic staged in the television serial and that can, ultimately, be overcome, as will become evident in *Twin Peaks: The Return*.

The pilot opens with the discovery of beautiful High School student, Laura Palmer – homecoming queen – having died. Naked, stripped of life, and wrapped in plastic, the beautiful young woman's corpse has washed ashore. In the style of the gothic tradition, her corpse carries overtones of the sublime, combining the dangerously horrific with the aesthetically pleasing. The scene that follows the corpse's discovery highlights the absence of life paired with the presence of death as we find Laura Palmer's mother, Sarah Palmer, frantically searching for her absent daughter in the idyllic family home, only to find her bed unmade and her daughter missing. Suffused with dramatic irony, these two scenes juxtapose existence and non-existence; while her corpse is highly aestheticized with the white plastic framing her beautifully innocent features, as we get a close-up of her face seemingly wrapped in peaceful slumber, her absence triggers insufferable despair which will come to be negotiated.

Illustration 2: Corpse of Laura Palmer, Twin Peaks, Episode 1.1

While her corpse, which is to say death, opens the narrative of *Twin Peaks*, the way it is staged visualizes that form of negative aestheticism with which the American gothic ornaments abject death.

As has already been illustrated in Poe's "Ligeia", read in terms of Blanchot's "The Two Versions of the Imaginary", Laura's corpse is similarly elevated to the status of magnificence:

> This magnified being, imposing and proud, which impresses the living as the appearance of the original never perceived until now- this sentence of the last judgment inscribed deep within being and triumphantly expressing itself with the aid of the remote – this grandeur, through its appearance of supreme authority, may well bring to mind the great images of classical art. (258)

Laura Palmer is not rendered abject through this angelic staging, even in her demise; rather, she is presented as the self-same great image of classical art that Blanchot invokes. Nevertheless, it is her death that casts itself upon the town of Twin Peaks in the manner of a shadow, rendering it momentarily silent while the camera rests upon the picture of the homecoming queen,[9] an image which will haunt the show, playing on the grandeur that the deceased suddenly obtains through her death.

Illustration 3: Homecoming Queen image Laura Palmer, Twin Peaks, Episode 1.1

Ignited by the corpse, we find the narratological quest for reinstating the dead as living displayed in serial form in *Twin Peaks*. It is, thus, only through her absence that Laura Palmer begins to generate a narrative.

9 This image also features as the haunting connective tissue between the original series and its return, given that this image opens the reboot's opening credits.

Laura Palmer's depiction, as beautiful even in death, echoes Poe's notorious assertion that "the death of a beautiful woman, is unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world" ("The Philosophy of Composition"). However, she is not only the most poetical topic of the world, but it is her untimely death that renders the narrative of *Twin Peaks* productive. Laura is also literally the author of her own mysterious absence, having captured or *textualized* her despair and descent in her journal. She is revived after her death, through the parsing and interpretation of the pages of the journal; Laura has been preserved and contained in a state of close proximity to death. In her death, then, Laura Palmer becomes the center around which the community begins to revolve and, in an attempt to bring her back, produces narrative, thereby exemplifying the *death paradox*'s dynamism.

In *Still the New World: American Literature in a Culture of Creative Destruction,* Fisher makes a claim for the necessity of *creative destruction* as part of the American optimistic mind set, in which "a merely temporarily unfinished newness [makes] it possible to sketch the philosophy for a new, permanently unsettled rhythm of creation and destruction" (Fisher, 3). The dynamic of repetition compulsion is inscribed into this concept. This implies that rather than merely repeating, *creative destruction* destroys in order to create something new and potentially better, rendering its repetition not only limitless but also constructive. *Creative destruction* destroys while carrying the promise of creation, something integral for American optimism that encourages a continuous and deserved strive for an ever-better version thereof; it creates a 'next' as well as a 'new' by means of superimposition of the aforementioned 'next' onto the already existing.

As is further stated by Fisher: "What does not exist, but might someday, takes on a half-real, half-unreal quality long before it exists. But all that now exists is equally half-real, half-unreal because it exists under the threat that it might soon become obsolete or be discarded" (13). Read in the context of the *death paradox*, the reason why the American gothic is particularly susceptible to the serial repetition of death becomes evident. The absoluteness of death hinges upon *creative destruction*, which bears hope for a new and better and shocks the American premise of a better next to its very core. The universality of death is stoutly absolute, even as many of the New World's aspects remain negotiable, creatively destructible and improvingly re-creatable. This notion finds voice and becomes a comfortable illusion within the serial representation. Read within the context of *Twin Peaks*, Laura Palmer's demise, her *creative destruction*, becomes negotiable within its literary depiction by means of interpretability, i.e., in terms of its texture. This interpretability then creates her narrative, which in turn is (in line with *creative destruction*) geared towards the reestablishment of her as living (and potentially better). It is thus that death when produced as text becomes negotiable and, framed by gothic discourse, ultimately reversible.

It is by means of Laura Palmer's body, then, that death is being negotiated against the backdrop of American optimism in an attempt to write a new onto an

old, an existence onto an non-existence. This can be contextualized through the lens of transcendentalism, as voiced by Ralph Waldo Emerson's musings on circularity. Emerson, starting with the pupil of the eye, elaborates on the fact that nature is built upon circles around which new circles are drawn: "Our life is an apprenticeship to the truth that around every circle another can be drawn; that there is no end in nature, but every end is a beginning; that there is always another dawn risen on midnoon, and under every deep a lower deep opens" (225). Picking up on Emerson, Bronfen contends that "[if] the conclusion to any sequence always announces the next episode, the correspondence between nature's evolution and an individual's self-reliance, which transcendentalism speaks to, is predicated in a logic of serial repetition" ("Seriality", 273). Read alongside Fisher's *creative destruction*, it is within this dynamic of serial repetition that a repudiation of death is made possible as "[t]he Emersonian imagination sees that the next-on world will shatter and rewrite this circle that now seems already finished and fixed in its array" (Fisher, 17). It is through this dynamic that the aestheticization of death does not merely remain variable, but also becomes formulaic through its episodic format. A serialization of an aestheticized death, then, insinuates a comfort of perpetuity, even while its ritualization also endows the television serial with a formal predictability.

Hinging on American optimism's promise, the idea of a continuous serial, which allows for a new and potentially better, clashes with the universality of death. This exact conceptualization of constructive repetition is inscribed in Fisher's *creative destruction*, is tied to Emerson's circles, and results in a constructive seriality sprouting from that textual productivity which is rooted in the temporary linguistic inability to grasp death; it sprouts from the *death paradox*. The serial format is able to provide a circularity with regard to an American repetition compulsion that is tied to aestheticized figurations of death. This is exemplified in *Twin Peaks*, where the series continues to be dominated by uncomfortably long silences after the discovery of Laura Palmer's corpse. Language temporarily stagnates, something that is emblematic of the *death paradox*, only to then become over-productive in order to compensate for the absence which has been implemented by Laura Palmer's demise; this is illustrated by the way her corpse sets the narrative in motion. Faced with death, language is at a loss and the town of Twin Peaks temporarily struggles to re-establish its norm, its identity, and its language; it portrays, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick phrases it, "the difficulty the story has in getting itself told" (13). Rendered silent and seemingly unable to make sense of what has happened, the community opens its gates to a visitor – federal agent Dale Cooper – who is there to aid them in solving the case of Laura Palmer's murder and, by extension, to create a narrative that reinstates her absence as presence. In Emersonian terms, the outside voice of Cooper becomes the authority of a new circle to be drawn around the former one, which renders his external voice a metaphorically authorial one.

While the American proclivity to prosper through *creative destruction* harbors the potential for a new circle to overwrite the old, the abject actuality of death does not and remains absolute in its stance. However, its metaphorical depiction, its aptitude for narration, feeds into this exact dynamic and, thus, feigns the potential of reestablishment of the living. The initial silence that befalls Twin Peaks is then filled with Cooper's discourse who takes the position of author of the new circle that is intended to fill the absence created by Laura Palmer's inexistence. Cooper, in Emerson's terms, takes up the second man's position:

> The man finishes his story, – how good! how final! how it puts a new face on all things! He fills the sky. Lo! On the other side rises also a man and draws a circle around the circle we had just pronounced the outline of the sphere. Then already is our first speaker not a man, but only a first speaker. (227)

Cooper becomes the agent of interpretation for the numerous supernatural instances that surround Laura Palmer's murder. These prophecies, spoken by those who are receptive to the otherworldly, the liminal forces suffusing Twin Peaks that Cooper literally translates and writes on the blackboard. As the Emersonian second man, he performs a hermeneutics of the liminal, of death; he can make intelligible that which is unintelligible, even as the local community's narrative stagnates.

Further supporting the claim that Cooper becomes second man to the community of Twin Peaks, we find the notion of metaphorical authorship of a new circle established to an even more significant degree when we observe that Cooper is communicating with the non-communal outside world through 'Diane', his assistant for whom he is recording his findings. By means of telling the story to a displaced outsider, he is turning it into graspable narrative. The fact that Diane (within the original *Twin Peaks*) remains disembodied, and neither appears nor responds, places her in the implicit position of pure reception, rather than agency. As the passive outsider listening to Cooper's account of what has happened exclusively, Diane remains canvas and provides room for Cooper's narrative, which is ultimately edged towards an overwriting of Laura Palmer's death.

In the manifestation of the aforementioned aestheticization of the deceased Laura, in a first instance towards the imagination of classical art partially being re-established, we find by means of the arrival of Madeleine "Maddy" Ferguson. Shortly after Laura Palmer's demise, Maddy, the deceased's cousin, arrives in Twin Peaks. This character is played by the same actress as Laura Palmer, albeit with a slightly altered appearance, now having dark hair and wearing prominent glasses. As Maddy, she becomes the embodiment of the concept of circular repetition that is so inherent in Fisher's *creative destruction*. In a similar fashion, as has been outlined in Poe's "Ligeia" and in Ligeia's doubled image in Rowena, the character of Maddy can be seen as having been superimposed upon the character of Laura Palmer – not only is she played by the same actress, but she also takes up the same position within

the structure of the community. The series draws on the gothic trope of the double by granting Maddy the position of Laura – she becomes a substitute daughter to Sarah and Leland Palmer and substitute best friend to Donna Hayward. As such, she also becomes reiterative of the repetition compulsion to which aestheticized images of death remain subject.

Initially glad to effortlessly step into a communal space in which there is already a pre-carved position available, Maddy agrees to act as Laura Palmer in a scheme of deceit targeted at Dr Lawrence Jacoby – a scheme in which she steps into her former self, her rendition of Laura being so accurate that even her uncle – Laura's father Leland Palmer – is deceived. With Maddy, Laura Palmer is repeated in the manner of *creative destruction*. Becoming an aesthetic imagination of a demise that has been partially repudiated, Maddy states that: "[a]ll I did was come to a funeral and it's as if I fell into a dream […] and it's as if people think that I'm Laura and I'm not, I'm nothing like Laura" (Episode 2.3). Maddy speaks these bitterly ironic words while standing next to a picture of Laura, a picture of herself, illustrating the dynamic of superimposition by underplaying their similarity. As Ledwon outlines: "[t]he visualization of Gothic images heightens and intensifies the standard function of the double – to problematize the distinction between appearance and reality." (263) The community's immediate acceptance of Maddy as Laura, then, illustrates its desperation to fill the absence that has been created by death with a repeated version, in spite of its obvious problematization of the impossible suturing of the gap between appearance and reality.

The implementation of long-lost cousin Maddy, then, aims at the repudiation of a dead Laura Palmer who is being replaced by her doppelganger in order to neglect Laura Palmer's actual, abject death. The double (i.e., her repetition) serves as a clouding of the absoluteness of death – an inexistence of Laura Palmer in all her appearance is partially reversed by the instatement of doppelganger Maddy. Therefore, it is also the character of Maddy that becomes the graspable manifestation of a repudiation of the absolute nature of death, which is avoided by means of the productivity of the serial providing room for the emergence of the double, all while structurally mirroring that same doubling. Laura Palmer has created an absence through her death that was superimposed by a rendition of herself. While the actress portraying both Laura and Maddy becomes an echo of both life and death, it is her staging as corpse that serves the canvas for a new interpretation of the character. As Maria M. Carrion outlines in "*Twin Peaks* and the Circular Ruins of Fiction":

> [I]t is *Twin Peaks*' potential for constant substitution of identities that helps the reader create a network of connections that do not depend only on a mechanical, passive, chaining process of isolated data from these different perspectives. In other words, all the units that constitute its thick web of stories can be mixed and matched to multiply and create new stories. (242)

Taking this a step further, the connection to Emerson's circles as well as to Fisher's *creative destruction* becomes all the more evident. In line with Fisher's thoughts a previous, which seemed final, was destroyed in order for a new, slightly different version to be (re-)established as a new (and potentially more capable) version. She simultaneously is and is not Laura Palmer; a superimposition of the former, she becomes the graspable performance of seriality, a seriality which hinges on the *death paradox*. Triggered by the productivity of death, figurations of Laura become excessive in the creation of Maddy as a substitute, a means of overcoming an absolute, abject death. Superimposed onto the character of Laura Palmer, Maddy comes to provide a narrative that fills the silences, as well as the linguistic stagnation, that Laura's demise created.

As an additional force within this web, we must consider the character of Bob as the agent of *creative destruction*. Bob remains elusive throughout the series. Present merely in the perceived unconscious of characters he appears in Cooper and Sarah Palmer's visions, as well as in the form of the personification of the serial killer in Leland Palmer. Part of a communal subconscious, Bob himself does not have an intelligible voice – his mannerisms are animalistic, and his appearance is unruly and wild. Sequences including Bob are filmed in an unsteady, even distorted, manner while the accompanying score is disturbing and drowned out by his animalistic cries. As he can be read as the actual murderous agency which possessed Leland Palmer in his misconduct, we could also go a step further and read Bob as an independently deadly agency. He becomes the moment of stagnation that language undergoes when faced with death and is symbolic of a lack of intelligibility. He is the destructive, unintelligible force that turns Leland Palmer into the serial killer that the town is searching for even though, at the same time, it is his possessive, deadly agency that sets the narrative in motion. Bob becomes the personification of the narratological productivity that the *death paradox* sets into place, given that it is his agency which produces the corpse of Laura Palmer.

Consequently, *creative destruction* makes sense if we read Cooper as the metaphorical author of a new circle and Maddy as the superimposed and newly established version, the positioning of Bob as the agent of death by extension. While the character of Bob remains elusive and unintelligible, and more animal than human, it is exactly this aspect that places him within the realm of interpretability, opening up a vast number of possible interpretations. This notion of interpretability, of production, becomes a vital part of both the *creative destruction* and its relentless constructive repetition in the form of serial narration. The newly drawn circle then draws itself to a close once again as Maddy is killed by the same murderer as Laura, which leaves the town desperate a second time, shattered anew and craving its orderly resurrection. It appears that the circle that had previously been drawn around Maddy by Cooper is, in the Emersonian tradition, not final after all, but immediately destroyed by the very same agent of *creative destruction*; namely, by Bob.

Relying on a circular seriality that refuses an inexistence created by death, there looms the overlying sense that a new circle will eventually be drawn provided by its serial format, as has also been the case in Poe's "Ligeia". Continuously haunting the screen, neither Laura nor Maddy are drawn as significations of an absolute death. Rather, their absences feed into the productivity of narration, one fueled by a gothic tradition which provides the potential of a circular overwriting; the continuous superimposition of a double and the limitless possibility of the production of a subsequent circle are ignited by the *death paradox*.

A less elusive manifestation of the serial characteristics is the television serial that we find depicted within *Twin Peaks*, the mise-en-abyme which is performed by and within the text. This television series within the television series, the soap opera *Invitation to Love,* which employs the same actors as *Twin Peaks* itself, pops up on television screens here and there throughout the show. This form of meta-serial self-reflexivity, reverting back to its own seriality, thereby reinforcing the series' performative circularity. This form of overstatement points to the aesthetic of the serial narration as a whole that we find described in Cavell's "The Fact of Television":

> To say that the primary object of aesthetic interest in television is not the individual piece, but the format, is to say that the format is its primary individual of aesthetic interest. This ontological recharacterization is meant to bring out that the relation between format and instance should be of essential aesthetic concern. (79)

This concept of essential aesthetic concern, for the relation between format and instance which we find reiterated in *Twin Peaks,* further highlights the text's overt productivity. It appears that we find a successful entanglement of both the format as well as the individual piece within *Twin Peaks*. Form and content perform simultaneously and in a parallel manner in the television series, each aspect feeding off of the other, both equally greedy for the destruction of a former circle and the establishment of a new one. As we read in Emerson: "[e]very ultimate fact is only the first of a new series" (227). Picking up on this transcendentalist assertion, Bronfen consolidates the view that "[c]oncieved in terms of seriality, all self-evolvement (as well as all self-recovery) is aimed towards a future achievable but not yet achieved" (273); this highlights why not only gothic tradition, but also the serial narration in particular offers itself to the productivity of the *death paradox*. We find the potential of a repudiation of death exactly by means of creating a narrative that is embedded in the serial format of the *Twin Peaks* narrative. In the serial television gothic, then, death is staged as somehow seemingly negotiable.

The series eventually ends in uncertainty with regard to the state of Agent Dale Cooper whose body and mind are captured within the ambiguous spatiality of the Black Lodge. While he seems to maintain a human body, within the realm of the living, the final image reveals that within this body dwells the deadly agency of Bob. In

this sense, in his attempt to overwrite Laura's death, Cooper himself has come to be overwritten by the unintelligibility of death. Cooper becomes the literal Foucauldian mirror image of a language facing death, in which:

> [h]eaded towards death, language turns back upon itself; it encounters something like a mirror; and 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 limits. (90)

This mirror image is quite literally shattered in the series and turns upon itself when faced with death which the series stages by positioning Bob as Cooper's fragmented reflection in the broken mirror:

Illustration 4: Fragmentation Agent Dale Cooper, Twin Peaks, Episode 2.22

In a very Foucauldian sense, the original series ends in death staring into a mirror, which is unable to contain the reality of death in its entirety, becoming shattered and turning on itself. Staged as such, the show visually reiterates that which it performs structurally. Drawing on the supernatural mode of uncertainty, which the American gothic sets into place, the show's first two seasons end in the liminal space of the Black Lodge, with a ghostly Laura Palmer whispering to Cooper that, "we

will meet again in twenty-five years" (Episode 2.22). Refusing to accept closure, the narrative states that it will lose its language for twenty-five years, as its metaphorical author of a subsequent circle, Agent Dale Cooper is overwritten by his attempt to capture death and finds himself incapacitated within an unreliable real, becoming trapped in the Black Lodge. Nevertheless, Laura's reassuring words – directed at Cooper, but arguably intended for the audience – secures the continuation of the tale and, in a sense, foreshadows her eventual resurrection in *Twin Peaks: The Return*.

1.3 Overcoming the Dead: *Twin Peaks – The Return*

> Beverly Paige: "Who is Laura Palmer?"
> Ben Horne: "That, my dear, is a long story"
> *Twin Peaks: The Return*

Staying true to its final promise, twenty-five years later, *Twin Peaks: The Return* offers a performance of the previously established productivity of the *death paradox*. As Ben Horne responds to Beverly Paige, mentioned above, the question of Laura Palmer's existence is indeed a long story. The fact that Beverly Paige places her within the realm of the living – 'is', not 'was' – without Horne correcting her mistake alludes to the eventual consolidation of her (un)death in the series' reboot. Not only did the original refuse its own ending, but it also allows for a state of complete inexistence. At the level of content, it also did so by means of the corpse that originally set the narrative in motion; it is Laura Palmer (who still refuses to die) who lays the groundwork for an eventual continuation of the narrative. Emblematic of the serialized text, the narrative picks up on its own refusal of closure as the opening credits of the reboot still hinge on the demise of Laura Palmer, as her seminal image rests upon the screen and fades, ever so slowly, into darkness. This can be read alongside Barbara Johnson's elaboration in "The Last Man":

> Isn't the end precisely that which never ceases to be repeated, which one is never done with? If man is truly, as Derrida says, "that which relates to its end," he is also that which is never finished with ending. Thus the question would not be to know how to begin speaking of the end but how to finish speaking of it, how to narrate something other than the interminable death of the penultimate, how to be finished with an end? (3)

Echoing this notion of refusing its own closure, of never being capable of "finish with ending", *Twin Peaks: The Return* performs this exact inability to finish speaking about the end; its seriality allows for an implicit, endless repetition that fills-in all absences

(including that of Laura Palmer), an absence which will eventually be overwritten and repudiated.

It is then all the more significant that the first words spoken in the opening episode belong to an undead Laura Palmer. They are directed to a seemingly undead Dale Cooper with her saying: "Hello Agent Cooper, I'll see you again in twenty-five years. Meanwhile" (Part 1). During this conversation, both characters are still situated in the Black Lodge's unreliable spatiality, somewhere between life and death, where we left the narrative twenty-five years previously. It is not just the spatial dimension that is situated outside of a real geography, but also its temporality, something that is illustrated by the sentence awkwardly ending in "meanwhile", leaving the question of whether or not we are past the meanwhile or in the midst thereof. This aspect, of an ambiguous temporality, is further exemplified by the one-armed man, in the same scene, asking: "is it future or is it past?" (Part 1). As this opening scene fades into darkness, what follows is a re-conceptualized version of the opening credits, which are dominated by Laura Palmer's notorious image with the narrative still hinging on her demise. Cooper and Laura further share the following exchange within the uncertain space of the Black Lodge: Cooper: "Who Are You?" Laura: (her speech distorted) "I am Laura Palmer" – Cooper: "But Laura Palmer is dead" – "I am dead, yet I live" (Part 1). It is this conversation between Cooper and Laura, which already foreshadows the reinstating of a living Laura Palmer, which is somewhere that the series will eventually lead. While the spatiality of the Black Lodge remains elusive, both Cooper and Palmer are immediately present in flesh and blood on the screen and this feeds into the American optimistic promise of life, the hope that their deaths can be reversed and that their bodies can be reinstated within reality. In the reboot's opening, then, it is their surroundings – temporal as well as spatial – that are staged as being uncertain, while the physicality of their bodies assumes certainty as living.

Evidently, a deceased Laura Palmer still makes up the fabric that renders the narrative of *Twin Peaks* productive. However, within *Twin Peaks: The Return* we find the previously established metaphorical author of the following Emersonian circle – Agent Dale Cooper – temporarily incapacitated, literally having become fragmented upon his language when faced with death. While the reboot's opening episodes reestablish Cooper's status as undead, he is simultaneously not reinstated in a "pure" human existence. Rather, we find that there are two doppelgangers in the real world beyond the Black Lodge who have been roaming the earth in his deadly absence; this is, on the one hand, Bad Cooper, his proverbial (evil) twin who is possessed by Bob (the image with which we left the second season of *Twin Peaks*). On the other hand, there is a character named Douglas "Dougie" Jones, about whose past we remain unsure. Twenty-five years after having been trapped in a half-real space, the real Cooper is able to escape the Black Lodge with Laura Palmer setting him free, telling him "you can go out now" (Part 1). Placing this in the context of

the *death paradox*, this can be read as the stagnant phase coming to an end and beginning to become productive by means of overcompensating stagnation.

This overcompensation is, of course, underlined by the fragmentation through which Agent Dale Cooper has himself become interpretable in manifold ways. As he is about to leave the Black Lodge, in order to finish his narrative, what identifies itself as "the arm", we may assume that being the arm of the one-armed man, a fragment also, asks Cooper: "Do you remember your doppelganger?" (Part 1). The scene that follows this query is spliced in from the conclusion of the original *Twin Peaks*, showing Cooper and Bob laughing in a horrendous frenzy, arguably having been overtaken by death. What is highlighted is their unintelligibility and their inability to transform their frenzy into understandable communication. Language, when faced with death, is at a loss for words, therefore. This metaphorical stagnation is then followed, or rather overcompensated, by two identical Coopers chasing each other through the Black Lodge, hinting at Cooper's potentially endless reduplication, to which the arm states that: "[h]e must come back in before you can go out" (Part 1). While what we assume is the real Cooper is dwelling in the uncertain space of the Black Lodge, he has become a fragmented man in reality, himself having obtained the nature of the serial. Having not one but two doppelgangers roaming the actual space outside the Black Lodge, it is the unnamed Asian woman who tells Cooper, still attempting to leave the Black Lodge, that: "When you get there you will already be there" (Part 2). It is thus the author of the initial circle, drawn around a deceased Laura Palmer, who himself has become fragmented when he faced Laura Palmer's death. His language has temporarily ground to a halt, stagnant – "meanwhile". However, as time progresses, his language returns, his doppelgangers hint at the textual productivity, which is generated by the *death paradox*. Thus, before finishing the narrative, Cooper, as the author of an Emersonian circle geared towards the reinstatement of Laura Palmer, must become an integral single entity once again, ridding himself of all of his uncanny doubles; only then can he step back into his (metaphorical) authorial position and finish the tale. As the series unfolds, we find that the goal for him is to return to Twin Peaks and to reestablish this norm. In this sense, *Twin Peaks: The Return* can be read as symptomatic of the established thesis and of the *death paradox* – the entirety of the reboot revolves around the notion that a dead Agent Dale Cooper is repudiated and, in turn, focuses on the establishment of a living Cooper who will be able to reinstate the existence of Laura Palmer; this is achieved only by overcoming that demise which first set the narrative into motion twenty-five years ago.

In the reboot's third episode, the real Cooper is finally able to enter the realm of the living through the body of one of his doppelgangers, Dougie Jones. Jones, in turn, is pulled into the spatiality of the Black Lodge while Cooper takes over Jones' (his same) body. As Jones finds himself in Cooper's chair in the Black Lodge, the one-armed man tells him: "Someone manufactured you. For a purpose but I think now

that has been fulfilled" (Part 3). Dougie Jones, then, can be read as a stagnant placeholder for a temporarily incapacitated narrative-producing force, Cooper, who is returning to finish telling the tale after these twenty-five years of silence. While Jones dissolves into black smoke, rendering Cooper's fragmented seriality less dispersed, Cooper himself is left in the real world in a childlike state, as Dougie Jones. Over an excruciatingly long stretch of sixteen episodes, we follow a child-like Cooper as he struggles to find his voice and to assume intelligibility. As we recall, in "Language to Infinity", Foucault states that:

> In this sense, death is undoubtedly the most essential of the accidents of language (its limit and its center): from the day that men began to speak toward death and against it, in order to grasp and imprison it, something was born, a murmuring that repeats, recounts, and redoubles itself endlessly, has undergone an uncanny process of amplification and thickening, in which our language is today lodged and hidden. (91)

Taking over the body of one of his doubles, it is this "lodged and hidden" language that is only slowly returning to Cooper. Embarking on an excruciatingly lengthy journey over the span of sixteen episodes, we follow a Cooper that is on a quest to reinstate Laura Palmer as alive, thereby mending the broken mirror.

It is not just Cooper, who in himself has become serialized in his doppelgangers and who is struggling to eliminate his own fragmentation; it is also the living characters who are hungry for a reestablishment of a living Cooper, only to find out for themselves that he has become fragmented: "Two Coopers" (Part 7) shows a surprised Hawk telling Sherriff Truman and Bobby a piece of information which has been bestowed upon Twin Peaks by means of the supernatural as they find a note within an ominous metal container. While the real Cooper is caught up in the stagnant phase of rediscovering his language, his evil twin is attempting to deceive the FBI, claiming that he is the real Agent Dale Cooper. Upon arresting a man whose fingerprints match those of Dale Cooper "backwards", it is none other than a no-longer-disembodied Diane who is asked to make a judgment about whether the arrested man is, in fact, the real Agent Dale Cooper who had been missing for twenty-five years:

Bad Cooper: "I knew it was going to be you. It's good to see you again, Diane"
Diane: "Oh yeah? When was that, Cooper? When did we see each other last?"
[...]
Bad Cooper: "At your house."
Diane: "That's right. Do you remember that night?"
Bad Cooper: "I'll always remember that night."
Diane: "Same for me. I'll never forget it. ... Who are you?"
Bad Cooper: "I don't know what you mean, Diane."
Diane: "Look at me. Look at me." (Part 7)

It is after meeting Bad Cooper's cold gaze that a distraught Diane closes the shutters, firmly placing a strong focus on the ability to see each other as an acknowledgment of the other. In urging him to look at her, Diane was able to see him and to recognize him for who he is not, as she confides in Albert: "Listen to me. That is not the Dale Cooper that I knew. […] it isn't time passing or how he's changed, or the way he looks. It's something here [heart]. There's something which definitely isn't here [heart]" (Part 7). As Cooper's fragmentation seeps into the living realm's consciousness, so too does the slow elimination of his fragmented state seep through the acknowledgment thereof. With Diane problematizing the fact that it is not the real Cooper who was facing her, she also empowers the narratological force of the real Cooper who is slowly finding his language and is progressing towards textual productivity that aims to reinstate (Laura's) life. Insinuating that it is not the real Cooper, the quest for legibility is tackled from two sides – the living realm is searching for the real Cooper, while the real Cooper is simultaneously attempting to break free from his childlike, unintelligible linguistic state which manifests as the character of Dougie.

Cooper's serial fragmentation is further mirrored on a formal level, in the scattered geography of *Twin Peaks: The Return*. While the original series remained in the town of Twin Peaks almost exclusively throughout, the reboot is less confined to a single geographical spatiality. This also hints at the larger proportions that are at stake in the reboot. It is not just the fabric of the narrative which is in question, but also the metaphorical voice of the narration by means of Cooper's fragmentation. At best, the vast geographical distances may be read as being tied together by the familiarity of the final sequences that are set at the Bang Bang Bar in most, albeit not all episodes, which only serves as meagre cohesion for the chaotic storytelling. Adding to this dispersed dynamic is the Black Lodge's unreliable spatiality, which suggests that in Cooper's fragmentation there lies an implied fragmentation of the Emersionian circularity surrounding the narrative. Furthermore, embedded in the narrative is the (largely incoherent) eighth episode, which alludes to a dadaesque interspersing of (largely unintelligible) images. Arguably, the epitome of language turning on itself that the episode portrays, among other images, is the sublimity of an atom bomb explosion. Horrifyingly beautiful, we find a complete bewilderment of the narrative. Alluding to Poe's all-encompassing tarn in "The Fall of the House of Usher", *Twin Peaks: The Return* steps beyond an absolute death and employs gothic tradition as a means to eliminate death entirely. The reboot of *Twin Peaks* literally reboots itself upon stagnation, rather than stopping in the face of stagnation, triggered by the ingraspability of death and literalized by the tarn and the images of the eight episode. While the story has an even more difficult struggle in getting itself told, this aspect also relates to its heightened interpretability and to the notion of linguistic productivity, something which is fueled by death in the reboot. While it is, thus, productivity that is expanding, the narrative's coherence is temporarily

called into question, once again illustrating a dispersed language that is struggling to capture death.

Bridging Cooper's doublings through formal repetition, a fragmented Agent Dale Cooper comes to replace the previous mise-en-abyme created by the original's implementation of the soap opera *Invitation to Love*. In *Twin Peaks: The Return* it is no longer a series within the series that highlights its circular repetitiveness, but rather Cooper as the metaphorical author drawing an Emersonian circle around Palmer himself. This heightening of self-reflexivity is illustrated by the literal incorporation of one of Cooper's fragments in the mise-en-abyme, highlighting not only his physical fragmentation, but also the series' own textuality. The sequence employs a strong, theatrical staged-ness in which the deadly agency, however, remains with Bad Cooper, simultaneously a part of the mise-en-abyme and as a partial narrator of the text, given that he will eventually leave the screen within the screen and step into his former, extradiegetic level portraying his narratological agency.

Illustration 5: Mise-en-Abyme Bad Cooper, Twin Peaks: The Return, Part 13

Ultimately, the real Agent Dale Cooper, dwelling in Jones' body, wakes up from a coma, which was caused by himself-as-Dougie. Still caught in a childlike state, he has electrocuted himself, sticking a fork into an electric socket. Upon waking up from this coma, any temporary uncertainty as to whether it is really him is immediately extinguished as his restoration is underlined by means of the all-too-familiar score playing in the background. Furthermore, this newly awoken character taking immediate agency illustrates the reestablishment of the original Agent Dale Cooper. As Cooper wakes up, his mannerisms immediately contrast his previously childlike movements as Dougie. Upon opening his eyes and sitting up, the one-armed man is superimposed on the hospital room. He tells Cooper: "You are awake" (Part 16).

Cooper answers in his familiar tone: "100 percent" (Part 16). The one-armed man answers with: "Finally. The other one… He didn't go back in. He's still out" (Part 16) problematizing Cooper's fragmentation. A self-assured Agent Dale Cooper is presently eager for the reestablishment of himself as a narrative force and takes immediate action; symbolically, he takes the wheel of the car in which he previously was a passenger throughout telling his wife that it "is okay" (Part 16). Confidently reclaiming his agency, Cooper is in possession of understandable discourse once again and this re-establishes him as still being the author of the Emersonian circle that he is attempting to draw around the deceased Laura Palmer. Once proverbially *returned*, he will find Laura Palmer and bring her back to Twin Peaks which will lead to the effacement of a narrative that no longer possesses a corpse and, hence, is no longer able to flaunt its own productive interpretability. It is the language that returns after a twenty-five-year long stagnation in order to re-establish the dead as living.

In a cathartic seventeenth episode of the reboot, the impossible is finally achieved. After having eliminated his final double, Bad Cooper, and having fully reestablished himself as a result, Cooper begins to write Laura Palmer's existence back into the fabric of the narrative. As the one-armed man tells him: "through the darkness of future past" (Part 17), Cooper begins to transcend the realm of the living. As a disembodied voice tells him: "It's slippery in here […] you can go in now" (Part 17), Cooper steps through the aforementioned darkness of future past into the past where he is able to prevent Laura's death. Stepping beyond the original narrative, Cooper takes the hand of a living seventeen-year-old Laura Palmer. Upon this unison between author and fabric, the narrative jumps back to the opening of the pilot and extinguishes the corpse of Laura Palmer. In this sense, then, the textual productivity that has been provided by her corpse has been eliminated; the narrative has been able to overcome death; the text has devoured the corpse. There is one final reversal of the plot that performs the *death paradox*; language has overcome death by paradoxically having created more text originating in death, as well as obsessively circling around it. An American optimism clinging to life, even in its cultural imaginary, was able to extinguish the corpse, thereby rendering the narrative of Twin Peaks obsolete. The reinstatement of life marks the death of narration. This notion is further underlined by the scene that follows and in which mother of the no-longer-deceased, Sarah Palmer, frantically destroys the seminal picture of Laura Palmer as homecoming queen. Stabbing the image in a frenzy becomes the metaphorical destruction of the dead which has been elevated to the sublimity of art, a glorification of the dead that is no longer necessary.

The subsequent final episode then bridges the reboot's fragmented spatiality as Cooper journeys from Odessa, Texas back to Twin Peaks, Washington alongside a living Laura Palmer. Guided by his intuition, he found Carrie Page in Odessa, portrayed by the same actress who plays Laura Palmer, a merely temporary double. Carrie Page may be read along the lines of Dougie Jones, as a stagnant placeholder for Laura

Palmer. Another proverbial 'page' coming to an end, he brings her to Twin Peaks and resurrects her as Laura Palmer. The narrative of *Twin Peaks*, in this sense, never existed due to death never having stricken the town. Language was never brought to a halt in order to reestablish itself only as more productive somehow, as attempting to overcome death. Hence, the production of text has, in the manner of the gothic, extinguished death. Upon returning Laura Palmer to Twin Peaks, Cooper's authorial force succeeds in reinstating her position as alive, rather than dead. Standing resurrected, Palmer jolts out an excruciating scream extinguishing all light and leaving the screen black for an eerily long minute. Upon her proverbial *return*, which is brought about by means of Cooper's reestablished authorial force, the narrative of *Twin Peaks* as well as *Twin Peaks: The Return* is paradoxically extinguished. No longer a corpse to be narrated about, the narrative grinds to a screeching halt and disintegrates, leaving nothing but darkness.

As has been shown, *Twin Peaks: The Return* essentially tells the tale of a fragmented Dale Cooper's odysseyesque return to Twin Peaks. With the reestablishment of his authorial discourse, as the Emersonian second man drawing a new circle around the deceased, he is able to rewrite Laura's death into an unreality. Hence, *Twin Peaks: The Return* illustrates what the American gothic has performed throughout its existence: a supernatural distancing from death that allows for an illusion of its inexistence. This repudiation and overwriting of an absolute death is made possible only by the serial superimposition of a vast array of interpretable deathly imaginations that originate in the productive interpretability of an inexperienceable death. As Derrida states in "The Reason of the Strongest": "Yet one more time, to be sure, but for me, yet one more time ever anew, in a way that is each time wholly new, yet one more time for a first time, one more time and once and for all the first time." (i). Within the gothic's literary framework, then, an American optimistic claim about death is made possible – once and for all for the first time. In line with both Emerson's circularity and Fisher's *creative destruction*, the American gothic indulges in linguistic productivity and in the textual interpretability that is provided by the *death paradox*. *Twin Peaks* as well as its reboot, then, works through the *death paradox* in its entirety and extinguishes the absolute sentence that death inhabits by means of creating more text. This text is able to perform an impossible American dream; it extinguishes the dead Laura Palmer in the reinstatement of her as alive and simultaneously extinguishes its own authority as narrative, illustrated by the black screen, the inexistence of narrative which is left. We may recall Foucault:

> [...] to speak as a sacred orator warning of death, to threaten men with this end beyond any possible glory, was also to disarm death and promise immortality. In other words, every work was intended to be completed, to still itself in a silence where infinite Word reestablished its supremacy. (94)

Harkening back to the black tarn that engulfed the House of Usher, the show's seriality comes to an end with a self-referential play on black ink, with all that is left being further circles yet to be drawn, narrated, and overwritten. The final overtones insinuate that the entirety of the narrative was all but a dream, dismissing the gravitas of death to an unconscious meandering, thereby repressing its universality and superimposing an optimistically governed albeit false fantasy of eternal life.

2. I am Dead, Yet I Live – The Zombie's Gluttonous Craving for the Living

> The teeth! – the teeth – they were here, and there and every where, and visibly and palpably before me.
> *Edgar Allan Poe, "Berenice"*

> The only modern myth is the myth of zombies.
> *Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*

While myths, or rather the idea of mythmaking, is deeply woven into the fabric of American optimism, most of these myths (such as the myth of discovery or the myth of the American West) also seem to concern themselves with a past that haunts the present; these myths are deeply ingrained in American culture and they have, in some form or other, already taken place; to that end, they write the American fantasy as reminiscence, rather than current observance. In "Walking", American philosopher Henry David Thoreau comments upon the myth's inspirational quality, stating that: "Perchance, when, in the course of ages, American liberty has become a fiction of the past, – as it is to some extent a fiction of the present, – the poets of the world will be inspired by American mythology". Picking up on this notion in *The Myths that Made America*, Heike Paul further asserts that myths are: "popular and powerful narratives […] which have turned out to be anchors and key references in discourses of 'Americanness,' past and present" (11). If mythmaking, therefore, can be isolated as an inherently American trait that employs a fabrication of a present imaginary by means of a past imaginary, then Deleuze and Guattari are quite right in stating that what remains contemporary is indeed the myth of the zombie and the myth of the zombie can be read as central to the American project. It does so in particular with regard to the negative connotations that it brings to the fore and in its close entanglement with death which marks the ugly flipside of America's optimistic mythmaking tendencies. These are linked to the quest for a promising new future more gener-

ally. If the myth of the zombie is truly the myth of modernity, then it must also be instrumental in fabricating the current American cultural imaginary.

Considering these assertions by Paul and by Deleuze and Guattari, it could be stated that it is the zombie myth that still makes America today. Toby Venables picks up on this when he states that: "[o]ne of [the zombie's] defining characteristics […] is that it is a distinctly modern creation: urban, consumerist, cinematic, American – the ultimate materialist monster" (208). As such, the myth of the zombie appears to isolate the governing notion of gluttonous insatiability on the one hand and centers on the dead body, rather than the living, on the other hand. The previous chapter discussed the literary depiction of death within the genre of the gothic, outlining the way in which the contemporary American gothic in particular employs the paradoxical productivity that language obtains when faced with death. This was exemplified by means of the *death paradox*, building upon Foucault's mirror trope in which:

> […] headed towards death, language turns back upon itself; it encounters something like a mirror; and 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 limits. (90)

The mode of the American gothic crafts a plethora of images of the deceased and has come to offer a fruitful depiction for an aestheticized death, in which text has the capability of becoming serially productive to the point of overwriting the deceased as a means to eliminate death completely, thereby reinstating the corpse as non-corpse, as living.[1] Moving away from this purely elusive, utopic depiction of the corpse, as opposed to its abject reality, this chapter is concerned with the more physical manifestation of death in the form of the image of the zombie. In the previous chapter, it has been outlined that the mode of the American gothic has the capability to textually devour the corpse by distancing itself from the corpse and by elevating it to the level of classical art, perhaps even to the point of outright mythologizing. This is to say that the corpse itself ceases to be and is, instead, reinstated as living by means of producing text about the corpse. While the American gothic employs texts that metaphorically devours the dead, to the point of resurrection even in the case of *Twin Peaks: The Return*, the zombie conversely becomes the literal manifestation of death that is hungry for life. The figure of the zombie, then, spins the previously outlined *death paradox* in a new direction, thereby giving rise to a more physical and graspable form of the deceased, adding an additional layer to this discussion about the American imaginary's seeming hunger for death.

The zombie, by definition, is "an antisubject, and the zombie horde is a swarm where no trace of individuality remains" (89) as Lauro and Embry's *A Zombie Mani-*

1 See chapter 1 for an in-depth discussion of the way in which the serialization of death progresses towards a reinstatement of the living that is navigated through gothic discourse.

festo states. As well as identifying the traditional zombie as antisubject, Lauro and Embry also make a claim for the figure being riddled with exclusively negative connotations. The zombie body, which is ambiguous at best, eludes categorization; it is located in a liminal position between life and death, it is *undead*, and therefore is neither human nor corpse and "has completely lost its mind, becoming a blank – animate but wholly devoid of consciousness" (Lauro & Embry, 89). The traditional zombie, then, is a subject-less half-being that is *un*dead and, yet, is still animate and in this liminal position rejects classification as either subject or object: "the zombie's irreconcilable body (both living and dead) raises the insufficiency of the dialectical model (subject/object) and suggests […] to become antisubject" (Lauro & Embry, 87). In "Gothic Wars – Media's Lust: On the Cultural Afterlife of the War Dead", Elisabeth Bronfen outlines the intricacies of the irreconcilable zombie body stating that:

> The monstrous body of the zombie, poised in an interzone between life and death, embodies […] an epistemological crisis regarding our intellectual ability to distinguish between the animate and the inanimate, the absent and the present body, human and non-human. (27)

Expanding on this aspect, Bronfen concludes that the zombie "bring[s] us face to face with the limits of our human understanding of a world in which binary oppositions no longer hold" (27). It is within this dynamism of irreconcilability, and the refusal for final categorization, that the zombie body echoes the *death paradox* and becomes both interpretable in manifold ways and textually productive.

Inspired by Barbara Johnson's "My Monster, My Self", which reflects on the potential irreconcilable monstrousness in and of selfhood, Olney expands this dynamic to the zombie in "Our Zombies, Ourselves" by referencing the plethora of recent texts, found throughout popular culture, all of which implement the subject-less undead:

> The living dead have been lurking in media and popular culture since the 1930s, but they have never been as ubiquitous or as widely embraced as they are today. […] Movie screens teem with zombies of all kinds: fast zombies and slow zombies, flesh-eating zombies and brain-eating zombies, plague zombies and rage zombies, voodoo zombies and demonic zombies, redneck zombies and Nazi zombies, sex zombies and pet zombies. (1)

While this illustrates the zombie figure's versatility on a formal level, and further outlines the zombie's overt capability to both transgress and bridge manifold genres in its ubiquitous contemporary presence, the zombie narrative itself is traditionally geared towards the non-zombie or subject. We commonly find the living at the centre of the versatile-in-form zombie narrative or myth, while the zombie is constructed as the dangerous (yet narratologically peripheral) other. Within its own narrative, the zombie lacks a voice, or in the words of James B. Twitchell in *Dreadful*

Pleasures: An Anatomy of Modern Horror: "The zombie myth seems flawed by its lack of complexity […] the zombie is really a mummy in street clothes with no love life and a big appetite. Both are automatons; neither is cunning nor heroic" (261). While this may draw a simplistic vision of one-dimensionality, it can hardly be denied that the zombie as character and voice oftentimes remains peripheral, even where it lends its name to a given narrative; its only palpable character trait is its insatiability. The zombie body's one-dimensionality, however, also renders it manifold interpretable, as: "[…] for the durability of zombie texts lies precisely in their 'blankness' which permits a variety of rather different narrative concerns to find them a workable vehicle […]" (Hubner, Leaning, & Manning, 7). In this sense, the zombie body is implemented in the narrative as pure canvas, "in which the 'blank' text can be inscribed with meanings that resonate" (Ibid, 9); its only purpose is to act as a sounding board for the living. The zombie's lack of depth, which is crafted as hollow, may be interpreted as a surface space for the anxieties of the living, thereby becoming a metaphor for a plethora of different fears: "the zombie has come to perform a vast range of allegorical functions, its meanings […] diverse […]" (Cussans, i). Ultimately, its body serves a merely narratological function that allows for the voice of the living to speak and act, rather than the voice of the undead. While there remains a rudimentary idea of what a zombie is, in spite of the manifold narratives which individually reinterpret its body, arguably contributing to its stance as a myth, Austin isolates "two key factors that define the zombie, whatever the cultural text – the uncontrolled body and the negation of borders" (175). The zombie itself becomes a mere nuisance for the non-zombie, whose voice may be interrupted by the zombie but remains steadfast in telling their story, thereby lending the aforementioned "uncontrolled", and seemingly empty, body as a vessel to the stories of the living, even within its own narrative. The zombie lacks a voice, and deliberate agency by extension, and is largely characterized by one single trait: its incessant and uncontrolled hunger for human flesh.

The zombie's paradoxical body, as a moving corpse, has often been quoted as lying within the realm of the previously employed Freudian concept of "The Uncanny", due to its proximity to death:

> Many people experience the [the uncanny] in the highest degree in relation to death and dead bodies, to the return of the dead, and to spirits and ghosts. […] There is scarcely any other matter, however, upon which our thoughts and feelings have changed so little since the very earliest times, and in which discarded forms have been so completely preserved under a thin disguise, as our relation to death. (241–242)

It is, however, the subjective corpse as an animate undead body with an agency that explicitly hinges on the familiar, which has become alienated, in the case of the zombie: "[…] this uncanny is in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is fa-

miliar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated" (241). Freud bases his elaborations on the uncanniness of the *un*dead in terms of the specific return of the dead. This can be brought into context by employing the notorious catchphrase, coined by George A. Romero, that: "When there is no more room in hell, the dead will walk the earth" in *Dawn of the Dead*. This points to the liminal nature that the zombie body acquires. Not only are the dead present on earth, rather than six feet under as they traditionally have, these dead are also walking. Zombies pose a form of animate agency that has been reduced to a term infused with ambivalence, *un*dead in spite of their status as dead. The zombie body's ambivalence can be placed within a causal progression that teases out why it remains a site of uncertainty: Not only is there an uncanny uncertainty with regard to the state of life or death inscribed into the zombie body, but this notion of uncertainty also leads to a lack of subjectivity. The zombie body, essentially "[…] sits on the cusp of death […]" (Davis, 57–58) which results in its dichotomous, if not completely ambiguous, existence. As Austin states: "[b]y refusing a final categorisation (a dead body in a defined space for dead bodies) […]) (177) zombies cannot be clearly defined as either living or deceased and, hence, cannot be defined as subject. The lack of subjectivity can then further be tied to a lack of language, something which remains prominent in the traditional zombie narrative; lacking subjectivity, the zombie body does not require language, given that it does not seek to communicate (yet); riddled with ambiguity, the consolidation of the zombie body mainly results in the lack of a clear-cut definition, feeding into its mythmaking capabilities. In order to analyze the zombie narrative, then, it becomes crucial to define the zombie body beyond the notion of "the ultimate foreign Other" (Bishop in Olney, 8) which still remains ambiguous and defies precise categorization for this exact reason.

First of all, the zombie is a revenant of the dead that is clearly marked as corpse, hence its obvious ties to the Freudian uncanny. As a continuation of the Foucauldian mirror image, in which language reflects back on itself when faced with death, the French philosopher's essay "Of Other Spaces" lends a further lens to this analysis. While the text is mainly concerned with the liminality of spaces, its main *denkfigur* proves useful with regard to the zombie body. Elaborating on real and unreal spaces, as well as what is left in between, Foucault again brings the metaphor of the mirror into play in "Of Other Spaces"; this becomes illustrative of both unreal spaces (utopias) as well as real spaces, which are paradoxically utopic and juxtapose with the regular *topos*:

> The mirror is, after all, a utopia, since it is a placeless place. In the mirror, I see myself there where I am not, in an unreal, virtual space that opens up behind the surface; I am over there, there where I am not, a sort of shadow that gives my own visibility to myself, that enables me to see myself there where I am absent; such is the utopia of the mirror. (24)

As a utopia, the mirror imitates reflections within the reflective glass's unreal spatiality. Having outlined the mirror's position as a utopic space, Foucault goes on to state that the mirror also simultaneously works as a real, tangible place, given that "the mirror does exist in reality, where it exerts a sort of counteraction on the position that I occupy" (24), a quality which also renders it a heterotopia; it becomes simultaneously real and unreal. This notion of ambiguity and doubledness can then be traced in the zombie's body, which "[…] cannot be understood as either 'alive' or 'dead': it is in transition and it is this which has the powerful and disturbing effect upon us" (Hubner, Leaning, & Manning, 6); its liminality becomes the source of its paradoxical body which seems to resist a precise definition. Returning to the previous chapter, the gothic corpse (like the zombie body) harbors a utopic quality. Like utopias, which "are fundamentally unreal places" (Foucault, 24) and are imaginary sites with no corresponding place in reality, "[t]hey are sites that have a general relation of direct or inverted analogy with the real space of Society" (Foucault, 24). The corpse, within the diegesis of the gothic tale, becomes a utopic body; death is pushed into the supernatural realm and the corpse becomes an unreal, unconsciousness meandering which results in the superimposition of a fantasy of eternal life.

A reconceptualization and approximation of the gothic corpse can be traced within the zombie body. In this sense, an undead body comes to operate as a form of counter-site to both the living as well as the dead body. When read alongside Foucault's elaborations, the zombie body can be constructed as a heterotopic body, similarly to the previously outlined utopic mirror, which functions as a heterotopia in this instance that "makes this place that I occupy at the moment when I look at myself in the glass at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal" (24). Being simultaneously animate as well as inanimate, real and unreal, the zombie body's undead state takes on heterotopic features. In his text, Foucault isolates *heterotopias* as:

> […] real places – places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society – which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality. Because these places are absolutely different from all the sites that they reflect and speak about, I shall call them, by way of contrast to utopias, heterotopias. (24)

The zombie body comes to echo what Foucault attributes to the heterotopic site and hinges on its previously outlined irreconcilability. It is constructed as a graspable, living real within the diegesis while also being simultaneously deceased in the manner of these contesting "enacted" utopias (non-places). Olney picks up on this notion when he asserts that the zombie body "functions like a funhouse mirror" (11), which

comes to be "a kind of living death: insatiably rapacious and perversely enduring" (11). Contextualized with Foucault's mirror tropes, the zombie body poses a twofold paradox; on the level of form, it becomes a manifestation of language attempting to grasp the corpse that it cannot properly grasp. Upon this linguistic stagnation, it comes to produce an aestheticized image of death. Secondly, the zombie body is rendered a heterotopic body within the diegesis, a site of negotiation precisely because it is textually fabricated by this "mirror of death", thereby superimposing an imagination of death onto the abject corpse. Neither entirely real nor entirely unreal, it becomes a marker of both and hence a site of contestation that refuses categorization. However, throughout its manifold narratives, the zombie body has been marked with one specific character trait that seems to remain stable in every representation; its insatiability or, as defined by Olney, "a monster driven and destroyed by its appetite" (13). The zombie body, therefore, can be seen as developing from the uncanny, but becomes more than that; the zombie body takes on a dichotomous position between life and death and becomes a counter-site for both and can, therefore, be read as heterotopic in terms of its singular desire within its aimless antisubjectivity (typified by its incessant insatiability).

George A. Romero's zombies, as the traditional zombie body, are seminal in the exploration of the zombie narrative and will be the focus of this chapter. They will be read against a contemporary reconceptualization of the zombie as subject in *The CW*'s contemporary television series *iZombie*. This chapter is specifically concerned with the zombie body as trope, metaphor, and text, rather than lending its gaze to the survival and reestablishment of institutions by the living, a dynamic which is otherwise prevalent in the zombie narrative. If, according to Davis, "[t]he existence of zombies is but a confirmation of a fundamental conviction that the dead wield power in the world of the living…" (57–58), then the prominence which the zombie body obtains in contemporary culture becomes a signifier for the overt presence of death; its heterotopic body not only comes to "[…] mark the rebellion of death against its capitalist appropriation" (Shaviro, 8), but also signifies the insatiability not only of the zombie body, but also of its voyeur. As Bronfen contends in "Gothic Wars," "'[c]ompelled' is an apt description of the mutual implication of zombies, consuming living body tissue, and people consuming images of this consumption" (26). An ever-compelling figuration of the living corpse, the prominence of the zombie myth in American culture can be aligned with a diagnosis of death as the disease of its (cruel) optimism; the incessant hunger for the dead has become a trope for a seemingly inherent repetition compulsion that not only repeats an aestheticized death, but also actively transforms it. Tracing the zombie body, from its Romerean beginnings to contemporary television, then, will also shine a light on its evolution from antisubject to (almost) subject, tracing how its evolution has come to endow the heterotopic zombie body with a distinct voice.

2.1 Romero's Zombies: *Dawn of the Dead, Land of the Dead*

> "You are what you eat"
> *Proverb*

> They consume an extraordinary amount of bacon. Ham and beefsteaks appear morning, noon, and night.
> *Frances Milton Trollope, Domestic Manners of the Americans*

The idiom "you are what you eat" finds its epistemological roots in the German expression 'Mann ist was Mann isst' which, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary of Proverbs*, translates to 'man is what man eats'. It involves either being or becoming that which one devours. The dictionary further states that "the saying is sometimes attributed to the French gastronome Anthelme Brillat-Savarin who wrote in his Physiologie du Goût (1825): "Dis-moi ce que tu manges, je te dirai ce que tu es" [meaning "Tell me what you eat, and I will tell you what you are"]. There is a physiological argument to be made in aligning the consumption of food with the formation of the self. However, proposing that one becomes what one eats proves difficult, if not outright paradoxical, with regard to the traditional figure of the zombie. If one becomes what one eats, then a notion of subjectivity is presupposed in the eating party. As has been outlined, however, the zombie body is marked, if not totally defined, by antisubjectivity; its only manifestable trait is its incessant hunger. Consolidating this notion with the idea of becoming what one eats, the zombie appears to be stuck in the formation of the self, which is to say it remains within the transgressive action of eating, rather than actually being able to actually become what it eats (i.e., to become a definite, living entity). While the quest for the zombie's subjectivity is inherently tied to its food consumption, it does not seem to ever be able to transgress into the realm of the living. Taking Foucault's elaborations on heterotopic spaces into consideration once again, this entrapment within a singular activity comes to be a presupposition of the zombie body, read as a heterotopia, which "are absolutely temporal […] indefinitely accumulating time" (26).

Simultaneously trapped within its sole agency, while also being defined thereby, the zombie cannot transgress its own heterotopic quality, endlessly contesting both the living and the dead. It is no surprise, then, that the zombie body is exclusively characterized by hunger; its hunger is clearly directed towards the living, that is what it instinctively wants to become. However, its lack of subjectivity renders its quest for selfhood an impossibility. At the peak of its evolution, as this chapter intends to show, the zombie body as subject remains a mere imitation of the living,

one unable to transgress into the *topos* of the living. It is this notion of transgressive entrapment which also renders its body so difficult to grasp; zombies are typified by an indefinability which caters to its narratological productivity and, by extension, mythmaking capabilities. Elusive by nature, the heterotopic body of the zombie exponentially generates narrative.

Oftentimes considered to be the father of the Western zombie myth, George R. Romero has made a number of films that have written the zombie body deeply into the fabric of the American cultural imaginary. According to McIntosh:

> [t]he seminal work that forever transformed how zombies are portrayed is, of course, Romero's *Night of The Living Dead*. […] Romero's original presentation of zombies […] breathed new life into zombies. (8)

It seems that the zombie narrative has largely been shaped by Romero's films; there is a plethora of voices that have identified Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* as the cornerstone of the contemporary zombie, given that "[h]is pivotal 1968 film *Night of the Living Dead* is retrospectively considered to be the forerunner of all modern zombie films […]" (Austin, 179). It is Romero who extracted the zombie figure from its spiritual roots in Haitian voodoo and "essentially conflated the zombie with the ghoul, a cannibalistic monster type […]" (McIntosh, 8). It is also Romero who characterized the zombie as incessantly hungry: "Romero […] invested his zombies not with a function (…) but rather a drive (eating flesh)" (Dendle, 6). While the zombie's flesh-eating drive is deeply ingrained in the zombie narrative, the zombie image which Romero has crafted with these films is not entirely stable, but rather remains in constant development; the films not only mark a (serial) progression, during which the world is slowly overtaken by the zombie, but also a progression which peaks in the proverbial *Land of the Dead*; these films mark an evolution of the zombie body itself which seems to develop towards subjectivity. This notion is reflected in the corresponding titles of these films; the 1968 *Night (of the Living Dead)* developed into the more apocalyptic 1978 *Dawn (of the Dead)* in which the "living" was eliminated from the title. *Dawn of the Dead* has further been remade and reshaped in 2004 as a prequel to the 2005 film *Land of the Dead* in which the titular land hints at a loss of land for the living in which the living are othered, given that the land belongs to the dead; Romero ends his series and evolution of the zombie body with *Diary of the Dead* in 2007, which then proposes a form of textual capitulation of the living who are no longer telling their tales; these seem to exclusively have become those of the dead. Having been an instrumental figure in fabricating the American myth of the zombie:

> Romero is at once the pornographer, the anthropologist, the allegorist, and the radical critic of contemporary American culture. He gleefully uncovers the hidden structures of our society in the course of charting the progress of its disintegration. (Shaviro, 7)

He does so by not only mirroring the living body with the zombie body, but also by crafting the zombie body as a heterotopic site which comes to contest the norm as a counter-site, always in the process of transgression, which therefore exposes an intricate part of the American myth itself; namely, its seeming insatiability not just for life, but also for death.

The original 1978 *Dawn of the Dead* opens with protagonist Francine asleep, haunted by a nightmare, with the titular letters sprawled over this opening image:

Illustration 6: Francine wakes up, Dawn of the Dead

A spatially ambiguous mise-en-scene, Francine is jerked awake a by an unnamed coworker stating "you alright? Shit is really hitting the fan" in what is then revealed to be the floor of studio of a news station reporting on the crisis of the zombie body that has come to haunt the living. Francine awakens to a reality in which the dead are roaming the earth; the viewer is simultaneously positioned in medias res. While this opening sequence alludes to the conclusion of the previous and proverbial awakening from a *Night of the Living Dead*, it also becomes a fitting metaphor with regard to the previously discussed ending of *Twin Peaks: The Return*, which isolates the entire narrative of death as a dream within the mode of the American Gothic. In line with the zombie body's tangibility and physicality, the gothic mode is overtaken by a tangible manifestation of the corpse which actively comes to haunt the living. In this sense, we are waking from a gothic dream of overwriting the deceased to a more palpable and gruesome reality in which the undead are no longer condemnded to the unconscious. Within this progression of the zombie narrative, *Dawn of the Dead*

places its viewer within an imaginary in which the zombie body has ingrained itself deeply into the living; while its body may remain an anomaly, its presence no longer is. Being overtly present in this reality, it is scientific authority, in the form of the voice of a doctor at the news station, who addresses the American public with information about the zombie body and who solidifies hunger as its main and only motivation: "They kill for one reason. They kill for food [...] that's what keeps them going". This dynamic then teases out the prominent entanglement of food and death within the American cultural imaginary. It is not just that the zombie body is hungry, it is that it becomes a murderous agency in order to satisfy this insatiable desire. However, its greed for consumption is also rendered paradoxical; while food traditionally nourishes and reinstates life, the zombie, per definition, cannot be categorized as living, which links back to its entrapment within transgression.

As the narrative progresses, during which a few survivors find shelter in an abandoned shopping mall, it is once again the voice of authority, implemented in the film as a self-reflection in the form of a mise-en-abyme, who informs both the protagonists as well as the viewer that: "The creatures function on a subconscious instinctive level", concluding the voice-over of the news station which accompanies images of zombies greedily devouring intestines, their hands and faces crimson with blood. This portrayal reinstates the zombie's lack of intentionality while simultaneously isolating the zombie body as active with regards to its singular desire for consumption. A satirical comment on American consumer culture, this notion is later reflected in the (sudden and ironic) tape that plays at the shopping mall that states: "Attention all shoppers, if you have a sweet tooth we have a treat for you". Elaborating further on the specifics of the zombie body's hunger, the disembodied newscaster voice-over by Dr. Rausch, a voice of science and authority, adds an additional layer to the definition of the suddenly graspable zombie body:

> The normal question, the first question is always: are these cannibals? No, they are not cannibals. Cannibalism in the true sense of the word implies an interspecies activity. These creatures cannot be considered human. They prey on us. They do not prey on each other. That's the difference. They attack and feed only on warm human flesh. Intelligence? Seemingly little or no reasoning power. What basic skills remain are more remembered [sic] from human life.

Scientific authority, in this instance, informs the American public of two things: firstly, that the zombie body is clearly marked as non-human and, therefore, can be pushed towards antisubjectivity and, secondly, that the focus lies on the zombie body remaining aimless in its guiding quest for human flesh, in which any debris of humanity is only a remnant of a former life; put otherwise, its murderous hunt is not conducted consciously. Dr. Rausch reaches the same conclusion by reducing the zombie body to pure need: "[...] These creatures are nothing but pure, motorized instinct". The zombie body's animated state is also ridiculed by means of dehuman-

izing the zombie body. This is to say that the image that is presented to the masses is that of an aimless animate corpse, a non-person that has only one motivation which it pursues mindlessly, namely its hunger for human flesh. While its reasoning powers are ridiculed, it is also crafted as a serious source of danger for the living; this is a duality that results in trivializing the ultimate death of the zombie.

McIntosh reminds us that: "Romero also popularized the notion that zombies could only truly be killed by a blow or shot to the head or other such head injury that severed the brain core […]" (9). Part of the zombie's ambiguous state is also that it always has to find a violent final death. Its transgressive and heterotopic state requires a second death that needs to be actively cemented. This notion of murder is then further trivialized because, as McIntosh elaborates, "[since] zombies evolved in the popular cultural imagination the way they did, they symbolize a monster that can be killed guilt-free" (13). For the living, killing the already deceased and cementing their death turns into a sport, a form of spectacle and, hence, into a desire to overkill the zombie body. As an antisubjective entity stripped of all humanity, the zombie body asks for a stronger and more intense notion of death than the living body would, an act of overkilling which can be conducted free of mercy as: "[…] the modern conception of zombies has [endowed] him with simply a physical or biological drive or craving to kill or eat humans, [which is why] it becomes essentially a no-brainer – zombies are evil, and we are good" (McIntosh, 13). The resulting disrespect for a dignified zombie body becomes prevalent in a carnivalesque scene in *Dawn of the Dead*, during which a surviving motorcycle gang wreaks havoc on the shopping mall and, as an act of purging jouissance, begin to throw pies in the zombie's faces, disrespecting the dead body that comes back.

Illustration 7: Carnivalesque zombies, Dawn of the Dead

The implementation of the zombie body, as a source of the grotesque, illustrates that the corpse as revenant, then, is no longer elevated to a state of classical art[2]; it is reduced to a purely non-human entity which, at best, is turned into spectacle, because it is out of place and is, therefore, detested, ridiculed, and killed "guilt-free". As such, it explicitly becomes a counter-site for the living as "[t]he zombie body offers a space for a rejection or inversion of social values, echoing Bakhtinian notions of the grotesque and carnivalesque" (Austin, 181). This notion of spectacle is developed even further in the subsequent *Land of the Dead,* in which the zombie body has become institutionalized as the carnivalesque, the living making an economy out of their ridicule. In the beginning of the film, the disillusioned rogue hero Denbo visits what could be termed an underground funhouse. Within this circus-like space, in which the norm is contested, the zombie body is clearly marked as stable; it is implemented within this liminality as a non-person and is turned into a spectacle. For instance, there is the opportunity to: "Take your picture with a zombie" or the possibility of shooting paintballs at a target which is a zombie's chained body. The funhouse offers stripping women as well as zombie fights in which the living have the opportunity to bet on the winning zombie. Within this carnivalesque space, the trapped zombie body is commodified and stripped of all of the potential dignity of its (former) self. Instating the zombie body as a source of ridicule and objectification, *Land of the Dead* actively dehumanizes the zombie body only to invert this notion later by proposing a transgressive zombie body the alignment of which shifts closer to the living, rather than to the deceased.

While the zombie body remains aimless and anonymous within its horde throughout Romero's oeuvre, the pivotal *Land of the Dead* proposes a more developed zombie body, one that has peaked in terms of its limited evolutionary possibilities. A previous lack of intentionality and aimlessness is rewritten and sharpened in *Land of the Dead,* which also hints at the zombie narrative's exponential progression. This dynamic is present from the beginning of the film, as the opening lines that follow the credits have a character, Mike, stating that "they're trying to be us". To this, the narrative's disillusioned hero, Riley Denbo, answers: "They used to be us. They're learning how to be us again", aligning the zombie body with the human body. These lines consolidate the opening sequence, which is illustrative of a developing zombie body; most notably, the picture rests upon a trio of performing zombies, former members of a band fiddling with their instruments. While Denbo's observation hints at the zombie body imitating the living body, there is an additional layer of haunting that is ingrained in the zombies of the *Land of the Dead*. In *Dawn of the Dead*, the debris of their past, living lives, remained purely on the surface. In *Land of the Dead*, they are not only "trying to be us", the living, they also seem to

2 See chapter 1 for an in-depth discussion of the way in which the American gothic aestheticizes the corpse by endowing it with artistic grandeur.

perform actions which harken back to their previous lives. Most notably, this notion is rooted in the performativity of the zombie body of "Big Daddy", the nametag on his uniform informing us of his former name, who will come to be a differentiated individual within the anonymous horde throughout the course of the film. Judging by his attire, a former gas station attendant, Big Daddy's distinguishability serves as a synecdoche of the zombie's evolution over time and throughout the film. His affinity for fire, harking back to his living days, becomes a metaphor for the purging quality that he both performs and desires. No longer is the zombie's individuality exclusively reduced to the external appearance and the debris that is left written on that heterotopic body. In *Land of the Dead*, it is also previous "living" behavior that begins to be performed by the zombie body. Part of this fragmented reinstating of individuality involves not only the crafting of a distinct form of selfhood, but also the acquisition of a rudimentary language. As his gaze keeps following the zombie's developing behavior, Denbo worrisomely adds that: "They're communicating, they're thinking, there's something going on". This progression can be read alongside a recent development towards a more differentiated form of zombie, which is no longer exclusively riddled with negative connotations. As Bishop observes: "As the twenty-first century zombie narrative continues to develop and change, it increasingly challenges the customary definition of 'monster', often exploring the potential benefits of *being* a zombie" (26). *Land of the Dead*'s Big Daddy remains seminal in this contemporary development, arguably the first zombie body who started to exhibit human features.

Even as early as in the beginning of the narrative, Big Daddy is framed as a more differentiated zombie identity who is no longer exclusively ruled by their hunger. When a horde of zombies, among whom wanders Big Daddy, is attacked by the living, he quite markedly exhibits anger at the loss of his fellow kind; this is sharpened further when he kills a fellow zombie who has been badly injured in a humane act to end their suffering. After this mercy killing, Big Daddy turns to the sky and lets out an excruciating cry clearly marked as anger at the loss of his fellow zombie. This aspect is lent further significance in a subsequent sequence during which Big Daddy assumes leadership of a zombie horde and, with purpose, begins to guide them towards an illuminated skyscraper towards which he sees the living drive. The fact that he performs a form of anger which develops into determination to follow his attackers, however rudimentary, illustrates the evolution of the zombie body in *Land of the Dead*; this is a zombie body that is no longer trapped within the limitation of its hunger, but which begins to exhibit other desires and which also obtains differentiation in so doing. This dynamic is further mirrored in the living "us" that have been aligned with the zombie body since the beginning of the narrative; it seems that while the zombie's individuality becomes more pronounced, it is, in turn, the living's individuality that begins to lack relevance. "Everyone's got their story and I am sick of hearing them" Denbo tells Slack upon meeting her for the first time. Sickened by

the apocalyptic state in which he lives, he is no longer interested in the living's narratives; while the zombie becomes more distinguishable, the living body is pushed towards a heterogeneous anonymity.

The zombie body's metamorphosis towards subjectivity is specifically emphasized in a scene during which there is a form of baptizing ritual performed by the zombie body. Not only has he assembled a horde and become their leading figure, while still showing clear intent for vengeance (the wish to attack and overtake what is left of the human base in this land of the dead in specific), Big Daddy also marches his followers towards the remaining urban space which is populated by the living. Separated by water, which reflects the targeted skyscraper as a clear marker for capitalist determination, we find the notion of imitation written into the scene. While the skyscraper is real, its reflection is a mere imitation. In the same manner, the dead, at this point, however similar they come to look and even behave, remain a mere imitation of the living. During a moment filled with ambiguity, Big Daddy gazes back and forth between the real skyscraper and its reflection. While the scene is undefined with regard to Big Daddy's intentionality, there is a sense of thought process awarded to Big Daddy's subsequent jump into the water; the zombie body's intention is not marked as equally relevant as the ritual which is being performed, a baptism. As Big Daddy reemerges from the water, he simultaneously seals his partial subjectivity; still dead, he is framed as having been reborn, his body a site of progression. While the film does not go as far as to picture the reflection of the zombie body itself, which would immediately allude to Lacan's mirror stage and a transgression to a definite self, this baptism nonetheless marks the zombie body's evolution. The horde that follows his baptism exhibits a similar transgression. While still part of an anonymous horde, the horde has a direct goal at this point which is to get to the skyscraper. An argument for pure instinct could be made here; however, the fact that the zombie horde strictly follows its leader, without external distraction, implies a development towards intentionality and away from blatant mindlessness.

This notion is further reinforced in a later sequence, upon sealing their baptism and ensuing development, during which Big Daddy teaches a fellow zombie how to use a machine gun instead of a baseball bat, metaphorically marking their development in terms of their choice of advanced weaponry. Furthermore, while the distinct use of weaponry alone implies intentionality, and hence development, the fact that this zombie horde is killing out of rage rather than hunger, destroying the living body without consuming it, illustrates the evolution of the zombie body towards subjectivity; no longer can the horde be defined as mere "mindless walking corpses" which is how Kaufmann, the film's evil capitalist, describes them as he assumes that "they will never be able to cross the river". However, having crossed the river in a baptizing ritual, the zombies in *Land of the Dead* have been reborn as walking corpses with a purpose, exhibiting a fragmented form of subjectivity.

As the zombie body moves away from antisubjective ambiguity, it is the living that begin to desire to become a zombie body as a form of instrumentalizing the heterotopic zombie body as weapon:

> Cholo turns himself into a supernatural weapon as the zombie version of himself has a better chance of killing the armed Kaufman than his human iteration would have had. In a bizarrely cathartic moment, then, the audience finds itself rooting for the zombie and cheering the explosive death of the film's evil human antagonist. (Bishop, 28)

Punctual audience identification with the zombie body, then, consolidates the zombie's progression towards an imitation of selfhood which it has undergone within Romero's series. As the zombie narrative expands, the living and the dead slowly appear to conflate. The film concludes with a classic ending of the surviving few stragglers on the road, hoping for somewhere safe to go, albeit aimlessly. As the living are driving towards their uncertain fate, they come to observe a zombie horde that Denbo ascribes with intentionality: "They're just looking for a place to go, same as us". Expanding on a previous reference uttered by Cholo who, upon beginning his transgression towards the zombie body states: "You know, I always wanted to know how the other half lives", the final lines cement the conflation of the living and the zombie body as a less fortunate, albeit no less similar other, replacing a former animosity with empathy. As Olney observes:

> Over the past decade or so, there has been a pronounced shift in our public conception of the zombie: increasingly, it has come to serve not as a symbolic Other but as a symbolic Self. […T]he impulse to be 'versus' the zombie and splatter its stuffing is now joined with a longing to *be* the zombie, to walk *in*, rather than alongside, its shoes. (9)

This notion is then further reflected in the developing complexity of the zombie's appetite. If the zombie truly desires to become what it eats, then the 2004 remake of *Dawn of the Dead* reinforces the notion that it is not just life that the zombie craves, but conscious subjectivity. In the film, a living dog's flesh remains untouched and therefore undesired by the zombie's hunger; it is not just life that the zombie seems to crave but humanity. This notion becomes further prevalent in the development, or evolution of the zombie, in which the zombie body is endowed with subjectivity. While traditionally "a conversion to the ranks of the walking dead was a fate from which none could ever return" (Bishop, 27), as initially exemplified by Roger in *Dawn of the Dead* who asserts: "I don't wanna be walking around like that. I'm gonna try not to come back", Cholo's active instrumentalization of himself as a zombie body marks this exact evolution. Having devoured human life in a multiplicity of ways for more than half a decade, it appears that the zombie body is indeed moving closer and closer towards becoming not only animate, but subject and therefore "living",

even becoming endowed with humanity. Spinning the zombie narrative's dynamic further, the contemporary television format has come to develop the zombie into a singular, sympathetic protagonist of the tale, thereby implementing the developing zombie as subject and as having a voice of its own productive, and thus serial, narrative.

2.2 Brains à la Mode: *iZombie* and the Reinterpretation of the Traditional Zombie as Subject

> Television, like cinema has become an industry of the living dead.
> *Ian Olney, Zombie Cinema*

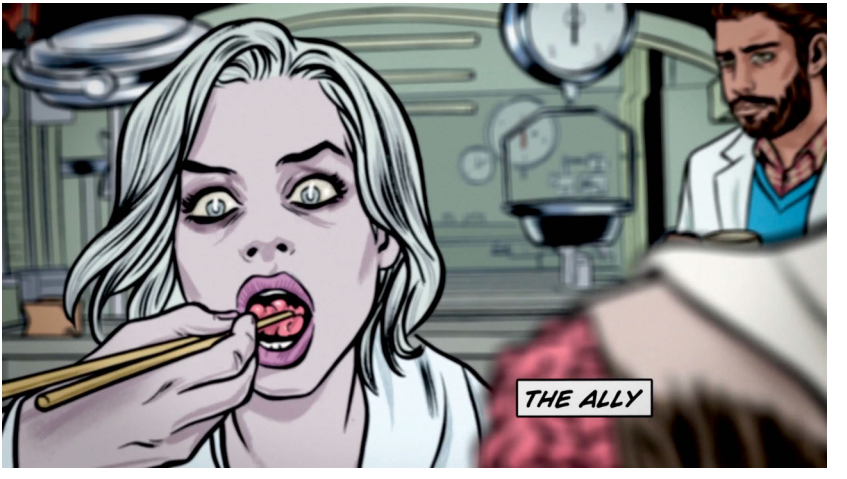
> I'm gonna eat your brain and gain your knowledge!
> *Dr. William Block, Planet Terror*

While Romero's films already mark a serial progression of the zombie myth as an integral part of the American cultural imaginary, *The CW*'s television series *iZombie* actively implements the serial format in its reconceptualization of the zombie as a conscious subject, thereby positioning the zombie at the centre of its narrative. The television series endows its undead protagonist with a complex voice that is rooted in an individualism that feeds on and absorbs an overabundance of deceased voices. While proposing the idea of a zombie with a self, this notion of self is both embellished (as well as shattered by means of crafting) the zombie as a gourmand of brains, which in itself proposes consciousness, individuality, and a resistance to becoming just another part of a hungry horde. Furthermore, infusing the brain-devouring zombie with the personal attributes of the former brain's host literalizes the notion of becoming or *being* what one eats. Thus, allowing the zombie to become not what it eats, but rather *who* it eats, elevates the antisubject into a realm of liminal subjectivity, thereby building up on the fragmented self which *Land of the Dead*'s Big Daddy eventually became. In *iZombie*, this subjectivity, in turn, allows for a narratological expansion governed by the zombie's voice(s), rather than focusing on the surviving living humans as the traditional zombie narrative does. By means of ingesting the dead's subjectivity, the reconceptualized zombie is eventually able to take charge of the narrative and to assume a position of metaphorical authorship by means of re-appropriating the tale of the undead into a domesticized space in which the zombie is able to gain subjectivity itself as a re-resurrected entity. Claiming their identity(ies) then allows the conscious zombie to not only assume selfhood,

but also, to assume an active voice which both actively tells and shapes the zombie's story.

Already inherent in its title, *iZombie* immediately shatters the notion of the conventional zombie's blank antisubjectivity. Adding a lower case 'I' to the proverbial zombie bestows its reconceptualized version with subjectivity. It is not just the genre and theme in this sense that has been adapted; there has also been a shift in focalization in which the undead are placed at the narrative's core, progressing the story narratologically, rather than simply providing obstacles for the non-zombie (i.e., the living). The television series' protagonist, zombie Olivia "Liv" Moore, is not just a gendered subject, she also evokes the audience's sympathies by means of her (post)humanity. In narratological terms, the zombie body is no longer exclusively focalized from without, lacking a voice and the corresponding agency. Instead, not only does the show center on the zombie body, but it is also actively told by and focalized through the zombie's subjective voice. The show, in terms of its leading character alone, essentially juxtaposes the antisubjective blind violence of the zombie with the performed femininity of a (post)human woman, thereby opening up potential for a more domesticized and complex version of the zombie. The fact that the opening credits feature a graphic image of Liv eating brains with chopsticks becomes a telling synecdoche for the complexity around which her character is built.

Illustration 8: Chopsticks and brains in opening credits, iZombie



Elaborating on the origins of chopsticks, Margaret Visser in *The Rituals of Dinner* states that:

> [t]he ultimately restricted – and therefore it may be thought the ultimate delicate – manner of eating with one's hands is to use the thumb and two fingers of the right hand, only the tips of these being allowed to touch the food. This gesture, refined even more by artificially elongating the fingers and further reducing their number, is of course the origin of chopsticks. (194)

Equipping the insatiable flesh-hungry zombie with the most delicate tools of food consumption illustrates the paradoxical nature that feeds into and informs Liv's character. While she may be driven by the zombie's traditional hunger, she is also showing restraint in her refined manner of brain consumption, thereby adding a layer not only of humanity but also of self-particularity and sophistication; this, in turn, becomes a marker of her individuality.

In the series' pilot episode, Liv is introduced as a formerly ambitious and successful medical student turned undead. While introducing her new existence as an undead being, she muses on her one guiding motivation, which has come to replace the manifold ambitions that she had previously. As we observe her 'insta noodles' heating up in the microwave, a dish that she sprinkles with fresh human brains, her voiceover reminisces on her former days as a human being, outlining her diverse desires, a thought she concludes with "now I am mostly just hungry – oh, and a zombie, so there's that"; she is shown visibly feasting on a bite of brains, closing her eyes in gluttonous gratification, and this is a sentiment which plays on the previously outlined "big appetite" of the zombie. While this highlights her trade-off of a complex personality, which is overtaken by a seemingly singular desire to eat, she also obtains a voice and immediately proposes subjectivity in her 'zombieness'. She is aware, not only of her hunger, but also of her former desires, the persona that she used to be while still alive as well as of her new status, a form of animate-yet-deceased subject. Presenting herself as a zombie illustrates the consciously active part that she is able to obtain; the construct of such a new individualized version of the zombie playing on the zombie body's uncanny dynamic. Liv, in this sense, is still Liv in some form; however, her death and partial return has alienated her from her previous self, thereby rendering her physical as well as mental subjectivity uncanny. It is no longer just her zombie body that can be constructed as uncanny, it is also her identity which feeds into her uncanny existence, harboring both the familiar as well as the unfamiliar. This notion of the familiar, a bygone humanity that returns in an alienated form, can be read alongside Kristeva's elaborations on the abject in "Approaching Abjection". In simple terms, the abject, something elusive by nature and as explored previously, forms that which the subject rejects as a means to preserve its own subjectivity; it is a non-object of disgust and repudiation: "The abject has only one quality of the object – that of being opposed to I" (230). This threat to selfhood,

like the uncanny, is particularly present within the corpse, the non-abstraction of the abject:

> The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject. It is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object. Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us. (Kristeva, 232)

The titular "I" in *iZombie* suggests a subjectivity that is inherent in the zombie that can become subject to the threat elaborated upon by Kristeva. Liv hence comes to obtain a complex position in her selfhood as an undead but clearly marked subject. While she is deceased, she is simultaneously (a) self by means of her conscious subjectivity. As a zombie who is not an antisubject, she returns from the dead as an uncanny version of her former, living self, while also continuously abjecting death in an attempt to maintain her subjectivity: "[t]here I am at the border of my condition as a living being. My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border" (Kristeva, 231). The liminal position that Liv inhabits renders her uncanny with regard to her former self and as simultaneously alive when read against the abject; as a consequence, Liv essentially becomes an agent of both positions, wanders along a spectrum between living and dead. She muses on this dichotomy in an episode called "The Exterminator" when she confides: "In my old life I was a lot of things – now I am only a stomach. Hunger incarnate. When I'm hungry I forget my lunch used to be a person. When the hunger's bad I forget I used to be one too". As V.W. Turner elaborates, the zombie comes to obtain a paradoxical position: "The essential feature […] is that the neophytes are neither living nor dead from one aspect, and both, living and dead from another. Their condition is one of ambiguity and paradox, a confusion of all the customary categories" (Turner in Austin, 178).

The definition of Liv's selfhood is, therefore, also dependent upon whether it is the dead or the living that characterizes her – whilst either might mark her as *other*. Therefore, as a subject and zombie, Liv's body defies categorization to a certain extent, but she retains the potential to lean more towards living than dead as a zombie, unlike previous zombie archetypes, given that "[t]he sympathetic zombie protagonist is something of a recent development" (Bishop, 27). Liv actively chooses to align herself with the living rather than the dead even as a zombie, to a certain extent but not completely; this takes place predominantly through her food consumption which both provides her with subjectivity (becoming the deceased) as well as an identity (employing food preparation as a specific character trait). Herself a corpse, she begins to abject death by means of consuming human brains which not only lend her their memories, but also their subjectivity in the form of their personality traits. The consumption of food not only provides nourishment, but it is a necessity in order to maintain her subjectivity; as the brains wear off, we get more and

more of a sense of who Liv used to be, even as she is simultaneously losing her humanity. In order to align herself with the living, she needs to feed on another brain that then overwrites the previous brain's subjectivity with a new identity while simultaneously allowing her to temporarily maintain her humanity. Already dead, yet alive, her status as living is exclusively dependent upon the consumption of human brains. Similar to Big Daddy's development towards more technologically advanced weaponry, Liv limits the consumption of human flesh to the brain alone, rather than any carnality of the living, thereby marking her craving of human flesh as targeted at the living's most well-developed part. Not only is she consuming brains exclusively, but she is also transforming them into a plethora of dishes. Connecting this dynamic back to Freud and Kristeva, her uncanny self can be said to drift into the abject unless she is able to perform the life-affirming act of cooking before consuming the needed brains, which both characterizes her complex and inherently fragmented identity as well as her humanity, rendering it paradoxical or, more precisely, heterotopic. Her body becomes a counter-site that contests both the dead and the living; the act of meticulous and particular food preparation becomes an uncanny reconceptualization of her abject tendencies for Liv, thereby illustrating the paradoxes which infuse her character.

By means of not simply proposing a hollow self as zombie, the show also draws on the zombies' desire to blindly devour by spinning this dynamic in a more differentiated direction. Even though Liv's last name is Moore, which can be read as a reflection on her insatiability, she also tells her ally and trusted boss, Ravi, that she restrains her carnivorous desire as best she can: "just so you know regarding my unique dietary needs, I do it as infrequently as possible if I don't eat I become dumber, meaner and I'm afraid that if I let it go long enough I'll go all George Romero" ("Brother, Can You Spare a Brain?"). While this statement plays into her humanity, it also points to her self-reflexive awareness and hence her consciousness. In citing Romero, she expresses a knowledge of her kin. However, she also positions herself in the realm of the living, comparing herself to Romero himself who "dramatically redefined the zombie […]" (Silver & Ursini, 90), abstracting her citation of the zombie as a cultural artefact within the diegesis, rather than blatantly aligning herself with her monstrous reality as a zombie. This suggests that rather than an ultimate state, the reconceptualized zombie can be placed along a spectrum of 'zombieness', once again adding complexity to the figure. The show capitalizes on this by means of the "full-on zombie mode" which a starved zombie enters when not restraining him/herself. This aforementioned full-on zombie mode becomes characteristic of the zombie horde in which all individuality is exchanged for carnivorous desire for flesh as elaborated in "A Zombie Manifesto": "[…t]herefore, […] the zombie poses twofold terror: There is the primary fear of being devoured by a zombie […] and the secondary fear that one will, in losing one's consciousness, become part of the monstrous horde" (Lauro & Embry, 89). A signifier of a complete

loss of individualism and consciousness, the zombie horde is clearly marked as other with regard to Liv who repeatedly references the zombie horde as a threat throughout the show as she expresses her wish to preserve her individuality.

Playing on the conventional zombie's insatiable hunger, but individualizing it, *iZombie* devotes a substantial amount of time outlining the manifold meals in which Liv prepares her brains, alluding to an educational cooking program in which the viewer is taken through a recipe step-by-step. In the traditional zombie narrative, the consumption of brains can be read as a gender-neutral, universal form of violence committed by the antisubject who is purely governed by instinct. The consumption of flesh is paralleled with a form of savagery in which zombies devour human flesh raw using their hands which are left bloody and greedy for more. *iZombie*'s subject-governed female zombie, then, is able to reinterpret the act of consuming a human brain into a domesticized, if not educational, form of cooking; the visual repetition of the act of cooking in each episode further mirrors the serial format of the television serial itself. As an additional complicating layer, the zombie that features subjectivity then also evokes the notion of cannibalism, as opposed to the traditional zombie who could be seen as operating in a state of reverse cannibalism (being a dead antisubject hungry for the living's flesh). Liv, to a certain degree becomes an actual cannibal, "[a] person who eats the flesh of other human beings." (OED) the closer her body comes to being aligned with the living and, hence, categorized as human. The show bridges the nurturing act of preparing a meal and the cannibalistic deed of eating a (deceased) human brain by instrumentalizing the gendered space of the kitchen, thereby creating a new version of a zombie who adapts to human convention in an attempt to assimilate into a communal consciousness, rather than devouring all subjectivity. While the conventional zombie is crafted as being hollow, save for the singular desire for food, *iZombie* reconceptualizes this notion by means of drawing Liv as a foodie, "[a] person with a particular interest in food; a gourmet" (OED). By means of drawing Liv as a complex character, but an undead one, what becomes reflected in her interest in food also becomes part of her identity, thereby rendering her cannibalistic hunger diverse; this is illustrated by means of all of the different recipes that she provides. In preserving her identity as subject, rather than being blinded by hunger, she fetishizes her desire which is channelled into the meticulous preparations of her dishes. It is the hunger for brains that she experiences which also transcends the different personalities that she obtains through the consumption of these brains and becomes a defining characteristic of her as an individual subject.

While hunger may be her sole guiding desire, as she herself claims, it is through said hunger that she begins to craft her new personality, even as a zombie. As a foodie, she is able to instrumentalize her desire as a significant marker of her complex subjectivity. In her review of *The Official Foodie Handbook* by Ann Barr and Paul

Levy, Angela Carter elaborates on an elevation of food to the high arts which is conducted by the foodie who considers:

> […] 'food to be an art, on a level with painting or drama'. It is the 'art' bit that takes their oral fetishism out of the moral scenario in which there is an implicit reprimand to greed in the constantly televised spectacle of the gaunt peasants who have trudged miles across drought-devastated terrain to score their scant half-crust. (1)

Accompanying their titular lines with the subtitle "Be Modern – Worship food", Barr and Levy highlight the notion of spectacle that becomes an intrinsic part of food preparation for the gourmet. Orally fetishizing the human brains, which she essentially cannibalizes, Liv simultaneously humanizes her desires and renders her *big appetite* both colorful and complex; removed from a purely nourishing quality, the show extensively visualizes the manifold dishes that she prepares in an aesthetic and appealing manner. Discussing her appetite with Ravi in the opening of "Flight of the Living Dead", Liv asks him: "Of everyone here, who would you eat first?" While this statement is certainly intended to satirize her status as a zombie, the conversation, then takes a more complex turn when she begins to muse on an egg salad sandwich which she had observed on television: "I was watching TV on Saturday and I saw an egg salad sandwich and I was like I loved egg salad when I was alive, there's gotta be an equivalent I can make. If vegans can pull it off with tofu, why can't I do it with brains." This statement certainly acknowledges her as *not* alive, an aliveness which she attributes to a former Liv; however, she also utters the desire to find an equivalent taste to when she was alive, which elevates her to a level closer to alive than dead. Through food preparation she seeks to masquerade herself as human as closely as she can, as she further states: "So I went down to the artisanal spice shop on Pike, you know, *Seasons for all Seasons*, and I picked up some stuff. In the end the sandwich wasn't so bad, it didn't quite hit the mark, but kinda close." While the name of the artisanal shop "*Seasons for all Seasons*" picks up on the form of the television series, implicitly referencing the different seasonings (of Liv and her plethora of brain-based dishes) which will come to be served throughout the show, the elaboration on her quest for seasonings which transform brains as closely as possible into egg salad also offers a reflection on her own status as almost living. The food that Liv so meticulously prepares comes to represent her own status as not just undead, but as *almost* living. The brains that she prepares may not quite approximate egg salad, but her particular method of preparation comes "kinda close" nevertheless; while she is not quite a human being anymore, she still remains closer to living than dead, coming "kinda close" herself, remaining a dead yet animate subject rather than becoming the traditional undead conscienceless antisubject.

Inscribing said complex subjectivity into the figure of the zombie, and positioning the undead at the centre of the serial narrative, allows for a narratological ex-

pansion through the zombie's own voice; in *iZombie*, the proverbial zombie assumes a form of agency which is traditionally assigned to the living within the zombie narrative. This paradoxical notion of a narratological productivity that is caused by language's temporary incapability to grasp death, then, renders the intangible *un*dead as a focalizing subject of the narrative, one which inherently fruitful in the previously leaned upon Foucauldian "play of mirrors that has no limits" (91). While the traditional zombie lacks language, its contemporary evolution no longer does. On a formal level, placing a zombie-subject at the center of a television serial makes perfect sense in light of this notion; in a sense, the text itself, paradoxically and at the point of stagnation, becomes insatiable and greedy to tell a plethora of stories when faced with a form of death. In reciprocity with Liv's potential for a narratological expansion of the story, by means of the versatile voices which she gains through eating the brains of the deceased, death in *iZombie* results in formal productivity (i.e., serial narration). In other words, Liv's stories are greedily devoured and this serves to align the politics of food consumption with the politics of death. Further expanding on this idea, Lacanian psychoanalysis suggests that desire is formed as "a relation to a lack" in which "desire can never be satisfied, it is constant in its pressure, and eternal. The realisation of desire does not consist in being 'fulfilled', but in the reproduction of desire as such" (Evans, 38). The insatiability that informs these images is epitomized by an overt alignment alongside food metaphors. Liv's desire to craft manifold dishes reflects her desire to tell her story; the versatility of brain dishes resembles the versatility of this new zombie as subject – different selves as her temporary previous incarnations, which she characterizes as "flashes of memories or dreams" through the eyes of the deceased, become a narratological tool which is used to expand the story into the past (instead of employing the more traditional flashback structure, for example) in order to further the consolidation of a case and preserve and forward the police procedural's narrative structure. This means that on a formal level, Liv's hunger for subjectivity, which she gains through eating the dead, is necessary in order to develop the story further. It hinges on an insatiable desire to eat and, by extension, to live as a subject, to *Liv Moore* ("live more") even while the story is essentially being told by the dead.

The figure of the zombie, whether conventional or reconceptualized, paradoxically remains immortal in its approximation of death: "The irony is that while [the zombie] prompts us to ask what kind of life that would be, it reveals that our fascination with the zombie is, in part, a celebration of its immortality and a recognition of ourselves as enslaved to our bodies" (Lauro & Embry, 88). In the case of *iZombie*, then, Liv sacrifices part of herself for this notion of immortality as she partially assumes another's subjectivity with every brain that she consumes. While this is illustrated by means of her attire, as well as the behavioural traits she acquires, the cookbook character the later episodes in the series assume in particular, in which the preparation of each dish is meticulously illustrated and accompanied by the same score,

highlight the repetitive aspect of cooking brains not only as a marker of her post-humanity, but also as a leitmotif of the police procedural. The dishes that Liv prepares using the brains of the murder victims at the morgue offer a wide culinary array; as a chef and foodie, she experiments with cuisines from all around the world, cooking entrees, baking desserts, and steaming hot beverages. Her concoctions throughout the series include spaghetti and meatballs, chili dogs, shepherd's pie, the Hungarian fried bread Langos, peanut butter and jelly rolls with no crust, filled mussels, spicy noodles, a foot-long turkey and brain sub, a curry dish, peanut butter filled celery sticks, cinnamon rolls as well as a brain-infused cappuccino and a hot chocolate which is topped off with whipped cream and sprinkles. All of these dishes are tainted with death, containing the flesh of the deceased; however, all of these dishes also remain appealing even to the living. In "Even Cowgirls get the Black and Blues" for instance, Liv chews on homemade brain nuggets with hot sauce while Ravi desperately calls out to a divine entity to keep him from indulging in human flesh himself: "God help me, that smells sensational!", having to contain his own appetite for what he knows would be a cannibalistic act for him and which, however, simultaneously triggers his gluttonous desires. Rather than devouring human flesh raw, Liv maintains her humanity through the sophisticated manner with which she meticulously prepares these dishes that even become appealing even to the living who are aware of their main ingredient. The brains themselves remain ambiguous in affect and are not screened as markedly abject throughout the series; in "Dead Rat, Live Rat, Brown Rat, White Rat", for instance, Liv sprinkles half of a pizza with brains and Ravi eats the other half. The scene that follows hinges on dramatic irony, during which unbeknownst to him, Clive Babineaux claims a "brained" slice for himself, taking a bite and mistaking the brains that he accidentally consumed for mushrooms (he is "not a big fan" of mushrooms, it turns out). Hence, in *iZombie*, the brains of the deceased become an intricate part of gluttonous desires; they are not prepared as abject but similarly to Liv's status, instead come to obtain a paradoxical status that masks their actual abject nature as heterotopic – subversive and other, yet potentially desirable and graspably possible.

Framing the preparation of her culinary experimentations in this manner visually picks up on the formulaic aspect of the series' narratological expansion. Each dish references a murder victim, proposing a crime that has to be solved. Similar to the television serial *Twin Peaks*, which was discussed in the previous chapter, this visualization of narratology may be read alongside Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay "Circles" which muses on the world's circularity in which expansion appears almost infinite:

> The man finishes his story, – how good! how final! how it puts a new face on all things! He fills the sky. Lo! On the other side rises also a man and draws a circle

> around the circle we had just pronounced the outline of the sphere. Then already is our first speaker not a man, but only a first speaker. (227)

While the previous chapter isolated Agent Dale Cooper as an authorial figure of this circularity, *iZombie* positions Liv's zombie voice as such. In the manner of the allegorical second man, with each case coming to a close, there is another brain to be meticulously prepared and eaten, but the deceased's subjectivity can still be adapted and resolved. While the zombie, by definition "[..] is anticatharsis, antiresolution: it proposes no third term reconciling the subject/object split, the lacuna between life and death." (Lauro & Embry, 94) its antiresolution is challenged by the construction of the zombie as developing subject. As a zombie with a self, Liv projects a newly gained subjectivity that is illustrated by means of her unique recipes, as well as by the multiplicity of possible characters that she becomes through the consumption thereof. Each dish that she prepares becomes the voice of an Emersonian second man who tells a new story and who, structurally, maintains the essence and development of the police procedural. Each dish, in this sense, is also a new self for Liv to become which both approximates her status as living while simultaneously overwriting her previous subjectivity as living. She is able to maintain part of her humanity by cannibalizing the brains of the victims as a means to solve the individual cases of the police procedural; at the same time, she is sacrificing her own self which is superimposed not simply by another, but by a deceased other. In her quest to stay alive she paradoxically has to approximate the already deceased, to become and speak for the dead. If one indeed is what one eats, and that which Liv eats is the flesh of the deceased, then she does remain dead even if dead brain matter endows her with the subjectivity of the living. The framing of her concoctions as a recurring theme can then be connected to Christopher Bigsby's *Viewing America* in which he states that, with regard to the American television serial, "reinforcing a national ideology to do with production and consumption, its programmes [are] regularly interrupted not only to sell products but to sell the idea of consuming as value" (ix). While the television format caters to endless consumption, Liv's dishes come to obtain a similar function. Reminiscent of an advertisement, as a zombie, Liv reappropriates culinary consumer culture for the living which she is only able to do because her status is ambiguous, thereby rendering her cannibalism an understandable prerequisite for her fleeting humanity.

Liv as a subject, in spite of being a zombie, transgresses the zombie's surface individualism in which the debris of a former life is still noticeable; this also occurs in in *Dawn of the Dead*, for example, which employs a minimal form of individualizing the zombie body within the horde: "as an extension of *Night of the Living Dead*, it is with this film that zombies are markedly individualized, with the living dead in the shopping mall including a Hare Krishna follower, a nun and a nurse" (Conrich, 17). While Liv remains undead, it is not just the debris of a former life that marks

her (previous) identity, it is the dead that fracture her animate body which, in turn, carries her subjectivity. Therefore, the zombie body remains irreconcilable to a certain extent and is tied to a paradox in *iZombie*. Liv cannot sustain her subjectivity without consuming the brains of the deceased, and by extension assuming their individualities. Her agency is inherently tied to the deceased that she cannibalizes, not just by aligning herself as human while simultaneously eating human flesh, but furthermore on the level of her very subjectivity. It is said that subjectivity becomes a nexus for the advancement of the story; this is then further reflected on a narratological level in the form of narrative cannibalism. The television series, as a police procedural in which Clive Babineaux assumes the role of the detective figure, is the hermeneutic agent who becomes reliant on his partner Liv's cannibalism which progresses the story. However, the visions that she obtains, which are crucial for the consolidation of the individual cases, are not her own memories but are cannibalized stories which she ingested through the deceased and, in that sense, does not actively produce, but instead *re*-produces. Expanding this to the meta level of genre, the serial format itself becomes reliant on her cannibalism in order to maintain and move itself forward. As a television series, it is also the recipient who becomes insatiable. The viewer also devours the dead metaphorically, by means of consuming the serial. This notion is mirrored in the cooking analogy that is employed throughout the show; the recipe for Liv's dishes becomes formulaic for the television serial itself.

Isolating the zombie's insatiable hunger and reformatting this desire into a source of individuality, then, *iZombie* instrumentalizes the anti-subjective zombie body and, instead of leaving it "devoid of consciousness", renders it an epitome of the carnivalesque as, "[…i]n the world of carnival the awareness of the people's immortality is combined with the realization that established authority and truth are relative" (Bakhtin, 10). Invoking the Bakhtinian concept of grotesque realism, *iZombie* hyperbolizes the zombie body as a heterotopic counter-site, as "[b]odies, their consumption and decomposition form a crucial part of Bakhtin's ideas on carnival" (Austin, 181). While Liv's body is marked as dead by means of her pale skin and white hair, her zombie body is not excessively marked with corporeal decay. While uncanny, she is not abject; the symptoms of 'zombieness' are easily masked with tanning spray and hair dye. Traditionally a marker of death infecting the space of the living, the contemporary, individualized zombie body as depicted in the show defies its own decay and is capable of passing as human. It is then not its surface that marks it as zombie, but rather its *behavior;* most prevalently, its eating habits are what marks it. The zombie body as subject then further explores the notion of a multiplicity of zombies which, having become subjects, are no longer a homogeneous horde, but instead become a societal entity themselves and come to pose a potential threat to human society; they contest "established authority" not by means of their antisubjectivity, but by means of their sudden superiority as undead (and yet conscious), thereby assuming a form of posthuman, if not immortal, agency.

The contemporary zombie challenges its own status as ultimate abject and instead assumes a desirable potential for immortality, even though, according to Kyle William Bishop, "[…i]n the original zombie films of the 1930s and 1940s, becoming a zombie was a thing to fear as it meant loss of self-awareness and autonomy" and "the walking dead were monstrous manifestations of fates worse than even the most violent of deaths" (27). Even while obtaining a form of subjectivity, the undead zombie body remains an irreconcilable site. However, *iZombie* elevates it to a more complex, heterotopic level by means of endowing it with subjectivity, and by extension, posthumanity.

As such, the zombie as subject becomes instrumental in the narrative's progression; the narrative is focalized on the zombie as self. In this sense, the show employs the previously neglected wasteland of liminality, in which the zombie resides, as a narratological source for the maintaining as well as the progression of the police procedural. The preparation and consumption of food serves as a signifier of this serial expansion, on the level of form, as well as a signifier for the zombie as subject. On a formal level, the brains that are concocted play on the repetitiveness of the serial while the plethora of possibilities which are acted out hint at the productive potential limitlessness that the serial entails. On the level of content, the sophistication of a zombie's hunger is allegorized in the crafting of a more complex zombie body that harbors the potential to transcend its previous hollowness, thereby finally becoming an active voice within its own narrative. In *iZombie*, the zombie is that which she eats and that which she eats is subjectivity. Quite literally, then, she also becomes that which she eats through the manner in which she prepares and eats her sustenance; this is a posthuman self which carries an active narratological voice. The zombie's evolution is marked by an uncanny fragmentation of the subject, rather than by a blatant abjection which eliminates all subjectivity; no longer is the zombie body crafted as the infectious abject other, but instead comes to obtain a desirable position which opens up room for a renegotiation of the self. However, they remain a counter-site to both the living as well as the dead.

As has become evident, the zombie body remains a mere imitation of the living throughout its evolution even as it transgresses into subjectivity, rather than being able to transgress back as fully reinstated as living. When read as a heterotopic counter-site within the narrative, it could be stated that the American gothic proposes a utopic dream of immortality, whereas the zombie narrative contextualizes the corpse as a graspable manifestation which contests the living as well as the dead body. The contestation, as well as imitation of the living and the corpse by the zombie, can be seen as illustrative of its mythmaking tendencies. While the zombie imitates life, the text is imitates death; both, however, remain a myth within the American cultural imaginary, a figment of the imagination which remains elusive and, therefore, becomes a repetition compulsion in the fabrication of the myth that *is* America. It is not at all surprising that the iconicity of the contemporary television

drama becomes a place of negotiation of the zombie myth, its serial format simulating potential for an endless repetition and further progression of the zombie body. The zombie body is both life and death and simultaneously neither; the negotiation of its elusive body results in an overt textual productivity which mirrors its own insatiability in terms of the prominence with which its narratives are not only fabricated, but actively consumed.

3. Producing the Corpse: Quentin Tarantino's Revenge Narratives

> Tarantino put desire back into the process of movie making.
> *Fred Botting & Scott Wilson, The Tarantinian Ethics*

> Marian looked back at her platter. The woman lay there, still smiling, glassily, her legs gone. 'Nonsense,' she said. It's only a cake.' She plunged her fork into the carcass, neatly severing the body from the head.
> *Margaret Atwood, The Edible Woman*

What has become evident in the previous two chapters is that aestheticizations of death in the American cultural imaginary emerge as inherently tied to the dynamism of a repetition compulsion. It is this repetition that marks America as insatiable for figurations of death. The American gothic repeats aestheticizations of death to the point re-establishing them as living and is nourished by the *death paradox*, resting on fertile American ground,[1,2] while the figure of the zombie surfaces as the undead corpse which craves the living.[3] And while the figure of the zombie is hungry for the living body, it is here that a further element must be brought into play in the context of this volume; this element is the artistic figuration of a living body that *actively* produces the corpse. Manifesting as a form of flipside of the zombie, the living body that is metaphorically hungry for the dead can be seen in the figure of the avenger. Rather than simply productive, the concept of revenge also emerges as a repetition itself and is, in fact, re-productive of murderous agency. Etymologically rooted in

1 See Introduction for in-depth discussion of this dynamic.

2 See chapter 1 for a detailed analysis of the way in which the mode of the American gothic reinstates the corpse as living, thereby ultimately eliminating the narrative retroactively.

3 See chapter 2 for a discussion of the figure of the zombie.

the French word *re*vanche, the act of *re*venge is specifically defined as "the action of hurting, harming, or otherwise obtaining satisfaction from someone *in return* for an injury or wrong suffered at his or her hands" (OED, my emphasis). As is apparent from this definition, the act of revenge produces two separate things; it produces either a wrong or injury based on a previous wrong (which, in the context of this volume, will circle around the production of death) and it allows the avenger to obtain (emotional) satisfaction from this murderous act. This illustrates the way in which the repetition of murderous agency, which is tied to the vengeful act, produces emotional gratification and aestheticizes murderous agency through emotional coloring.

It is this element of emotional gratification that also conjoins the act of revenge with the politics of food. Not only is the participation in a dinner ritual pleasurable because it caters to an appetite, it also follows a distinct formula in which participants are complicit, a formula geared towards gratification or catharsis which is also present in the execution of revenge. It comes as no surprise, then, that common phrases outlined on the etymology of the word 'revenge' liken the vengeful act to the consumption of food, such as for instance in the phrases "revenge is sweet", "thirst for revenge", as well as the notorious "revenge is a dish best served cold" (OED). In "Tragedy and Revenge", Tanya Pollard asserts that revenge tragedy's cathartic quality is rooted in the satisfaction obtained by the rightful repetition of a wrong, stating that "[t]he genre's popularity, then, speaks to the attraction of seeing frustrated victims satisfy their demand for justice" because "[r]evenge redresses injustice caused by abuses of power" (59). A vengeance that reproduces a previous murderous act, deemed an "injustice", provides emotional justification for the active production of death at the wronged party's hands. It is desire for murder that manifests itself as an appetite for the dead in the *living* that also reifies the hunger metaphor more explicitly than the previous two chapters; this is an aspect which will be further cemented in the figure of the cannibal.[4]

When René Girard raises the question: "[w]hy does the spirit of revenge, wherever it breaks out, constitute of […] intolerable menace?" (14), he implicitly aligns revenge with an expansive quality through the use of the term "break out".[5] When he then answers his own question, by stating that "[p]erhaps because the only satisfactory revenge for spilt blood is spilling the blood of the killer" (14), he emphasizes the repetitive dynamism which is at play in the concept of revenge. Girard concludes his argumentation with the assertion that:

4 See chapter 4 for a detailed discussion of the configuration of the cannibal.

5 He expands on this terminology throughout the development of his argument which also isolates the concept of revenge as a contagious "disease" (22).

> [v]engeance professes to be an act of reprisal, and every reprisal calls for another reprisal. The crime to which the act of vengeance addresses itself is […] never an unprecedented offence; […] it has been committed in revenge for some prior crime. (14)

What becomes evident is that "vengeance is an interminable, *infinitely repetitive* process" (Girard, 14, my emphasis) which means that the concept of revenge itself emerges as structurally serial. Murderous agency, conducted as a vengeful act, must always be preceded by a previous wrong and it manifests as reactive. This means that the revenge plot, like the serial narrative, is endowed with self-perpetuity and it is always already in motion; the vengeful act emerges only as the logical conclusion and consequence of a previous wrong in an expansive chain.

When read alongside the fruition of the *death paradox* in the context of the American cultural imaginary, the revenge narrative manifests itself as a structural serial that is geared towards emotional gratification and, thus, caters to an appetite for murder. The revenge plot unfolds as a narrative that has already begun, hinging on a preceding act which the avenger is avenging, and is endowed with that transcendentalist circularity that Emerson isolates in his essay "Circles" and with which Bronfen describes the dynamism of seriality.[6] Based on this logic, the way in which revenge becomes circular and expansive, as elaborated upon by Girard, becomes apparent; the avenger's murderous act comes to form the preceding act for another's revenge in an endless chain of "reprisal" (Girard, 14). The emotional gratification that is written into the cathartic action of avenging, then, renders an aestheticized murderous agency pleasurable and this caters to the metaphorical hunger for death that haunts the American cultural imaginary. Based on this trajectory, this chapter focuses explicitly on the living agent of death that actively produces the corpse which ties to an emotional legitimization of murderous agency through the dynamism of revenge. It is here that we see a reconceptualization of the previous American gothic; vengeful desire, rather than overwriting the dead in order to reproduce them as living, re-actively produces more dead based on a previous action that is to be avenged.

It is significant that vengeance is based on emotional, rather than legal, justification and employs codification outside the symbolic order, outside the law even. This means that vengeance – be it personal or collective – is governed more by emotion than by rationale and implements an aesthetic of the emotionally just, rather than the lawfully right. By means of the previously outlined *death paradox* – the dynamic that a reality of abject death renders language linguistically mute for an instant, only to revert back to a compensatory productivity, a plethora of aesthetic renditions of

6 See chapter 3 for an in-depth discussion of the way in which seriality builds upon Emerson's "Circles".

death in an attempt to overcome – the revenge narrative can be seen as actively writing death, rather than rewriting the dead. Hence, the ensuing narratological productivity not only remains with the dead, as was the case in the previously outlined chapters on the American gothic and the figure of the zombie respectively, but further spans over the living who come to inflict death and desire to produce a corpse. Rather than rewriting the dead in an attempt to overcome it, a revenge narrative actively produces a corpse.

As Terry Eagleton claims, in a manner similar to Michel Foucault, "[d]eath is the limit of discourse, not a product of it" (87). In the context of vengeful desires, revenge becomes the active production of a perceived limitation. The vengeful agent of death codifies a just framework for becoming another's abject – "being opposed to I" (Kristeva, 230) – in the sense that they are threatening another's subjectivity through their vengeful agency. The murderous avenger is opposed to another's subjectivity and, harboring murderous intention, becomes another's abject as Julia Kristeva outlines:

> The traitor, the liar, the criminal with a good conscience, the shameless rapist, the killer who claims he is the savior. Any crime, because it draws attention to the fragility of the law, is abject, but premeditated crime, cunning murder, hypocritical revenge are even more so because they heighten the display of such fragility. […] Abjection […] is […] a friend who stabs you… (232)

The vengeful murderer, then, employs the structure of justification or legitimization by means of another's abject deeds; vengeful agency becomes the result of a previous wrong. Both eventually become oppositions to a subject and, therefore, abject entities in the reactive chain that the revenge plot sets into motion. Conceived of as a serial machinery, the revenge narrative produces aestheticized renditions of death by juxtaposing designated abject entities against one another. Geared towards a cathartic moment, vengeance hinges upon the lawless pursuit of emotional gratification which produces the corpse as a reaction. As a progression of the trajectory of this book, the dynamism of revenge does not overwrite the corpse, but instead, produces and thus writes the serialization of the corpse into the present based on a previously undertaken act.

Contemporary American filmmaker Quentin Tarantino in particular employs the structure of the revenge narrative in many of his films and will serve as a case study for the examination of the emotional aesthetization of murderous agency. Governed by the repetitive dynamism of vengeance, his texts infer a morality that aims at an emotional gratification, rather than a juridical justification. Personal codification of right and wrong allow for a legitimization of murderous agency through its emotional aestheticization. Playing to spectatorial sentimentality, vengeful desires rely on a culturally acknowledged ethical framework of just and unjust, in which acting as an agent of death in the context of reprisal is regarded

as acceptable, if not even outright encouraged. Cementing the pleasurable quality of gratification towards which the revenge narrative progresses, Tarantino's 2003 *Kill Bill Vol 1* opens with the following, notorious 'old Klingon' proverb: "Revenge is a dish best served cold." Alluding to the preparation of a meal, this proverb aligns the concept of revenge with the completion of a dish which is to be devoured. Reading the revenge narrative alongside an analogy of food, as a governing *denkfigur*, alludes to the seductive undercurrent that vengeance seems to carry within itself. Catering to an American hunger for death, the proverbial "thirst" for revenge satiates the appetite for aestheticized renditions of death.

In its purest form, a vengeful act is a simple repetition, the *re*payment of a wrong which is geared towards the implementation of ideologically codified justice. On a narratological level, though, the revenge narrative as text is in itself a reaction rather than an action because it merely mirrors an action as a reaction to a previous wrong. The vengeful desire's simplicity, therefore, also becomes a promising formula for satisfaction in which the repetition of a codified injustice is seen as a legitimate means by which to settle the score. I propose a reading of Tarantino's revenge narratives as a series of mirror images of each other, each proposing a different formula or recipe for murderous revenge, governed by an insatiable hunger for a codified, rightful death that hinges on Foucault's trope of the mirror, in which the confrontation with abject death becomes a limitless representation of aestheticized mirror images. In *Film Theory*, Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener examine the ways in which cinema implements and works as (a) mirror, in particular with regard to its self-reflexivity, through what they term "nested narration (a film within a film) or pictorial framing which highlight[s] the constructedness of the mise-en-scene" (84); this results in "[…] various *mise en abyme* constructions resembl[ing] looks into the mirror […]" (83). Read through the lens of the *death paradox*, in which the impossibility of a linguistic confrontation with death splits into the aforementioned plethora of mirror images, film may be regarded as a prevalent platform for the productive aestheticization of abject death. The medium of film, thus, reshapes or *tames* death towards tangibility,[7] in terms of kinetic visualization in particular:

> Yet it is precisely this feeling of having the ground pulled from under one that turns the mirror into a privileged place of ontological uncertainty by virtue of the fact that the mirror absorbs the lack of groundedness of the cinematographic image and turns it into a double reflection. (Elsaesser & Hagener, 85)

The way in which Elsaesser and Hagener describe the effect of the motion picture as mirror ties into David Lynch's (previously outlined) image of a haunted Dale

7 See introduction, passage on Wood, *America in the Movies*.

Cooper;[8] the gaze into the mirror of death can be read as unleashing a desire to produce a corpse. As Lacanian theory suggests, "[…] desire is not only based on a (perceived) lack within the self, but also finds itself always mediated by someone else's (imagined) desire" (74). Read alongside Lacan's mirror stage, one could further propose that a confrontation with an abject momentarily destroys the fantasy of unity and what results is an anti-subjectivity, a self that is shattered by its own mortality, removed from its ideal and that is, therefore, forced to experience cracks in selfhood; this exposes the subject's repressed abject mortality which is then visualized in film as a doubled mirror trope.

Manifesting as subtle mirror images of one another, Tarantino's revenge films also strongly align the consumption of food and the execution of vengeful murderous agency both of which hinge on the gratification of an appetite. Tarantino's oeuvre becomes an anthology of vengeful desires in which trauma becomes a moral currency. Echoing the tradition of the English Renaissance revenge tragedy, a "drama based on a quest for revenge […] typically featuring scenes of carnage and mutilation" (OED), Tarantino's revenge fantasies cater to gluttonous satisfaction, rather than lawful punishment, and are geared towards a more carnal lust that dismisses the symbolic order in its need for instant, emotional gratification. Employing the structure of the revenge tragedy, the openings of his films generally outline a wrong that has occurred, thereby creating an appetite, for which the larger part of the main feature extensively caters. The revenge narrative allows for an oversimplification of good and evil or right and wrong and taps into libidinal desires; its simplicity allows for spectatorial identification with the revenge fantasy. One-dimensional characters are drawn as fragmented yearnings which, by means of simplification, are able to blindly follow their thirst for revenge. Dictated by the revenge plot, by catering to this murderous appetite, these characters expand upon the serial structure of revenge, thereby 'spreading the disease' in Girard's conceptualization through the reactive production of the corpse.

In *The Tarantinian Ethics*, Fred Botting and Scott Wilson assert that:

> [c]haracter, or 'personality' is an effect of an assemblage of samples, references and productions that sustain desire" and therefore, "[…] Tarantino's characters draw attention to both their fictionality and this conventional process of character-identification which they literalise and fragment. (13–14)

These fragmented characters become almost hollowed out by their desires and, not unlike the zombie, become consumed by their desires in Tarantino's revenge narratives in particular. Similarly, spectatorial satisfaction is achieved by means of emotional gratification, rather than factualization of the narrative, playing into senti-

8 See chapter 1 for a visualization of Cooper's fragmentation when possessed by Bob as he gazes into the mirror.

mental insatiability rather than sober rationality. A conscious lack of depth and realism is replaced by the fulfillment of a desire that is created by the filmmaker; as Lisa Coulthard states in "Torture Tunes", Tarantino's films are "loaded with libidinal energy, nostalgia, and the promise of fantasmatic satisfaction" (3). The serially expansive revenge then feeds on the aforementioned libidinal energy and, in turn, feeds the desire that craves "fantasmatic satisfaction" in the form of personally codified, vengeful murder. This chapter explores the way in which the cyclical concept of revenge negotiates an American repetition compulsion for an aestheticized death in the revenge narrative. Nourished by an emotional encoding catering to satisfaction, this chapter joins the Tarantinian revenge film with a libidinal hunger for death. These films can thus be read as mirror images or of each other against the backdrop of the *death paradox*; expanding on this proposition, rather than simple mirror images of an aestheticized death, this chapter reads these films as stunt doubles of one another, proposing an analysis which picks up on the indeterminable dynamism of revenge by means of highlighting its structural seriality. Governed by a lust for vengeance, these films also illustrate the way in which the politics of death align with the politics of food and showcase the American cultural imaginary's insatiability for the production of the corpse .

3.1 The Personal Vendetta: Riding the Pussy Wagon – *Kill(ing) Bill* and *Death Proof*

> As I lay in the back of Buck's truck, trying to will my limbs out of entropy, I could see the faces of the cunts that did this to me and the dicks responsible. Members all of the Deadly Viper Assassination Squad. When fortune smiles on something as violent and ugly as revenge, it seems proof like no other, that not only does God exist, you're doing His will.
> *The Bride, Kill Bill*

There is a distinction to be made between individual vengeance and collective revenge. While both of these concepts are fueled by the same desire to murder the unjust in an attempt to reinstate emotionally classified justice, the personal vendetta hinges on strong personal codification, as the quote above illustrates; "violent and ugly" revenge turns murderous desire into pseudo-moralistic proof of a larger, divine notion of right and wrong. The collective revenge fantasy expands upon this dy-

namic even further and employs the structure of collective trauma or wrong, broadening vengeance to a communally perceived wrongdoing of much larger proportions. Purity and simplicity motivate the personal vendetta in which an almost biblical "an eye for an eye" justification of a personal, and primarily emotionally driven, desire consumes both the avenger as well as the avenged. Hinging on this paradigm of emotion, the dynamic of a personal codification of a hunger and emotional charge aligns itself more closely with biological, natural law and situates itself outside of either the law or of any symbolic order. This claim may even be stretched as far as having a compensatory purpose in instances in which the law fails. As is stated in Walter Benjamin's "Critique of Violence": "From this maxim follows that law sees violence in the hand of individuals as a danger undermining the legal system" (238). Individual, personal violence then often employs the structure of vengeance as a means to right a wrong that has slipped through the cracks of the law, as: "the individual [...] has *de jure* the right to use at will the violence that is *de facto* at his disposal" (Benjamin, 237) in order to correct or re-pay a perceived wrong.

In its purest form, revenge serves as a form of repetition compulsion; a perceived unjust is avenged by a potential injustice which is legitimized by means of its repetition. This simplification of justice dictates that a wrong may be avenged by another wrong, a dynamic which feeds on human desire and plays to the emotion not only of the avenger, but also of the onlooker. As Benjamin further states: "[...] for one reflects how often the figure of the "great" criminal, however repellent his ends may have been, has aroused the secret admiration of the public" (239). The revenge fantasy becomes liminal, almost carnivalesque, as it transgresses the limits of the law; violence conducted in the name of revenge caters to a personal need to level the playing field and, more often than not based on this dynamic, is secretly celebrated, rather than condemned according to Benjamin; the particular choice of the word 'arouse' also hints at the libidinal quality inherent in vengeful desire. What needs to be emphasized here is that revenge is fueled by emotional desire and satisfies a craving, an appetite which succumbs to temptation and that rights a wrong, or where the law has failed, by repeating said wrong.

Looking at the personal vendetta in the first instance, Tarantino's *Kill Bill* saga as well as his double feature Grindhouse production *Death Proof* (alongside Robert Rodriguez's *Planet Terror*) will serve as illustrations, since both implement a female murderous agency, thereby adding a layer of untraditionally gendered violence to these narratives. This female gendering of avengers can be read alongside Gillian Flynn's essay "I Was not a Nice Little Girl", written as a partial justification of the violent women that can be found throughout her novel *Sharp Objects*. The essay is concerned with the domestication of female violence which, in contrast to male violence, is neither celebrated nor spoken about, but has been traditionally omitted as a pretence of its non-existence. Flynn elaborates on this violent femininity stating that:

> I was not a nice little girl. My favourite summertime hobby was stunning ants and feeding them to spiders. […] if one of my dolls started getting an attitude, I'd cut off her hair. […] these childhood rites of passage […] really don't make it into the oral history of most women. […] I think women like to read about murderous mothers and lost little girls because it's our only mainstream outlet to even begin discussing female violence on a personal level. Female violence is a specific brand of ferocity. It's invasive. A girlfight is all teeth and hair, spit and nails – a much more fearsome thing to watch than two dudes clobbering each other. […] watching women go to work on each other is a horrific bit of pageantry that can stretch on for years. (1)

According to Flynn, then, female violence is gruesome, emotional, and vengeful, "a fearsome thing to watch" and is mostly absent from traditional narratives. The feminine is silenced and neglected as an agency of violent acts, more often than not, as becomes evident in the necessity of her ode to female violence. We find female violence mainly confined to the domestic space, namely in the form of cutting, beating, broiling, and whipping as part of the nurturing act of cooking.

Expanding on the analogy between vengeance and the preparation of a dish outlined previously, I would like to consider television chef Julia Child's *The French Chef,* which premiered in 1963 and was an immediate success and at least partially brought female violence into the domesticated, sheltered American household of the 1960s. Throughout her serial program Child notoriously emphasized the necessity for violence in the kitchen, stating, for example: "You can be very rough, I think a lot of people think that you have to be delicate in cooking but you don't" or, more blatantly, chopping off turkey leg: "just whack it off" (*The French Chef*). Traditionally, female violence, then, is limited to the spatiality of the kitchen, if it is represented at all, where it is executed by means of wielding knives and forceful wooden rolling pins. With *The French Chef,* Julia Child was able to bring at least one form of female violence into the American home and did it so successfully that her cooking programs continued airing into the 1990s. It is this domestication of female violence that is renegotiated through the female revenge narrative, in which the violence of food preparation is displaced onto the production of a corpse. However it is re-encoded, the aim remains the same and is motivated by gratification.

It appears that the violent nurture of knife-wielding women certainly has a wide appeal, a notion which we find skilfully reconfigured in Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill* saga. The two films, presented in double feature tradition, translate the visual documentation of the preparation of a meal into a revenge narrative. Metaphorically reformatting the cooking show as a revenge narrative, *Kill Bill* offers highly aestheticized images; the film is a self-referential and conscious pastiche, a reinterpretation of numerous other films and their respective genres, as Anneke Smelik elaborates: "*Kill Bill* is a typical action film, hybridized with many violent genres such as the

spaghetti western, the Japanese samurai, yakuza and anime, the Chinese kung fu, the American blaxploitation, the gangster film, and 'rape revenge' film" (187). The two films isolate vengeance as the proverbial dish[9] that the protagonist is preparing and hoping to serve up, satirically adhering to the domesticized female chef. This reconceptualization domesticizes female violence within revenge-driven action films. As Coulthard states:

> The Bride's violence is exceptional, personally motivated, and purposefully aimed at the reestablishment of family unity . . . The end of the film offers a family devoid of its patriarch, but the emotive and narrational force of the film transforms this absence into positive presence. The absence of patriarchy is an absence of violence and threat, and the female violence of the film is configured retroactively as temporary, aberrant, obligatory, and curative. (70)

Throughout both films, The Bride works her way through her Kill List, which can be analogously read as a list of ingredients that are required in order to satisfy her appetite; the killing of Bill is, after all, an act of revenge. The film implicitly highlights The Bride's singular desire as avenger through the way in which fight sequences are presented, as meticulously choreographed, and settings are intentionally staged in a hyper-artificial manner. Culminating in the visualization of the way in which she conducts her revenge, *Kill Bill* not only invites attention to be paid to surfaces, but actively forces its audience to engage with the exaggerated artifice of the female violence that is being executed. In an article written for *The New York Times*, John Leland observes that "in *Kill Bill* […] women rise to a level of brutality previously reserved for men […]." They do so by transgressing their (previously domesticized) violence, by claiming that masculine space by means of the emotionally charged revenge fantasy.

The film opens with a flashback during which we learn about the mistreatment of The Bride at the hands of Bill and his deadly assassination squad, who leave her for dead at a wedding chapel, pregnant with Bill's child at the time. The narrative jumps ahead four years, having provided rightful ground for The Bride's (re)actions, her repayment of a wrong unfolds as a series of vengeful actions. The flashback is necessary in order to provide the audience with the overarching structure, as well as the ideological foundation, for the murderous, female violence being staged as a repetition compulsion. The opening epigraph "Revenge is a dish best served cold" becomes particularly resonant of an alignment of the politics of death and food, based on the previously outlined analogy, between the television cooking show and a narrative of vengeful retribution, and this bridges the narrational justification and drive for the protagonist's revenge with the inherently domestic activity of cooking. In this

9 We are reminded of the 'old Klingon' proverb which states that "Revenge is a dish best served cold".

sense, Tarantino places the revenge narrative within the domestic framework of the kitchen. That which is metaphorically cooked is vengeance and that which is being observed by the audience is the meticulous planning and execution of the recipe, except that instead of Julia Child, we are following The Bride who becomes our figurative chef du jour.

The first fight sequence of *Kill Bill* in particular illustrates this analogy between a woman's traditional domesticized role as chef within the home and The Bride's extended and deadly version thereof. The sequence opens in suburbia par excellence, Pasadena California,[10] in the idyllic family home of "Pasadena homemaker Genie Bell (former Vernita Green of the deadly assassination squad), [whose] husband is doctor Laurence Bell", something that is referenced by The Bride. The setting is suburban, residential, and exaggeratedly sheltered. It offers the contrasting frame for the brutality with which The Bride follows her vengeful desires. Female violence is executed within the safety of the domesticated female space and cathartically ends in the kitchen.

Illustration 9: The Bride and Vernita Green battle; Kill Bill: Vol. 1

Extensively duelling each other, the weapon of choice fittingly becomes a kitchen utensil, the deadly blade of a knife. We also find a reconfiguration of a rolling pin in the form of a wooden table leg, pans serve as shields, tables are set. The femininely gendered domestic space is turned into a piece of weaponry, something reminiscent of *The French Chef*'s call for brutality in the kitchen. This first fight sequence translates the revenge narrative into a highly aestheticized domestic space that is weaponized by the exact same femininity that it traditionally confines and stifles, while simulta-

10 Coincidentally, Pasadena, California is also the place of birth of *The French Chef* Julia Child.

neously hinting at the libidinal quality of vengeful desire through its alignment with the preparation of a meal.

The duel is suddenly interrupted by the arrival of Vernita Green's daughter, Nicki, who becomes the reason for a temporary truce. Shared experiences of motherhood allow for female bonding between the duelling women, as Minowa, Maclaran, and Stevens also point out:

> The gender-subversive context of violet vengeance parodies the gender inversion with sprinkles of feminine moments such as female assassins' desire for domesticity and motherhood. An androgynous nouvelle femme (and enfant terrible), the Bride is portrayed having both masculine and feminine qualities. (216)

What follows this literal and symbolic interruption of the duel is the reversal of the weaponized domestic space into its traditional form. Green makes coffee for The Bride who has become a fellow mother and is no longer a vengeful opponent. The looming resolution of the duel nevertheless finds its subsequent and eventual retribution in the death of Green. Placing this resolution in the domestic space of the kitchen is symbolically necessary as a set up for the other dishes that are being stirred up through the analogous vengeance at the hands of The Bride far beyond the domestic space of the kitchen. The battle between The Bride and Green finds an abrupt ending; in a conniving attempt to shoot The Bride, in complete disregard of the previously set plans for a 'fair' duel, Green misses the shot and is stabbed in the heart by a knife thrown with masterful precision by The Bride, illustrative of her proficiency in the craft. Death resolves the duel, and the entrée is served symbolically by means of the cold blade of a knife. What is highlighted by means of setting is the domestic notion of the serving of a dish – preferably cold – and in the form of emotionally cathartic vengeance; based on The Bride's previously outlined past, Green's death becomes pleasurable because it is what the audience, as well as The Bride, *craves*. The fact that Green's daughter accidentally becomes an observer of The Bride's metaphorical concoction of revenge, then, spins the analogy further. Suddenly bereft of a mother, The Bride temporarily becomes her substitute and in a maternal act passes her recipe for revenge on to Nicki by telling her that she will await her own revenge for The Bride's own conducted wrong. While this assertion employs the trope of cooking as a gesture of motherhood, it also highlights the expansive quality inherent in the revenge plot which spirals into a potentially limitless seriality.

The revenge narrative of *Kill(ing) Bill* continues to follow The Bride in the painstaking preparation of her revenge, which must find its cathartic ending in the killing of Bill. The Bride, confronted with the rectification of the false assumption that her daughter has died, eventually becomes the daughter's rightful guardian and can step into her role of motherhood. As the story draws to a close so does the analogy of the cooking show, in which the preparation and meticulous cooking

of vengeance has become a domestic act of reinstatement and preservation of the rightful family order. As Coulthard observes, "[r]eiterating this redemptive function of retributive violence, the final scene of *Kill Bill* offers a utopic and intensely feminized image of a naturalized and conventional maternal wholeness. This melodramatic ending is in keeping with the drive towards increasing domesticity that carries the final acts of the film" ("Killing Bill", 165). The deliciously violent preparation of vengeance, analogized in the manner of an extravagant meal, becomes a benevolent maternal act in which the patriarch is eliminated. The Bride's motivation does not remain selfishly redemptive. First and foremost, The Bride is avenging the assumed death of her daughter; ultimately, she is avenging and killing Bill as an act of motherhood.

With narrational justification as its formulaic recipe, Tarantino skilfully reconceptualises the specifically female cooking narrative, which he translates into a revenge narrative, further exposing vengeful desire as a figure for the failed relationship between The Bride and Bill. Essentially, The Bride, upon her resurrection, rewrites her death as part of the patriarchal order into her own, matriarchal order. As she states in the opening of *Kill Bill, Vol. 2*:

> I looked dead, didn't I? Well, I wasn't. But it wasn't from lack of trying, I can tell you that. Actually, Bill's last bullet put me in a coma – a coma I was to lie in for four years. When I woke up, I went on what the movie advertisements refer to as "a roaring rampage of revenge." I roared. And I rampaged. And I got bloody satisfaction...
>
> I've killed a hell of a lot of people to get to this point, but I have only one more. The last one. The one I'm driving to right now. The only one left. And when I arrive at my destination, I am gonna kill Bill.

Her opening monologue aligns the desire to kill with physical "bloody satisfaction" which, hinging on a vengeful hunger, draws the audience in and invites the onlooker's secret admiration, in terms of Benjamin's "Critique of Violence". The monologue further highlights the personal codification of revenge, alongside its emotional charge, by means of desire. Dawson states that:

> From this perspective, Tarantino's *Kill Bill: Volume 1* and *Kill Bill: Volume 2* offer a unique representation of revenge in that between them they contain a literal enactment of what is normally a fantasy in the mind of the revenger. In *Kill Bill*, the murdered victim is also the triumphant revenger, who seemingly comes back to life to rewrite the past and resurrect the dead. (Dawson, 122)

The saga of *Kill Bill*, thus, visualizes the aestheticization of the production of the corpse as fulfilling the fantasy of the revenger. The revenge narrative rewrites the past by means of changing the present and future rather than extinguishing the past completely, as was the case with the American Gothic, or manifesting a past

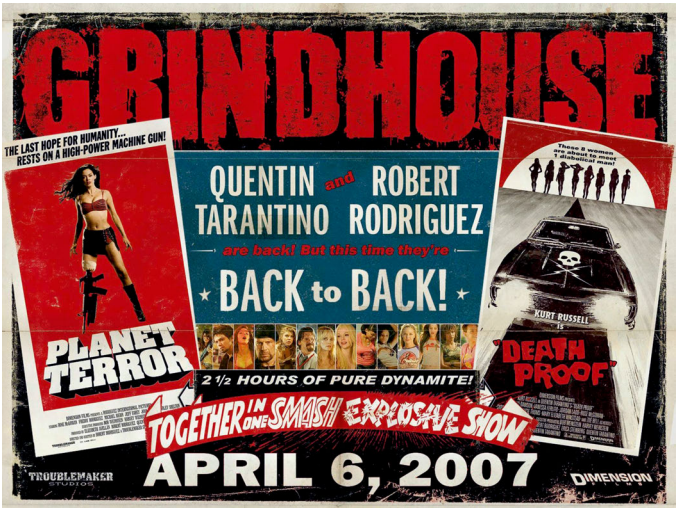
trauma of being killed as a ghostly resurrection which comes back to haunt us, as was the case with the figure of the zombie. While gothic tradition is quoted with a dead bride who re-emerges as a haunting, so is the figure of the zombie when The Bride, who was literally buried alive, resurrects herself. However, the narrative is geared towards a repetition of death, rather than towards an extinction thereof. While she may have "looked dead", she "wasn't". While she may have been momentarily rendered silent, had been penetrated by Bill's bullet, and lay in a coma for four years, she came back as a producer of death, an avenger who roars and rampages with a clear intention: "I am gonna kill Bill". Read in the context of the *death paradox*, the *Kill Bill* saga can be seen as becoming one of the many mirror images of death that produces its aestheticization in emotional form. Embedded in the structure of the revenge narrative, The Bride actively produces the corpse and writes it into the American cultural imaginary. By means of character identification and through the implementation of the concept of revenge, the aestheticized production of the corpse, thus, comes to cater to a desire for emotional gratification.

The fact that the opening monologue is spoken while driving a car, then, picks up on *Kill Bill Vol. 1's* Pussy Wagon, with regard to which it is significant to emphasize that The Bride re-appropriates her former rapist "Buck's" sexist vehicle as her own deadly machine. In *The Monstrous Feminine,* Barbara Creed, elaborating on female monstrosity, states that "[a]ll human societies have a conception of the monstrous-feminine, of what it is about woman that is shocking, terrifying, horrific, abject" (1). As an example of this she highlights the trope of the *vagina dentata*, which "[…] is a motif occurring in certain primitive mythologies, as well as in modern surrealist painting and neurotic dream, which is known to folklore as 'the toothed vagina' – the vagina that castrates" (Campbell, 73). While The Bride herself remains largely uneroticized in the film, the Pussy Wagon certainly hints at a misogynistic eroticization and objectification of the female body. The Bride reappropriates its purpose by means of making it her own, however. The Pussy Wagon rather than being a metaphor for misogyny, becomes a trope for a *vagina dentata* in which Tarantino's female gendering of the personal vendetta aligns it with the emotionality of a vengeance that is tied to its libidinal desires by alluding to a hungry mouth. Gendering the spatiality of vengeance as such allows us to spin this analogy further into a claim for the *vagina dentata*, the toothed vagina, female genitalia that is paralleled with a mouth and wants to consume, for which the Pussy Wagon becomes a fitting synecdoche. Reappropriating murderous female craving as the *vagina dentata*, in the form of a vehicle, adds an additional layer to this figuration of revenge, as the car, or monster truck in this case, may be regarded as a specifically American trope of the road. The Pussy Wagon becomes a *machina dentata* roaming the streets of Pasadena, California. Read alongside the *death paradox*, the *machina dentata* emerges as an ultimate, productive response to linguistic stagnation. This trope of a feminized American machine as a vehicle for revenge is further

extended in Tarantino's *Death Proof*, which will be read as a further aestheticized rendition of death within the framework of this chapter; it is an additional mirror image which is produced by the exact incapability of retelling death which serves as a metaphorical stunt double of the *Kill Bill* saga.

In 2007, Tarantino launched the Grindhouse Production Double Feature *Death Proof* and *Planet Terror* together with Robert Rodriguez; this was a double feature which was advertised as "Quentin Tarantino and Robert Rodriguez are back! But this time they're back to back, 2 $\frac{1}{2}$ hours of pure dynamite! Together in one smash explosive show!"

Illustration 10: Grindhouse Double Feature Poster, 2007



While *Death Proof* employs the same repetitive structuring as the narrative of *Kill Bill*, its edges are visibly rougher and the conceptualization of the revenge narrative in *Death Proof* hinges on instant emotional gratification, as opposed to the meticulous planning and deferment of revenge which spans over the *Kill Bill* saga. While an overt self-reflexivity may be said to characterize all of Tarantino's films, the artifice of film is particularly present in *Death Proof* and emphasizes the kinetic energy of cinema in an allusion to the tangibility of instantaneous emotional gratification of murderous agency governed by the revenge plot.

On the level of form, the kinetic materiality of film is explicitly emphasized as there are repetitious inconsistencies written into the film, which is supposed to look old and ragged, so as to adhere to grindhouse tradition. Continuity suffers from bro-

ken film strips and highlights its physicality as film. The film's impression of materiality offers a nostalgic mosaic of cinema history, quoting grindhouse, exploitation movie, b-grade roadmovies such as *Vanishing Point*, *Convoy*, or *Faster Pussycat! Kill! Kill!* Traditionally, grindhouse movies are "films shown as cheap double features in less-than-savory theatres decades ago" ("Double Trouble", Donahue, 128). Picking up on the repetitive nature of revenge, *Death Proof* is haunted by the excessive doubling of form and content throughout. The film is presented as a doubled narrative told in two parts and bridged by "one diabolical man" whom, according to the poster: "[t]hese 8 Women are about to meet". This diabolical man is the one-dimensional character stuntman Mike, his occupation as stuntman further hinting at the corporeality of film material, who is characterized simply by his desire to randomly choose women whom he kills by means of his death proof car, a leftover prop from one of his stunts. The inherent double entendre does not remain subtle, but becomes explicit as Stuntman Mike explains to the first victim we observe: "this car is 100% death proof. Only to be getting the benefit of it, honey, you really need to be sitting in my seat", reinforcing the incessant doubling which is written into the fabric of the film.

His diabolical actions will ultimately come to be avenged by the rightful repetition of diabolicalness as a vengeful reaction, which renders them just in the hands of the avengers. Rodriguez classifies the grindhouse film as a caterer to spectatorial desire, as a picture that is hungry for sensation: "In those days, the exploitation films couldn't afford stars, they didn't have big budgets so they had to have 'exploitable elements' – things the other movies didn't have [...] the subject matter, the sex, or the action" (qtd in "Double Trouble", 128). The emphasis lies on speed, action, and immediate characters and, by extension, spectatorial satisfaction. Compared to *Kill Bill*, vengeance in *Death Proof* is drawn as less orchestrated and more immediate, but similarly concludes with the death of the patriarch at the hands of the avenger, as a punishment for an unjust act. The corpse that is produced (Stuntman Mike) rests on a plethora of previous corpses (the deceased girls) produced at his hands and, thus, emerges as a result of a repetition compulsion which, in the context of revenge, becomes expansive in the serial repetition of a previous wrong. With a strong emphasis on immediate gratification, the desire to avenge in *Death Proof* becomes predominantly carnal, which is reinforced through its staging of the trope of the devouring *machina dentata*.

The dynamics of a repetition compulsion that produces the corpse is written into the very fabric of *Death Proof* from the very beginning of the (double) feature. Designed as one part of a double feature, the story is also told in two parts. While Stuntman Mike manages to feed his desire to kill by means of his car – his phallic extension, which is overtly quoted as such throughout the film – he rams his death proof car into the girls in the first part, murdering all of them which is visualized as a grotesque fragmentation of the female body. It is this murderous act that comes to serve as the emotional legitimization of the second part, outlining the pre-

vious wrong to which the ensuing revenge fantasy becomes a (cyclically expanding) reaction. Aligning the consumption of food with the production of death, Stuntman Mike is initially introduced devouring a plate of nachos with distinct pleasure. Again, Tarantino emphasizes the notion of desire by means of paralleling a desire to kill with a desire to eat, as an entire minute is spent on Mike eating. Corporeality, plasticity, and physicality characterize not only the kinetic tangibility of the rugged grindhouse film, but also find their way into the film's overtly self-reflexive tone which adds an additional doubling of vengeful desires where, "corporeal and acoustic amputation become one in the prematurely terminated song that scores the dismemberment and deaths of the girls" (Coulthard, 4). The audible as a double of the visual emphasizes cinema as a material, kinetic experience, thereby highlighting the sensual reception of film, the content of which is simultaneously geared toward all of the senses.

As the second part of the narrative is introduced – "Lebanon, Tennessee – 14 months later" we are once again introduced to a new girl gang that Stuntman Mike has his sadistic eye on. A different state and a different girl gang, the repetitive doubling not only poses repetition, but implements the uncanniness of the doppelganger as a harbinger of death.[11] As the girl gang is presented, we learn that two women out of this new gang of four are stunt women. Stuntman Mike unknowingly not only comes to face with his own kind, but he will also come to be defeated by them in a heroic act as "[i]n the *Kill Bill* films and *Death Proof*, homicidal vengeance is heroism, and deliberate infliction of pain part of the package" (Walters, 21). It is not insignificant that it takes his own kind to defeat him as the motif of the stunt double as a trope carries further implications. The stunt double is the doppelganger of an 'original' actor who, rather than being an uncanny threat, is the more disposable copy of the original. Stunt doubles become a mise-en-abyme, taking on a danger themselves so that the original does not have to; they are the potentially expendable lesser original and simultaneous reminder of mortality. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the term "stuntman" as: "A person employed to take an actor's place in performing dangerous stunts". The stuntman does so in order to render the final product (i.e., the cinematic representation of a dangerous act) more believable in spite of its artificial nature. The commonality of the more ambiguous stunt *double* adds an additional layer of uncanniness to the term as the double, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, can be defined as "[a] person who looks exactly like another" but also as "[a] person who stands in for an actor in a film." While Kurt Russel is the actor in the film *Death Proof* who is being doubled, he also assumes the role of stuntman Mike; he becomes a mirror image of himself in himself, thereby simultaneously highlighting the plasticity or corporeality of the revenge fantasy as film as well as its stance as a mirrored illusion, as a mere aesthetic.

11 See Freud, "The Uncanny", 1916.

It is also in this second part of the picture in which the references to *Kill Bill* become almost farcically overt; a ringtone, a reference to the literal stunt double of Daryl Hannah, the color of the car which is reminiscent of The Bride's suit and which is decorated with a sticker that reads "Lil' Pussy Wagon" all foreshadow the looming female vengeance which is about to be catered to: a misconduct and ensuing revenge executed by women in the name of all of his presumed victims. While *Kill Bill* offered the meticulous planning of each step in the avenger's revenge, *Death Proof* highlights immediacy over perfection and, hence, instantaneous emotional gratification over reason. As Benjamin critiques: "[a]s regards man, he is impelled by anger, for example, to the most visible outbursts of a violence that is not related as a means to a preconceived end. It is not a means but a manifestation" (Benjamin, 248). *Death Proof* aligns itself more closely with the corporeal and physical, becoming a manifestation of said anger as desire which is hungry for quenching gratification. While *Death Proof*'s Zoë Bell was the stuntwoman for Uma Thurman's The Bride, it is also the yellow "lil Pussy Wagon" which then specifically quotes The Bride's iconic suit during her murderous avenging of O-Ren Ishii. The excessive referencing of *Kill Bill*, as well as the film's material placing of *Death Proof* in a position of a metaphorical stunt double of the *Kill Bill* saga, makes it feel like a more disposable copy of the original. This aspect further picks up on the grindhouse genre, operating with a smaller budget and, therefore, working with doppelgangers or stunt doubles in a leading role of an original feature. What is emphasized, by means of this mirroring, is the plasticity of kinetic corporeality in the form of vengeful desires, thereby adding tangibility to the aestheticization of death that in itself caters to murderous desire. The revenge narrative's seriality continuously produces the corpse while a focus on kinematic plasticity renders it seemingly tangible with the trope of the *vagina dentata* as *machina dentata* echoing a specific appetite for revenge.

Expanding on this dynamic, while *Kill Bill* legitimized female violence by means of a reappropriation of the feminine and domesticized space of the kitchen, *Death Proof* employs a reverse structure, claiming the traditionally male gendered machine as a female tool of weaponry. Both films employ the trope of the *machina dentata* as a carrier of vengeful desires. Before being attacked by Stuntman Mike, the stunt girls, hungry for adrenaline, play a stunt termed "Ship's Mast". As Joshua Clover elaborates:

> […] the '69 Dodge Charger and '70 Dodge Challenger should have gotten points on the gross. Several human characters are (and are played by) professional stunt artists, a craft which highlights the objectizing of bodies; the cars are obviously their next of kin. Though the film's lesson is brutal, the central stunt, known as "Ship's Mast" (wherein Zoë Bell straps herself to the windshield by means of Prada belts), seems to involve actually trying to have the same experience a car has […] (6)

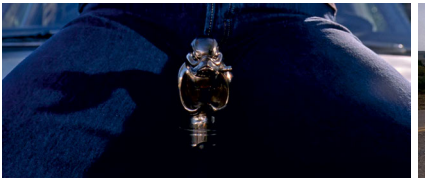
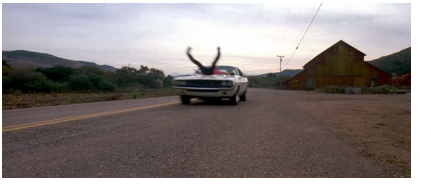
By conducting this stunt, they write themselves into the fabric of the machine, and expanding on the metaphorical ship, not only become captains of the vehicle but an extension thereof. The hood ornament, a little duck on top of Stuntman Mike's car, which is aligned with his phallic power, is then mirrored and re-conceptualized with the girls' car while the two race each other in a life or death battle.

Illustrations 11 & 12: Car ornament doubling, Death Proof


Not only are they gendering the original car from *Vanishing Point* into a *machina dentata*, one driven and ridden by a woman, it is also Zoë Bell, the real life stuntwoman who is portraying herself in the film, who becomes the girls' literal hood ornament. The girl gang, in conducting their revenge, literally double Stuntman Mike's masculine space to then overcome or overwrite it by means of killing him. Performing vengeance, they repeat his wrong and, in so doing, produce him as a corpse.

Their respective vehicles become synecdoches of their physical potency,[12] which doubles the plasticity of the grindhouse film itself, thereby also rendering the girls' car as a literal pussy wagon, or *machina dentata*, on which Zoë herself becomes the ornament. This dynamic of gendering the machine is mirrored by Stuntman Mike's car which is drawn as his phallic desire throughout the film:

Illustrations 13 & 14: Ornament alignment with genitalia, Death Proof

12 The conflation of man and machine also hints at the technological reproductivity that is inherent in the structure of the revenge plot.

Upon recovering from his first attack, the unnamed Sheriff suspects Stuntman Mike of being a diabolical man, calling his urge to kill women by means of his death proof car "a sex thing". This is a suspicion that is confirmed in the second part, when Stuntman Mike chases the girl gang in a euphoric haze, yelling: "Wanna get hot?" The sexual innuendo is further continued in the role reversal in which the girls come to chase Stuntman Mike. During the extensive car chase, their immediate revenge, a spontaneous decision, is motivated by emotional gratification; Zoë asks: "wanna go get him?" to which Kim replies: "oh hell yes," which Abby concludes with "fuck that shit. Let's kill this bastard". The immediacy with which they follow their desire is rendered even more libidinal when Kim comments on hitting Stuntman Mike's car with: "Oh you know I can't let you go without tapping that ass". In a gruesome and cathartic fist fight, the girls murder and symbolically overkill the object of their vengeful desires; this serves to emphasize the emotionally driven nature of revenge and its direct connection to gratification.

In the manner of what has been termed Hollywood's *new brutality* or *ultraviolence* which, according to Coulthard, proposes that "[…] the postmodern detachment, the lack of affect, and the ironic distance that are seen to characterize contemporary cinematic ultraviolence" ("Torture Tunes", 1). She further isolates Tarantino as an icon and the arguable "principal originator" of the aforementioned *new brutality* which results in the "uncomfortable mixing of violence with humor" ("Torture Tunes", 1–2). This also places violence within the realm of the carnivalesque, which is governed by a transcendent exchange of the rational for either the irrational or for the libidinal. Elaborating further on *new brutality*, Coulthard explains: "this kind of ironic representation of on-screen graphic film violence in the last two decades of American cinema has been characterized as evincing a new atmospheric and aesthetic cinematic trend toward cynical, dystopic, extreme, and explicit violence" ("Torture Tunes", 1). The staging of the production of the corpse as such highlights the film's materiality and, by extension, the revenge carried out as a more graspable aesthetic. Read as a metaphorical stunt double of *Kill Bill*, *Death Proof* performs a dangerous act in lieu of the original, adding plasticity to that same dangerous act which caters to a more instantaneous gratification of vengeful desires, thereby highlighting its libidinal quality.

As Coulthard further elaborates, in terms of torture tunes, the score in Tarantino is often designed to break with any remaining debris of a cinematic illusion of reality, instead highlighting the kinetic, physical materiality of film itself:

> As a result of all of these factors, music works to frame extreme violence in Tarantino films in a way that recognizes and emphasizes its highly libidinal, affective nature and effect while simultaneously derealizing that violence, defusing its threat, and controlling its impact. ("Torture Tunes", 3)

It is then also the proverbial tunes that accompany the end credits of *Death Proof* – Aprilmarch's "chick habit" – which draws on the image of gluttonous desire, urging "Daddy" to "hang up the chick habit," aligning the presumably female victims of this habit with chickens, placing the desire to kill within a framework of food. The analogy between victim and consumption is further drawn on as the tune elaborates: "A girl's not a tonic or a pill [...] No candy in your till, No cutie left to thrill". The song further expands this notion with regards to the avenger when it states that: "I'm telling you it's not a trick, Pay attention, don't be thick, Or you're liable to get *licked*", the liability to "get licked" pointing towards the desire to devour vengeance as well as aligning violence with the consumption of food. The final tune meta-cinematically brings the film, as well as its carnal portrayal of revenge, to a close by consolidating the brutal and instant revenge that the girls executed, thereby placing it within a realm of deserved gratification which: "[...] give[s] the spectator a permission to enjoy – an authorization that domesticates the audiovisual violence, renders it isolated, controllable, and slightly unreal" (Coulthard, "Torture Tunes", 4). When read alongside the more meticulous orchestration of revenge formulated as the preparation of a meal that we find in *Kill Bill*, then, the reading of *Death Proof* as its stunt double highlights the plasticity or carnality of vengeful desire, which is allowed to roam more overtly in the "disposable" and lesser original. Both *Death Proof* as well as the *Kill Bill* saga draw revenge as a physical, carnal desire, one that is aligned with the preparation and consumption of a meal and this taps into its overt simplicity as a personally codified repetition. The characters themselves remain overtly one-dimensional, consumed by their desire to kill, because:

> Tarantino's characters are drawn as blatant caricatures and often remain largely one dimensional. This lack of depth, however, allows them to become exclusive hunters of their desires. They often have but one appetite which they incessantly follow until it can be quenched. (Botting & Wilson, 13)

In both *Death Proof* and the *Kill Bill* saga, the one-dimensionality of the characters underlines the way in which the revenge narrative allows for these characters to be consumed by their desire to avenge. Becoming pure avengers, it is through these one-dimensional characters that the concept of revenge is epitomized as a powerful repetition compulsion of murderous agency that actively produces the corpse in order to achieve gratification. Making use of the revenge narrative's cathartic dynamism, Tarantino also positions the specifically female avenger as a murderous agent, thereby challenging gender conventions regarding violent behavior. Reading the *Kill Bill* saga in adherence to the serial television cooking program and *Death Proof* as its metaphorical stunt double not only highlights the way in which the revenge narrative allows for a rehabilitation of female violence, but also the way in which the cyclical machinery of revenge becomes serially expansive. The revenge narrative is dominated by the reactive and exponential production of the corpse and is always

preceded by a violent act. It is these corpses, in the form of an aestheticized abject death, that come to satisfy the avengers' desire in a serial spiral that caters to the American cultural imaginary's insatiability.

3.2 Reimaginations of History as Collective Vengeance: *Inglourious Basterds* and *Django Unchained*

> To write something down doesn't make it true. But the history of truth is lashed to the history of writing like a mast to a sail.
> *Jill Lepore, These Truths*

Tarantino's *Inglourious Basterds* as well as *Django Unchained* both tackle a collective wrong which is to be avenged by means of a reimagination of its history, thereby expanding on the individual revenge narrative, the personal vendetta. In "Debating Inglourious Basterds", Ben Walters observes that: "[…] without much thought for the reality of war, [Tarantino] saw here an opportunity to map his pet plot of female revenge onto an interesting genre" (19). A film which was received with ambivalent tonality, Tarantino's "cavalier revisionism" (Walters, 19) in *Inglourious Basterds* offers the alternative execution of Adolf Hitler and the implied destruction of the Third Reich, a reimagination which feeds into a real communal desire and which mirrors the subsequent *Django Unchained*, which produces the African American body as a Western hero. Both purely fictional re-tellings of history, I propose a reading of *Inglourious Basterds* as a mirrored version and metaphorical stunt double of *Django Unchained*. Not just a remapping and expansion of the female revenge plot, these two films seem to employ a similar relationship as *Death Proof* does with the *Kill Bill* saga, in which one becomes the stunt double of the other, thereby performing a dangerous act in order to hone in on the subsequent original to perfection, adding a tangible plasticity to the repetitively expansive act of vengeance.

Inglourious Basterds spatially distances itself from the United States, but simultaneously problematizes the Holocaust as a screen memory for American trauma; in "Bastardized History: How Inglourious Basterds Breaks through American Screen Memory", Stella Setka discusses this notion, outlining that "[…] the Holocaust has been transformed in the United States from a specifically Jewish trauma into a broadly defined mainstream American experience" (142). This is a reading which is confirmed by Peter Novick who observes that "[…] the Holocaust has come to be presented – come to be thought of – as not just a Jewish memory but an American memory" (207). While the personal vendetta remains tied to the individual, vengeance that hinges on the collective bears the question of ownership regarding

trauma; this is something which is inherently tied to the question of who is allowed to avenge this trauma. The titular 'Inglourious Basterds', according to Setka, "call […] attention to American culture's appropriation of Holocaust memory through its conflation of Jewish and American identities in the elite fighting unit that gives the film its title" (142). A blatant Americanization of the Holocaust, therefore, calls the legitimization of vengeful desire into question by questioning the traumatized collective and its execution of righting a wrong. I say blatant here because my proposition of reading *Inglourious Basterds*, as a literal bastardization of the Holocaust as an American trauma, allows the film to become the metaphorical stunt double for *Django Unchained*, which addresses the specifically American trauma of slavery. In this sense, the "[…] sadistic bloodlust of his Jewish avengers [which] is as unsettling as his revisionist chutzpah is disarming" (Walters, 19) in *Inglourious Basterds* performs an initial dangerous act without harming the "original" trauma. Reading these films as fragmented mirror images further illustrates the way in which they both employ the same narratological structure, one governed by a vengefully motivated repetition compulsion that produces the corpse as an act of gratification. Emphasizing the expansive dynamism of revenge, both films also diegetically double the revenge narrative, interweaving the personal vendetta with the collective avenging of a trauma. Positioned as chronological mirror images of one another, the films become a logical continuation of the cathartic collective revenge fantasy that is played through.

In *Inglourious Basterds*, Shoshanna Dreyfuss becomes the nexus of vengeful desire as she combines the personal vendetta and the collective trauma at stake. Her direct opponent and the primary object of her individual vengeful desire is Colonel Hans Landa with whose introduction the film opens. He is "[…] the film's arch villain, the murderous "Jew Hunter" […], an SS officer whose sole responsibility, as his nickname indicates, is to hunt down Jews and ensure their destruction" (Setka, 155). Describing himself to Aldo "the Apache" Raine, leader of the Basterds, Landa euphemistically compares himself to "a damn good detective. Finding people is my specialty." However, while the detective traditionally seeks a murderer, a quest which is only triggered by a corpse, Landa finds those who (according to his ideology) deserve to be killed and in his quest, he produces the corpse rather than the corpse's retribution. Similar to *Death Proof*'s stuntman Mike, Landa's desire to produce death is immediately associated with the consumption of food in the opening scene. As he asks for a second glass of "this delicious milk" during the opening at LaPadite farm, it becomes evident that Landa is thirsty, thirsty to kill. This element is reinforced by his repeated request for a second glass of milk right before killing the hidden Dreyfuss family and before allowing Shoshanna to escape.

This analogy between eating and killing is highlighted throughout the film, where Landa is prominently drawn as a *foodie*, "[a] person with a particular interest in food; a gourmet" (OED), his gluttonous desires usually appearing alongside a

subsequent murderous rampage. The scene that follows his apparent insatiable thirst for milk is the elimination of the Dreyfuss' family members, who have been hiding beneath the floorboards, a murderous act from which Shoshanna Dreyfuss will come to be the sole survivor. It is this act that provides the film with the underlying evil or wrong that will be made just through an act of revenge. Transforming the previous wrong into an ongoing quest for vengeance, the visualization of this brutal act serves as the legitimization of Shoshanna's eventual destruction of her cinema, filled with Nazis at the time, an act which history renders satisfactory to the spectatorial gaze, as:

> […] *Inglourious Basterds* reminds us through its postmodern self-reflexivity, Holocaust films, like any other commodity, are created to fulfil a market demand; their content is often tailored to meet the desires of a majority of the viewing public and thus may not always be shaped by a sense of fidelity to verifiable historical knowledge. (Setka, 148)

Collective trauma, then, is incorporated by murderous SS officer Landa who is prominently shown as being quite insatiable. Years later, Landa unwittingly meets Shoshanna again, who has taken on a new identity as Emmanuelle Mimieux adding significance to his previous departing words "Au Revoir". During a scene that is built on tangible dramatic irony, he orders her "un verre de lait" an immediate reminder of her personal trauma, the murder of her family which was framed by his unquenchable thirst for milk. When he urges her to "attendez la crème" to perfect her experience when eating the apple strudel, he is again aligned with the consumption of food, onto which her trauma is superimposed; his hunger for death is to be avenged by means of her own desire to repay his wrong which emerges as a just act in the face of his unjust behavior.

Read as an expansion on the female revenge plot, as well as a displaced screen memory for American traumata, the image of *machina dentata* crafted as a specifically American trope for the previously outlined *death paradox* is not missing in *Inglourious Basterds*, but is instead adapted to the spatial displacement of American trauma. The *machina dentata* as a carrier of narrative becomes a linguistic expansion into the realm of the living, its productive potency catering to an appetite for the production of the aestheticized corpse. The machine, as an extension of vengeful desires within the European setting of *Inglourious Basterds*, does not manifest as a car but is instead reconceptualized as a displaced lens within Shoshanna's film projector. Implemented as screen image, it becomes the literal projection of American trauma onto a geographical displacement as the diegetic film projector is framed as the machinic extension of (female) vengeful desires. On European soil, cinema itself as a powerful tool for displacement becomes the *machina dentata* in the form of Shohsanna's film, which itself is a reimagination of the Nazi picture "Der Stolz der Nation," the ending of which she literally changes. Upon planning her murderous re-

venge, she decides with determination that "[n]ous allons faire un film", mirroring Tarantino's own filmmaking in which kinetic materiality is used in order to exhaust trauma.

While the framing parallels 35mm film and its flammability with ammunition, it is also the literal film material which becomes the ammunition of Shoshanna's revenge. This doubling of cinematic materiality continues the cooking metaphor; as Walters outlines, "[…] cinema provides not only incidental references: it is also the meat of the plot" (20). In *Inglourious Basterds*, then, it is the materiality of film itself that is used to execute vengeful desires which, in turn, also emphasizes a collective striving for vengeance, one mirrored in spectatorial desire:

> When it comes, the story's climax is as blunt an assertion of the phantasmagorical power of cinema as the medium has ever delivered. Shosanna and Zoller kill each other but are resurrected as filmic images – themselves agents of death – before flames consume the screen and then the audience.
> What remains is a weird form of film as fatal dominatrix, a close-up of Shosanna projected onto smoke – the giant face of the chapter's title – laughing as her viewers burn. (Walters, 22)

Illustration 15: Shoshanna engulfing screen, Inglourious Basterds

While Shoshanna has died, and the picture rests on her abject corpse, she also continues to live on screen as a pure image in the alternate ending of "Stolz der Nation" which she has made and which begins to roll. "I have a message for Germany" she says as a close-up of her determined gaze captures the audience and she continues, "[t]hat you are all going to die." Locked inside the movie theater, the audience is unable to escape the flames which slowly engulf the screen and begin to transgress the screen burning through the entire auditorium. Engulfing Shoshanna's face, the flames wrap her victorious laughter and literally devour the picture; an image be-

comes a fitting metaphor for the motif in which the trauma of the Holocaust is consciously instrumentalized as screen memory for another, displaced traumata:

> […] in the Freudian sense, covering up a traumatic event – another traumatic event – that cannot be approached directly. More than just an ideological displacement (which it is no doubt as well), the fascination with the Holocaust could be read as a kind of screen allegory behind/through which the nation is struggling to find a proper mode of memorializing a trauma closer to home. (Hansen, 113)

A domestic trauma is tackled in *Django Unchained* in which, according to Tarantino, spatial displacement is substituted for a specifically American traumata:

> I want to explore something that really hasn't been done. I want to do movies that deal with America's horrible past with slavery and stuff but do them like spaghetti westerns, not like big issue movies. I want to do them like genre films, but they deal with everything that America has never dealt with because it's ashamed of it, and other countries don't really deal with because they don't feel they have the right to. (Interview with John Hiscock)

There are numerous allusions to traumata in American history throughout *Inglourious Basterds*, such as Raine's native American roots, exemplified in his nickname "the Apache" about whose historical background Tarantino has stated: "Aldo has been fighting racism in the South; he was fighting the Klan before he ever got into World War II. And the fact that Aldo is part Indian is a very important part of my whole conception […]" (Interview with Ella Taylor), or Goebbels' extensive rant on American Olympic superiority exclusively by means of the athletic black body. This discourse is epitomized in the Basterd's "name game" during which a small band of Basterds, disguised as Nazi officers alongside German actress and double agent Bridget von Hammersmark, are roped into conversation with German Major Hellstrom. During the game, Hellstrom specifically addresses the American trauma of slavery. He has to find out whom the identity written on the card taped to his head belongs to – it reads King Kong – by means of asking a series of questions. After establishing that 'his' origins are exotic he inquires: "When I went from the jungle to America, did I go by boat? […] Did I go against my will? […] On this boat ride, was I in chains? […] When I arrived in America, was I displayed in chains? […] Am I the story of the Negro in America?" which Bridget von Hammersmark dismisses as wrong and to which Hellstrom then replies: "Well then I must be King Kong." Implementing these strong citations of specifically American history, or rather traumata, underlines the status of *Inglourious Basterds* as a metaphorical stunt double of the subsequent *Django Unchained*.

It becomes evident that just as *Death Proof* may be read as *Kill Bill*'s stunt double, this dynamism of a visual repetition compulsion emerges again when comparing

Inglourious Basterds to *Django Unchained*. As the metaphorical stunt double, *Inglourious Basterds* is rougher in the sense that it displays a spatial detachment, one which allows the performance of a dangerous act that is then honed to perfection in *Django Unchained*. Once again crafted in Tarantino's signature revisionism, the film refigures the specifically American collective trauma of slavery as a revenge narrative. Tarantino himself stated: "I think America is one of the only countries that has not been forced . . . to look [its] own past sins in the face. And it's only by looking them in the face that you can possibly work past them" (Interview with Henry Louis Gates Jr, 194). The film's opening gaze focuses on the mutilated black body as we see the scarred backs of a row of slaves, among whom wanders Django, exposed. What is front and center is the American trauma of slavery, but also an immediate visualization of the wrong, the injustice which creates an appetite for the avenging thereof. Both films, *Inglourious Basterds* as well as *Django Unchained*, remain formulaic in that they employ the structure of the revenge narrative which, as we know, leans heavily on the previously outlined food analogy in its visualization. Both films tackle a collective hunger for setting a wrong right by means of executing ideologically codified and serially expansive productions of the corpse towards a sense of gratification that is inherently tied to the dynamism of revenge.

From the very beginning, the film hints at a traumatizing past that exercises a firm grip over Django's future revenge. The film rolls its opening credits in thick red letters on a beige canvas, making an immediate reference to the Western genre as "[t]he red letters of the opening sequence quote classic Westerns of the 1950s like John Ford's *The Searchers*; the accompanying zooms are lifted right out of a 70s Western" (Bronfen & Daub, 2). In making a clear statement that this film adheres to a Western genre, one conventionally dominated by a white male hero, Tarantino immediately opens the debate of African-American writer Toni Morrison's "critical project", initially raised in *Playing in the Dark*, which aims at challenging the conventions of the white male hero via inclusion of the marginalized Africanist perspective: "I intend to outline an attractive, fruitful, and provocative critical project, unencumbered by dreams of subversion or rallying gestures at fortress walls" (3). Tarantino does so by subverting the genre and by choosing an African American hero, called Django no less, named after Sergio Corbucci's 1966 Spaghetti Western *Django*. Within the frameset of the opening credits of *Django Unchained*, we not only learn that the year is 1858 but also the (now yellow) letters on a black canvas inform us that the film is taking us to a time "Two years before the Civil War". This framing places a particular emphasis on the Civil War as a historical landmark as well as the re-imaginary nature of the film that explores an impossible past through the lens of the future as an attempt to process the trauma caused, in much the same way as *Inglourious Basterds* reimagined Second World War era Germany. In the same manner as *Inglourious Basterds, Django Unchained* hinges on a twofold structuring of vengeful desires. While it sets up a basis for Django's personal vendetta, and quest for

his wife Broomhilda, it also addresses the collective trauma of slavery in the United States. With regard to Morrison's previously mentioned claim in *Playing in the Dark*, Tarantino's *Django Unchained* may be regarded as such a reimagination of white male literature. The manifestation of Django's trauma is then, arguably, brought to life by Calvin Candie's master slave Stephen, who embodies everything Django despises, but that he is unable to overcome. The fact that he cannot escape Stephen, but is instead pushed to his limits by this character, reinforces the notion that Stephen not only serves as the story's villain story, but that he more importantly becomes Django's uncanny double; the personified trauma that Django has yet to overcome and in overcoming is also avenging for himself as well as for the community more generally.

After Django is *unchained* by Dr. King Schultz, at the very beginning of the film, the pair become bounty hunters which foreshadows Django's eventual revenge. Their ensuing partnership as bounty hunters is based on a commodification of the dead as Schultz himself states that he: "deals in corpses", elaborating on his occupation which "like slavery [is] a flesh for cash business". Against the backdrop of the American South in 1858, the bounty hunter business is further woven into a dynamic of revenge when Django inquires: "You kill people, and they give you a reward? [...] bad people?" to which Schultz replies: "[the] badder they are the bigger the reward," the obvious implication here is that these bad people deserve to be killed as punishment for their bad deeds and this feeds into Benjamin's aforementioned secret admiration of the criminal. This glorification of murderous agency is possible because it is built upon the grounds of collective trauma and the resulting collective vengeful desire generates gratification through the production of the corpse. For Schultz, and by extension for Django, it becomes possible to (ab)use the symbolic order to achieve vengeance as he acts as a killer in the form of "legal representative of the criminal justice system of the United States of America".

Illustration 16: Alignment with tooth on carriage, Django Unchained

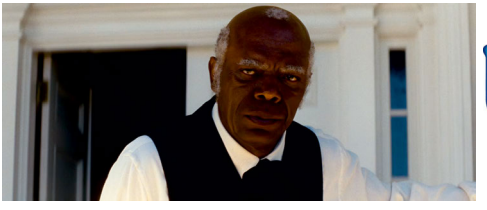
Killing becomes their literal occupation as they roam the Southern wasteland in Schultz's carriage, crowned by a tooth, a remnant of his previous occupation as a dentist. Schultz's carriage is also reminiscent of the previously proposed *machina dentata*, the American reappropriation of gluttonous (specifically female in previous films) hunger for death, a physical manifestation of the internal desire to kill or, read against the hunger analogy, to devour as literalized by the synecdochical mouth; it is also the dynamite in the tooth that eventually destroys a large part of the followers of plantation owner "Big Daddy". This notion is further epitomized in the framing of Django alongside the carriage. A metaphor for Django's individual as well as America's collective trauma, the tooth overshadows Big Daddy's farm; it is guided by King Schultz, Christoph Waltz's celebrity image is not only being reminiscent of Hans Landa but further also becomes a transcendent carrier of World War II trauma. While in *Inglourious Basterds*, Landa claimed that he "wouldn't want the success or failure of [Hitler's] illustrious evening dependent on the prowess of a Negro", Waltz returns as Schultz in order to aid the avenging of African American slavery. The carriage then, read as *machina dentata*, similar to *Kill Bill*'s Pussy Wagon, *Death Proof*'s 70s Dodge Challenger, as well as Shoshanna's movie projector becomes a manifestation of lethal desire which is drawn along by a notion of food consumption. The pair's bounty hunting is conducted in concordance with Hollywood *ultraviolence*; killing becomes a source of money and a quencher of a murderous appetite, as Django finds himself intrigued with the proposed partnership by Schultz, stating: "kill white folks and they pay you for it? What's not to like?" Paralleling lethal desires with the consumption of food becomes even more explicit at the proverbial farm 'Candyland', where Calvin Candie orders hounds to be let loose on a runaway slave. Both Django and Schultz are bystanders as the starved dogs rip the accused runaway slave apart and eat away at his flesh. To Candie's query with regards to Schultz's obvious discomfort at the scene, Django replies: "he just ain't used to see dogs ripping a human apart […] I'm just a little more used to Americans than he is", placing a hunger for death within a specifically American framework, marking the European as other. This notion is further reinforced as it will be flickering images from this scene that will later come to haunt Schultz in a number of flashbacks that eventually trigger him to kill – or to eat a piece of – Candie, admitting that he too, eventually fell to gluttonous temptation as he states: "I couldn't resist".

With Calvin Candie avenged at Schultz's hands, it is the character of Stephen that becomes a catalyst for Django's final revenge, in which the mere reconciliation with his wife does not suffice to feed his desires; instead, Candyland and anyone who is associated with it has to die. His vengeance is conducted for both himself and the community, given that it is based on both personally and collectively perceived wrongdoings. Django mirrors *Inglourious Basterds*' Shoshanna in his final vengeance and weaves together the personal vendetta with collective vengeance. While collective trauma haunts both films, the personal vendetta feeds more deeply into the

avenger's desires and audience's appetite. The sparingly, but crucially, embedded flashbacks remind us of the avenger's mistreatment and, therefore, keep the emotional charge tense; this in turn seems to legitimize the ensuing vengeance that is screened in the fashion of Hollywood's *new brutality*. We want to see the evildoers bleed, and in re-visioning the past, *Django Unchained* is a conscious staging of physical, carnal anger and the resulting bloody revenge from a conscious contemporary perspective. The film overtly states that it is looking back and, while *repeating* is simultaneously staging a past that is taking the present into consideration. This is indicated by means of formal aspects such as the obvious references to the Western genre as well as the captivity narrative and further, the inclusion of a contemporary rap song "100 Black Coffins" by Rick Ross, who lends a tune to a crucial occurrence within the film all of which turn the film into a postmodern collage by marking its contemporary revisionist perspective.

With regard to the manifestation of the object of revenge, in this case epitomized by Stephen, Tarantino again establishes a further proximity to food. Stephen may not only be seen as an embodiment of Django's trauma, but also as a generic embodiment of slavery itself. Taking the view that Tarantino makes use of various postmodern references throughout his oeuvre into account, it can hardly be denied that Stephen shares a striking similarity to the iconic rice brand icon "Uncle Ben's":

Illustration 17 & 18: Unlce Ben's reference, Django Unchained



While the reference to Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is certainly prevalent, his blatant similarity to Uncle Ben also highlights the notion of food and, by extension, gluttonous desire. This is a motif that is extended to Stephen's female counterpart, female master slave Cora, who resembles Uncle Ben's female counterpart Aunt Jemima. While Uncle Ben provides rice, Stephen will come to feed Django's appetite for murder as a vengeful act. This notion is taken even further by means of former master slave "Ben", whose skull Candie presents at the dinner table in order to illustrate pseudoscientific evidence for African American predisposed submissiveness. As Candie ponders the question of why there is no uprising amongst the slaves, he simultaneously aligns Ben with the blade of a knife

– something that epitomizes both eating and killing: "old Ben would shave my Daddy with a razor […] if I was Ben I have cut my Daddy's throat". If we accept the reference to Uncle Ben, the death (or rather the desire to kill) is once again aligned with the consumption of food. This highlights the libidinal character of both; eating and killing become corporeal desires when governed by temptation.

Django Unchained, which celebrates Django as a Western hero, instrumentalizes contemporary cinema in order to revisit and to reimagine the Civil War and the repressed collective trauma that it caused. Its revisionist character elevates the film from action-filled entertainment to emotionally charged political questioning. As Bronfen and Daub state:

> More so than in any of his previous films, Tarantino seems vexed by the tropes he is repeating and by the very fact that he is repeating them. He outlines the terms of repetition, and he uses some of the itinerant – yet – static characters that guide Django's odyssey to do it in a quest narrative that refuses all conciliation. (3)

Tarantino seems to follow in Morrison's footsteps in her quest for recognition, as outlined in *Playing in the Dark*: "[…] such knowledge assumes that the characteristics of our national literature emanate from a particular "Americanness" that is separate from and unaccountable to this [African American] presence." (5) With *Django Unchained*, Tarantino challenges the established notion of the literarily established white male that Morrison observes. The film skillfully produces an African American Western hero and both recounts his captivity narrative and executes his personal revenge which is fueled by collective trauma. As Morrison sharpens her argument in *Playing in the Dark*, so too does Tarantino's probable intention to create a hero like Django:

> There seems to be a more or less tacit agreement among literary scholars that, because American literature has been clearly the preserve of white male views, genius, and power, those views, genius, and power are without relationship to and removed from the overwhelming presence of black people in the United States. […] The contemplation of this black presence is central to any understanding of our national literature and should not be permitted to hover at the margins of literary imagination. (5)

American literature has been governed by white male characters for an excessive amount of time, allowing only marginal space for any character that is not part of this demographic group. This convention is challenged in Tarantino's *Django Unchained*, which casts an African American hero in a Spaghetti Western that follows the guidelines of the archetypal captivity narrative. These narratives are commonly geared toward a final, cathartic purging by means of revenge. Tarantino revisits pre-civil war America and offers a strong African American hero protagonist who opposes a strong African American antagonist, thereby marginalizing the flat white

characters who, for once, are crammed into a corner and left there to vegetate and eventually cease to exist. Tarantino incorporates the Wagnerian reference of Broomhilda in order for this narrative to unravel which raises a damsel in distress notion, thereby allowing for our hero to become the savior. Challenging the more conservative literary history of white men in shining armor with the character of Django, Tarantino elevates the African American hero to the realm of Prince Charming, a role previously only occupied by white male characters. As stated in Bronfen and Daub, "[t]he question is of course who gets to strive and who wallows, and the answer is: usually white men strive, everybody gets to help, impede or inspire them" (1). Django's heroism transcends these archaic traditions since it is exclusively Django who is drawn as a rounded character, while both Dr. King Schulz and Calvin Candie remain flat: "They are harem eunuchs in the place of narrative: they keep things running smoothly, and there's no danger they'll develop any appetites or goals of their own that might inconvenience the man of the house" (Bronfen & Daub, 1). What remains central to the film is Django's appetite for revenge and the emotional gratification thereof through the production of the corpse.

In Stephen, Django finds his ultimate antagonist, a manifestation of that vengeful trauma which he has yet to overcome. Django Freeman is living the future of a free man; however, he remains metaphorically chained by his own trauma that keeps him from accepting his given freedom prior to facing his antagonist and, by murdering him, extinguishes the source of his suffering; he is facing a past that demands a re-memory as well as a reconfiguration of what happened. Despite Django's unlikely rise to freedom, it is, in the first instance, the spectral hallucination of Broomhilda that haunts his glorious ride into Candyland in which he assumes a position of (white) power uttering, for example, the following:

> [playing his role as a black slaver to the hilt] You niggas go' understand something about me! I'm worse than any of these white men here! You get the molasses out your ass, and you keep your goddamn eyeballs off me!

In this instant, Django is forced to play the role of that which he despises. He is not merely remembering his past, but reliving it from a different perspective in this particular scene, which then causes a re-memory and allows him to eventually exorcise the ghost of his traumatic past. In another moment, as a result of Django's immediate encounter with the manifestation and object of his vengeful hunger, Stephen, Django is put in a position which demands him to rememorize the past, while not reliving the experience of slavery, in order to overcome his individual trauma. In his quest to save his princess, Django is forced to remember his condemned past in order to avenge it and to find murderous redemption. Consequently, the fact that "Tarantino's film tells the story of a black man's quest in which every white face serves a simple narrative function" (Bronfen & Daub, 1) is established early on in the film, demanding the consideration of Django's trauma rather than a white man's trauma,

which is reinforced by Django's final showdown with the specifically African American personification of his haunting, Calvin Candie's master servant Stephen.

This implies that the core issue is centered on an African American trauma in which the white characters, Calvin Candie, Dr. King Schultz, and the washed-out Southern Bell Lara Lee Candie-Fitzwilly, become peripheral. As participants in Django's personal vendetta, they merely serve as one-dimensional supporting characters. As Bronfen and Daub state:

> Wandering, rootless, devoid of motivation beyond a general and unwavering beneficence, King Schultz is likely intended as a parody of those (frequently non-white) mentor characters that drift into and eventually out of the narratives of white folk, who offer them advice and encouragement, only to die when no longer necessary. […] Convention, not inner need, propels him in his support of Django's quest, and convention compels him to end his life. (2)

As becomes evident, *Django Unchained* is concerned with the African American characters rather than the typical white male characters who have switched places in this particular narrative. Crafted as a complex carrier of the (African) American trauma of slavery, Calvin Candie's most loyal servant Stephen's mindset appears to have become that of a plantation owner, rather than that of the not free or, in other words, that of being Candie's commodified property. The ensuing mutual contempt between Django and Stephen show how two characters are established as antagonizing doubles right from the beginning, as Calvin Candie states: "Let me at least introduce the two of you. Django, this is another cheeky black bugger like yourself, Stephen. Stephen, this here is Django. You two oughta hate each other." The immediate protagonist versus antagonist frame that is established here is necessary not only for the figuration of Django as Siegfried, but further elevates Django's final revenge into a quest of biblical proportions. On the one hand, Tarantino explores the violent acts that African Americans were subjected to by white Americans; on the other hand, the film explores the violence executed by African Americans on African Americans. As Bronfen and Daub observe:

> Tarantino now distinguishes between the cruelty, which white folk impose on their slaves simply as a matter of course and the violence with which these sadistic tormentors are justly punished. Violence visited upon blacks is treated altogether differently. (6)

Tarantino raises the complex issue of violence within Afro-Americanism by establishing an antagonizing doppelganger relation between Django and Stephen which becomes the nexus of the revenge plot. With Candie and Schultz marginalized and devoured by the narrative itself, Stephen and Django's death-match illustrates the epitome of the American Civil war finding a cathartic ending to the African American Siegfried's quest to save Broomhilda, thereby extinguishing his psychological

trauma, conducting gratifying revenge on both the level of personal as well as collective retribution.

This aspect is emphasized in the film's final minutes, during which Django urges the 'black folks' to leave, but asks Stephen to remain where he is: "Now, all you black folks, I suggest you get away from all these white folks. Not you Stephen – you are right where you belong". Stephen embodies that which Django loathes; however, he is also an embodiment of that which our African American hero finds within himself, especially in his quest which demands that he pose as a slave trader, a position that is traditionally occupied by a white male figure. The whiteness that Django sees and despises in Stephen is the whiteness that Django is forced to portray vis-à-vis Calvin Candie in order to avenge a collective wrong and to save his princess. Django comes to classify Stephen as 'white folk' based on his behavior during the film, given that Stephen is the one who not only exposes Django and Dr. Schultz's true intentions to Candie but who also intends to force him back into slavery once Django is captured, thereby taking pleasure in the idea that everything will be back where it belongs. Consequently, Stephen, despite being Candie's property, does not oppose the system but rather agrees with it after having achieved the status of confidant. Having climbed the hierarchical ladder, he desires to maintain the given rules in order to keep his position. Stephen, then, appears to value his position as house slave deeply, and betraying his kin, does not hold contempt for his master; rather, he feels only pure loyalty. It is this that marks misconduct vis-à-vis Django, which is to say that which serves as the justification of the revenge plot.

As Django's vengeance comes to a close, Tarantino leaves his audience with nothing more than utter darkness. The force of destruction is aligned with the quenching of a thirst for vengeance in which Candyland is completely extinguished:

> In Tarantino's world, the burning of Candyland, the destruction of all its assembled tropes and film-historical references enables Django and Broomhilda to ride off into the darkness of a night at the end of which a new dawn awaits them. and into a new film, one that would not have to repeat anything that came before it. They can leave the stage of this twilight world. For them there will be a tomorrow. (Bronfen & Daub, 5)

Django has fed his appetite and the narrative has metaphorically eaten away any remnants of vengeful desire as the hero rides into the unknown with his princess; what follows is a tabula rasa. Tarantino's *Django Unchained* attempts to remap a repressed past through the re-imagination of a traumata that has been endured. Tarantino chooses a path of destruction that adheres to the impossibility of his re-figuration of a historical past by making reference to the fact that *Django Unchained* is fiction after all and, in the manner of historiographic metafiction, "situate[s] itself within historical discourse without surrendering its autonomy as fiction" (Hutcheon, 194). With *Django Unchained*, Tarantino uses cinematic visual-

ization in order to create a hyperreality that challenges previous conventions and positions a transgressive hero at its center as the film obtains a pre-Civil War position which is reimagined from a contemporary standpoint. This particular dynamic allows for the film to not only gaze, but to become an active (albeit fictitious) agent within a reimagined history.

It becomes evident that the Tarantinian revenge narrative generally caters to a libidinal murderous appetite. The playful uncanniness of the mirror – or stunt double – which is written into these Tarantino films, portrays a plethora of aestheticized figurations of death, thereby further positioning each individual piece in relation to his other films. Inscribed throughout his oeuvre by means of overt doubling of character, set, cameo and score, the play with mirrors and the doppelganger within the framework of the *death paradox* highlights the fragmentation of the aestheticized figuration of death in its abject form which, in Kristeva's terms, remains opposed to the subjectivity of the I and hence threatens the boundary of the self's subjectivity. Embedded in the revenge narrative's structural repetition compulsion, the production of the corpse becomes emotionally codified and geared towards gratification. Resting on a previous wrong, the revenge narrative is inherently serial and develops as expansive, rather than conclusive, with vengeful murderous agency emerging as reactive. Catering to the avenger's appetite of as well as the audience, vengeance develops as a serial repetition compulsion to produce the corpse as a means for emotional gratification.

It is this quest for gratification that then manifests in the form of insatiability in these films. This aspect is visualized through an overt alignment of food metaphors alongside murderous desire. The proposed 'toothed machinery', the *machina dentata,* a variation of which is present in each of these films, becomes a fitting image for this libidinal and gluttonous vengeful desire. Vengeance is literally *driven* by emotion and manifests as an appetite or hunger to produce the corpse against the backdrop of the *death paradox*. The plethora of revenge narratives presented by Tarantino feature the concept of revenge as structurally serial and in which the aestheticizations of death it produces become plentiful; the revenge narrative writing an aestheticized corpse into the American cultural imaginary serves as a compensation for the absence created by abject death. The revenge plot is bound to continually double because it is structurally governed by the serial nature inherent in the concept of revenge, which is to say that it tends to *repeat* itself based on the fact that no matter how many corpses it produces, it simultaneously continuously produces another wrong that needs to be repaid. Like an appetite, the revenge narrative is marked by insatiability; it can never be conclusively satisfied. Instead, it constantly expands.

4. Ingesting the Corpse: The Cannibal's Taste for Death – *American Psycho* and *Hannibal*

He's a myth, a monster, a mortal man.
Scott McGrath, Nightfilm, Prologue

Before we begin you must all be warned.
Nothing here is vegetarian. Bon appétit.
Hannibal Lecter, Hannibal

If we accept the previously established *death paradox*, which builds on Foucault's "Language to Infinity" and suggests that the inability of language to grasp death results in an overt productivity of texts that either capture or consume imaginations thereof upon stagnation, then the proposition of the hunger metaphor governing this book exposes the American soul as being deeply riddled with murderous desires. In essence, there lies a killer at the root of the American soul, as asserted by the external British eye of novelist D.H. Lawrence who, in his reflection on James Fenimore Cooper, states that "[a]ll the other stuff, the love, the democracy, the floundering into lust, is a sort of by-play. The essential American soul is hard, isolate, stoic, and a killer. It has never yet melted" (68). Connecting this observation to the overt production of an imaginary that is not only haunted by its canvas, but also continually projects death onto it, the American soul is not only marked by a killer's isolate stoicism but, furthermore, seems inherently insatiable. It appears, then, that not only is there a murderous undercurrent to "all the other stuff", the love and democratic hope which characterizes an American optimism, is classified by Lawrence as mere "by-play"; the textual productivity of this murderous undercurrent is also classified by its relentless desire for more (death) which then manifests itself in the figure of the *serial* killer. In its cultural imaginary, American optimism comes to fetishize an American pessimism; this is a pessimism which seems eerily absent in the American narrative trajectory of the reiteration of the American Dream. This lack or absence comes to be over-compensated for in its cultural unconscious; specifically, in the literary depiction of the figure of the serial killer, someone who is compulsively plagued by an endless desire for more death.

Linnie Blake states that, "since the earliest days of the republic, the popular arts in America have displayed a lurid preoccupation with the figure of the murderer" (197). Consolidating her claim, she echoes the previously outlined proposition of seriality, adding the following nuance:

> The mass, multiple or serial killer has, moreover, been creatively deployed for some two hundred years as a means of articulating a sense of social dislocation and, specifically, as a means of examining the relation of the lone and often alienated individual to the purportedly democratic society that he or she inhabits. (197)

Blake roots this form of "social dislocation" in the inherent binary on the basis of which the American project is built: the tension between public and private which must be continuously negotiated by the American individual. In his seminal examination of American democracy, Alexis de Tocqueville repeatedly voices his bafflement at this binary, stating, for instance, that "[a]n American attends to his private concerns as if he were alone in the world; a moment later, he devotes himself to public affairs as if he had forgotten his own" (628), thereby teasing out the core paradox which haunts the American individual, the seemingly impossible maintenance of a balance between self-reliant individualism and community-driven public affairs. If the figuration not just of a killer, but of a *serial* killer, comes to articulate an American anxiety with regard to the binary opposition between the private and the communal geared towards a blatant prosperity which seems to disregard the killer's own "by-play", then what seems to be at stake is a form of lack (of death) which results in a serial desire for death, as desire, according to Lacanian psychoanalysis forms in "relation to a *lack*":

> Unlike a need, which can be satisfied and which then ceases to motivate the subject until another need arises, desire can never be satisfied, it is constant in its pressure, and eternal. The realisation of desire does not consist in being 'fulfilled', but in the reproduction of desire as such. ("desire", 38)

As outlined, desire, *per definitionem*, hinges not on its fulfillment, but in the reproduction of itself (i.e., in its own inability to be satisfied renders the nature of desire intrinsically serial). This serial aspect of murderous desire exposes the fact that it will remain eternally unfulfillable, which results not only in insatiability but in a conjoined incessant hunger for that which is perceived as lacking. What is amiss in the American narrative trajectory of optimism and prosperity is death, which then symptomatically (re-)appears in a plethora of figurations of the serial killer, or as Blake suggests, "[…i]t seems that threats posed to the cohesiveness and integrity of the American civic body were symbolically located in the figure of the mass or serial murderer" (198). In accordance with the claims outlined in previous chapters, Blake also locates the cornerstone of this deployment in the American Gothic, iso-

lating Charles Brockden Brown's *Wieland* as exemplary; this is a text which "set out to explore ideas of murderous criminality as a psychological dysfunction predicated on the individual's inability to reconcile personal perceptions with the democratically agreed empirical norms" (197). In this sense, the literary depiction of the serial killer comes to act out the irreconcilable American binary which was outlined by Tocqueville. If the fictional serial killer epitomizes an American psychosis, then the serial cannibal marks a refinement and literalization of this metaphor that places the focus specifically on that selfsame insatiability-turned-hunger. The fetishization of death, manifested in the cannibalistic devouring of the corpse, forms an additional pillar in this analysis that this chapter in particular will address by expanding on the American Gothic and its implications, which lay the cornerstone for the specifically American insatiability or hunger for death alongside its physical manifestation in the form of the zombie myth as well as the recipe-esque, formulaic serialization of murder in the form of revenge, as discussed in pervious chapters; the attempt to overcome death by means of its physical ingestion (i.e. cannibalism), given agency by the serial cannibal, a specific form of the serial killer who adequately literalizes the hunger metaphor.

The concept of fetishism offers a useful lens to read cannibalism as an unfulfilled desire for death. In its simplest form, the fetish mourns an absence which it overcompensates for by means of a substitute that fills the space of the original absence. In his essay "Fetishism", Freud contextualizes this in terms of castration and asserts that "[t]o put it more plainly: the fetish is a substitute for the woman's (the mother's) penis that the little boy once believed in and – for reasons familiar to us – does not want to give up" (153). Abstracting Freud's elaboration on castration, the fetish in its purest form denotes a form of disavowal of something conjoined with the excessive substitution by means of another. Freud ties this to the horror of castration which, in essence, is the horror of something valuable being taken away:

> When now I announce that the fetish is a substitute for the penis, I shall certainly create disappointment; so I hasten to add that it is not a substitute for any chance penis, but for a particular and quite special penis that had been extremely important in early childhood but had later been lost. (152)

In fetishizing, a memorial to desire itself is built as a form of substitute which redirects a desire initially formed towards an absence; overcoming said absence, towards which desire was initially directed, another object takes the place of a previously authentically desired one: "Something else has taken its place, has been appointed its substitute, as it were, and now inherits the interest which was formerly directed to its predecessor" (Freud, 154). In this sense, a memorial is built that not only honors its predecessor, but also compensates for its lack; in so doing, the attention which is brought to the fetishized object is overt because it carries a form of over-com-

pensation which obfuscates the disavowal of the initially desired, in addition to its intrinsic, inherited desire.

In *Fetishism and Culture: A Different Theory of Modernity*, Hartmut Böhme asserts that, ultimately, the fetish boils down to an absence or empty space: "After endlessly ploughing the field of fetishism, one seems to arrive back at […] the "empty space" that fetish occupies [which] can also be a wound[1], an absence, a negation, a hole, a lack, a vacuum […]" (359). Attempting to fill said vacuum, the fetish is manifested as a subject-object relationship in which the object is endowed with an unusual element of power; this can extend to the point where the subject can become completely engrossed by the object as "[t]he relationship to the fetish is therefore compulsive […] it functions, but it is a delusion; it is a consciously handled mechanism whose internal structure remains unconscious" (Böhme, 4–5). It is significant that the element of power ascribed to the object not only substitutes, but over-compensates, a loss or absence, thereby serving the purpose of protection and, more often than not, sexual gratification. This characterizes the relationship between fetishizer and fetishized as deviant, as "[…] 'fetishism' has been a term used to describe a corrupt relationship to objects […]" (Böhme, 4). The fetish marks a corrupt relationship which produces a memorial in lieu of an absence, filling the place of something that has been lost or is absent, which highlights the implication the fetish intrinsically carries; an act of *over*-compensation in which desire or "[..] interest suffers an extraordinary increase as well, because the horror of castration has set up a memorial to itself in the creation of a substitute" (Freud, 154). While recognized as a deviant (sexual) desire by the subject, according to Freud the fetish carries an erotic component which facilitates eroticism:

> For no doubt a fetish is recognized by its adherents as an abnormality, it is seldom felt by them as the symptom of an ailment accompanied by suffering. Usually they are quite satisfied with it, or even praise the way in which it eases their erotic life. (152)

It can be stated that the desire for the figuration of the serial killer exposes a lack of death in American optimism, which comes to fetishize death in lieu of this absence, by leaning on the trajectory of Lacanian desire and fetishism and theorized against the previously outlined symptom of the serial killer which comes to characterize the American cultural imaginary. While the fetish as such is already driven by over-compensation, it is significant to note here that death itself marks an absence and, in this sense, doubles the desire to fetishize. We find the literalization of this dynamic in the figure of the serial cannibal, which is marked not only by insatiability but further by

1 See chapter 5 for the development of this absence as wound in the context of the spectacular serial killer that Mark Seltzer theorizes as being rooted in *wound culture*.

a form of overcompensation of internalizing the corpse into the subject. Contextualized with cannibalistic desire, the fetish comes to mark an abnormal or corrupt relationship with the corpse, the corpse itself becoming the absence (of life) which is over-compensated for through the ingestion thereof. On a structural level, the implementation of a fictionalized serial cannibal fetishizing the corpse comes to place visibility on what is culturally absent and overcompensated for: the abject reality of corporeal demise.

If the fetish is rooted in eroticism, then the figure of the serial cannibal's agency can be seen as governed by said undercurrent of "eroticism" which, according to Georges Bataille, paradoxically, "is assenting to life even in death" (11). In the foreword to his seminal work *Erotism: Death and Sensuality*, Bataille claims that he does "[…] not think that man has much chance of throwing light on the things that terrify him before he has dominated them" (7), thereby making an argument for the necessity of dominance over terror. This form of dominion, according to Bataille, is tied to elevation and he goes on to state that "[…] man can *surmount* the things that frighten him and face them squarely" (7). Bataille further argues that erotic desire, with regard to death, is rooted in the fact that humans are:

> […] discontinuous beings, individuals who perish in isolation in the midst of an incomprehensible adventure, but we yearn for our lost continuity. We find the state of affairs that binds us to our random and ephemeral individuality hard to bear. Along with our tormenting desire that this evanescent thing should last, there stands our obsession with a primal continuity linking us with everything that is. (15)

In order to compensate for the yearning for our lost continuity, Bataille asserts that it is the eroticization of an intrinsically non-reproductive death that paradoxically results in continuity, thereby bridging the gulf which marks us as discontinuous: "This gulf is death in one sense, and death is vertiginous, death is hypnotizing. It is my intention to suggest that for us, discontinuous beings that we are, [eroticizing] death means continuity of being. […]" (13). By eroticizing death it becomes continuous, which exemplifies the desire to eroticize death and to fetishize the corpse. While death may highlight our discontinuity in isolation, it still reverses this aspect and places an emphasis on our continuity when it is tied to eroticism. The eroticization of death, the marker of an absence in itself, can only be sustained by means of the fetish which creates the illusion of continuity or immortality. Bataille goes on to solidify this notion by stating that, through its eroticization, the "[…] fear of death and pain is transcended, then the sense of relative continuity between animals of the same species […] is suddenly heightened" (99). Leaning on Freud's elaborations on the totem and the taboo in his argumentation, Bataille expands Freud's elaboration on touching the corpse as a palpability "[…] by which we are made aware of the surfaces and textures of objects" (Brillat-Savarin, 37) tying it to a desire for con-

sumption which he highlights as the next logical step: "If [Freud] goes on to discuss the taboo on touching the corpse he must imply that the taboo protected the corpse from other people's desire to eat it" (71). This marks the sense of touch as a predecessor of a desire for physical ingestion. As exemplified by Lacan, an excessive desire to surmount death can never be satisfied, however, thereby rendering the fetishization of the corpse perpetual, which is to say serial. While the corpse's tangibility may be protected by means of a culturally implemented taboo, Freud also outlines the desire to eat it as an epitomizing of mere touch, placing his finger on an insatiability, the literalization of which becomes he who cannot stop devouring the dead: the serial cannibal.

The figure of the 'cannibal' is defined as "[a] person who eats the flesh of other human beings," (OED) which, in broader terms, can come to denote "[a]n animal that feeds on flesh of its own species". In the form of agency, 'cannibalism' is "[t]he practice of eating the flesh of one's own species" (OED). The figuration of the cannibal can be seen as echoing the zombie as a reversal – while the zombie marks the dead craving life, the cannibal marks the living craving death; both are equally characterized by an incessant hunger. Reflecting on the symbolism of food in contemporary culture in *The Rituals of Dinner*, Margaret Visser comes to assert that "[s]omewhere at the back of our minds, carefully walled off from ordinary consideration and discourse, lies the idea of cannibalism – that human beings might become food, and eaters of each other" (3). Although it is "walled off", the idea of cannibalism still lurks beneath the surface of the culinary ritual, albeit, as previously outlined by Freud, carrying an almost universal cultural acknowledgment of taboo as Justin D. Edwards and Rune Graulund confirm in their examination of the grotesque:

> Dreadful, hideous and macabre, cannibalism is seen to be the taboo desire par excellence, for it breaks down artificial distinctions between the human and the animal […] and figures the flesh of the human body as meat. Such conceptions of human consumption blur the boundaries between civilization and savagery, not just in the discontents of civilization, but through a rupture in the relationship between self and other. (7)

Cannibalism, then, not only exposes the abject fear of consuming a corpse, but also that of being consumed by an agency enacting the fetishization of death through the ingestion of the corpse. Christina Lee quotes notorious serial killer and cannibal Jefferey Dahmer who stated that his compulsive agency was driven by a desire that transferred objectivity onto subjectivity, thereby allowing him to fetishize his victims: "My consuming lust was to experience their bodies. I viewed them as objects, as strangers" (105). The element of experience, as a form of identity formation, links back to the chapter on the figure of the zombie which brought the fact that compulsion seems inherently tied to a consumption geared towards the generating and

stabilizing of subjectivity to the fore.[2] The serial cannibal becoming the zombie figure's reversal translates to life consuming death in order to uphold the boundaries of one's subjectivity in which the consumption of the corpse becomes a form of generating stability for the (living) self. Consuming the dead, in this sense, paradoxically becomes an act of abjecting death by means of which the boundaries of subjectivity are reinforced.[3] As such, the repetitious killing and consumption of the deceased forms an act of identity formation for the American soul which, at heart, lies divided and therefore produces the figuration of the serial cannibal which becomes "[t]he cultural construction of the serial killer as yet another fetish commodity" (Lee, 106). Fetishizing death in the form of cannibalistic desire allows for the corpse to become nourishment, because "[…] in eating we experience a certain special and indefinable well-being, which arises from our instinctive realization that by the very act we perform we are repairing our bodily losses and prolonging our lives" (Brillat-Savarin, 53). At the same time, the physical ingestion of the dead shatters any previously established distance from the extreme and, in this form of approximation, literally internalizes the flesh of the dead into the living body; in this sense, this becomes a desired rehearsal of death through the body of another.

These cannibalistic desires, which seem so deeply cemented into the American cultural imaginary, find a voice in Bret Easton Ellis' notorious 1991 novel *American Psycho* as well as in Bryan Fuller's serial adaptation of Thomas Harris' novels *Hannibal*. While Ellis' iconic protagonist Patrick Bateman comes to fetishize death, triggered by the empty space which remains leftover following the achievement of an alleged self-perfectibility, he fetishizes by means of extreme violence and perverse sexuality. Nevertheless, it is, in fact, cannibalism towards which he is eventually driven, which ties him to Fuller's *Hannibal*, the protagonist of which can be read as the evolution of Bateman in which extreme violence and perverse sexuality come to be substituted by an elevation of erotic desire to the level of the high arts and ritualization. Hannibal Lecter is the productive repetition of Patrick Bateman, the evolution from cannibalistic savagery to cannibalistic sophistication. Both figures are serial cannibals whose agency is geared towards dominating the corpse in its synecdochical stance as death and mark different degrees of the fetishization of the corpse. *American Psycho* and *Hannibal* figure the serial killer as cannibal, albeit to different degrees, thereby literalizing an insatiable desire to consume death in which "[t]he serial killer experiences euphoric transgression through the medium of commodity consumption" (King, 122), a notion which Anthony King exemplifies with Warhol's *Diamond Dust Shoes*, with which he analogizes the serial killer, stating that "[l]ike the sleek and shiny shoes ranked in that picture, the serial killer represents a flattened

2 See chapter 2 for the way in which the consumption of the corpse is staged as nourishment and how this sustains the subjectivity of the zombie-as-protagonist in *iZombie*.

3 See Kristeva, "Approaching Abjection".

self-constituted in repeated acts of euphoric and commodified consumption" (122). In connection to *American Psycho*, this comes to denote that carnage becomes entertainment in Bateman's hyperreal pastiche world and that experimentation with the corpse is endowed with spectacle. When read against *Hannibal*, Lecter takes this aspect one step further; not only does he craft the corpse as entertainment, but he also elevates the carnality of the corpse to a level of the fine arts, cultivating cannibalism in the process. If Bateman marks the immediate carnality of cannibalistic desire which asserts itself in a form of tyranny as "[w]e have seen that physical desire is part of all sciences; it asserts itself in them with that tyranny which always characterizes it" (Brillat-Savarin, 41), then Lecter marks the refinement of such tyrannical cannibalistic desire by means of taste, "[…] a more cautious and prudent faculty although no less active one, has arrived at the same goal with a slowness which guarantees the lasting quality of its triumphs" (Brillat-Savarin, 41). The corpse in *Hannibal*, reminiscent of the American Gothic's Laura Palmer,[4] comes to signify "[a] grandeur, through its appearance of supreme authority, [which] may well bring to mind the great images of classical art" (258) which is consolidated in Lecter stating: "I transferred my passion for anatomy into the culinary arts" ("Sorbet"). These culinary arts lean on cannibalism which in turn rest rather uneasily with the composition of Lecter as a serial cannibal of sophistication, or taste, as "the taste for art becomes a method of consuming the life it fixes in time, and killing becomes a lunge to possess the ineffable of humanity that it destroys" (Bayman, 156). While the zombie was driven exclusively by savagery and needs, the sophisticated cannibal becomes a poet, driven by aesthetic desire. Bateman positions himself somewhere in between, marking an evolutionary development towards the cultivation of an American insatiability for death. Ultimately, whether cultivated or not, a compulsive cannibalistic desire in the figure of the serial cannibal comes to manifest the proverbial carnal appetite for death which is so inherently woven into the American cultural trajectory.

4 See chapter 1 for a detailed analysis of the way in which the genre of the American gothic features the corpse as an aesthetic moment in adherence to classical art.

4.1 Fetishizing the Corpse: Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho*

> Man goes constantly in fear of himself. His erotic urges terrify him.
> *Bataille, Erotism: Death and Sensuality*

> "Why, she wouldn't even harm a fly."
> *Norman Bates, Psycho*

The character of Norman Bates attempts to assert his/her harmlessness vis-a-vis the law at the end of Hitchcock's 1960 seminal film *Psycho* and we overhear Norman Bates' thoughts in the form of a voice-over voiced by his deceased mother who, having claimed his body, states that "she wouldn't even harm a fly". Intended to illustrate his/her benevolence, (s)he lets the fly calmly rest upon her hand. The scene is endowed with the symbolism of the fly as a harbinger of death; often associated with the corpse, and commonly read this way, the fact that Norma(n) Bates asserts his/her innocent nature by means of not swatting away death bears significance. The fly, in this sense, is reminiscent of Dickinson's "I heard a fly buzz – when I died" which places the fly into a chiasmic relation with the speaker's own demise in which death has become entangled with the buzzing of the fly. Leaning on this symbolism, the eponymous psycho of Hitchcock's film concludes the motion picture by rendering an American psychosis visible; while the American individual is fueled by an idea of hope which parenthesizes death, a myth upon which the American project is inherently built, the more deviant, psychotic American subject nevertheless allows death to rest upon his/her hand. The interruptive buzz of the fly, in this sense, becomes the position that death comes to obtain in the American project; the fly is embraced by the deviant subject, whereas the well-adjusted subject would swat it away.

Picking up not only on Hitchcock's title, but arguably also on the film's final claim, this dynamic is exemplified in Ellis' *American Psycho* which immediately shatters preconceived notions of optimism when its opening lines urge the reader to "Abandon all hope Ye who enter here" (3). While this might be a tale of an *American* Psycho, the opening lines place the focus on the flipside of optimism: the American *Psycho*(sis). Designed as a character study, the novel's style also unveils the superficiality of its protagonist's personality profile as "the recordings of empirical details [are] pushed to baroque extremes, while character, plot and epistemological and ethical commentary are reduced to fragments that seem even more unfinished and contradictory […]" (Leypoldt, 250). A collage of citations, the satire on the superficiality which ultimately seems to characterize the American Dream exposes an American psychosis, the other, dark side of the coin which appears to be such a deeply ingrained undercurrent in the American cultural imaginary.

Leaning on American literary tradition, Blake comes to a similar conclusion with regard to Brockden Brown's *Wieland*, often considered to be the first American novel. Published in 1798, the text is riddled with a gothic spectrality throughout and a sermonesque tone that eventually frames its protagonist as a murderer, and spectacularly so, as according to Blake:

> Wieland […] is effectively driven mad by voices in his head, voices that lead not only to a questioning of his hitherto idealistic vision of American social life but incite him to act out the murderous impossibility of his position as citizen of the new republic by taking a carving knife and purposefully butchering his wife and little children. Th[e] gory deployment of the figure of the murderer [becomes] a means of questioning ramifications of American-style democracy on ideas of selfhood […]." (198)

Wieland's murderous desires are a product of American idealism, in a similar fashion to *American Psycho*'s Patrick Bateman's violent fetish, which comes to represent the result not only of the American Dream, but of Emersonian self-perfectibility gone awry. The novel specifically places itself within the epitome of the American capitalist enterprise of Wall Street, a historical as well as geographical landmark, outlining a prosperity which has grown deeply infested with corruption by the beginning of the early 1990s. At the tender age of only twenty-seven, Bateman is figured as the handsomely tailored Vice President of investment bank Pierce & Pierce; wealthy, Harvard-educated, intelligent, he has molded his physical body to perfection and enjoys an impeccable reputation amongst his Wall Street peers. His lifestyle is lavish while his morals are conflicted as "[a] militantly conservative and *laissez-faire* mentality finds its staunchest supporter in the unapologetic Bateman" (Lee, 109). Once the excessive luxurious opulence that he indulges in on a daily basis fails to satisfy his insatiability for more, he begins to nurture his obsessive desires with exceedingly violent behavior, becoming "[…] the embodiment of a desire marked by an aesthetics of nothingness in which the act of consuming becomes in and of itself the necessity, that is, consumption for consumption's sake" (Lee, 114). These "aesthetics of nothingness" come to reveal a lack of substance that ties the character to the fetish in which, in the absence of the desired, there is compulsive substitution by means of an other. When there is nothing left to materialistically consume except for the human body, Bateman does exactly that. What begins as extreme sexual behaviour, which layers violence with eroticism, soon evolves into murderous agency, a form of aimless "[w]ilding [which] is defined as brutal, apparently motiveless attacks committed by malefactors on luckless strangers" (Simpson, 135). Philip L. Simpson ties this type of serial killing, which lacks direction, to the backdrop of American optimism in particular onto which the wilding serial killer inscribes his murderous fetish:

> In his individual assertion of violent control, the fictionalized serial killer remains recognizably American in ideologies both subversive and conservative. Thus, the serial killer is a socialized (even over-socialized) individual. For a multiplicity of reasons both accessible and inaccessible to others, the serial killer chooses to write an identity on the body politic through what came to be known […] in the 1980s as "wilding". (135)

Similar to the previously quoted Christina Lee, Simpson also identifies Bateman as both conservative as well as subversive with regard to his American ideologies. The balancing act between "individualism and patriotism" (Tocqueville, 628), the psychotic synthesis of private and communal prosperity, relies on a binary reciprocity that ultimately seems to produce death rather than life, over and against the irreconcilable tension between communal responsibility and Emersonian self-perfectibility.

The American project, which was initially constructed as an experiment in prosperity, rests uneasily on its parenthesis of death, thereby rendering its optimism *cruel*.[5] It is this absence of death that comes to be fetishized by the psychotic, murderous subject that this tension eventually produces. In "Consuming Cannibals: Psychopathic Killers as Archetypes and Cultural Icons", Joseph Grixti contemplates the celebrity status[6] that the serial killer has the ability to obtain within the American cultural imaginary and references the notorious Ted Bundy who "[…] seemed to epitomize many of the most cherished American notions of wholesomeness" (89) which eerily rings equally true for Patrick Bateman's profile. A symptom of the irreconcilable binary that governs American optimism, "[s]erial killers are […] fragmented subjects, emblematic figures indicating the rupture of the unitary subject under the pressures of modernity, particularly in an American context" (Baker, 129). It is thus, then, that the *American Psycho(sis)* results in an embodiment of a wilding serial killer, marking the isolate and un-meltable American soul which becomes the manifestation of Bateman's inner Norma(n) Bates.

Taking a second glance at the protagonist's name, within 'Bateman', we find not only a reference to Norman Bates but a further resemblance to Bob Kane's iconic comic book hero *Batman*. In the same vein as the character of Norman Bates, Batman also proposes an intrinsic doubling, as the vigilante alter ego of the successful upper-class billionaire Bruce Wayne. The name 'Bateman', then, is "uneasily positioned between the poles of "hero" and "villain" (Simpson, 150) and becomes a referenced double in itself which references two further doubles, Norma(n) Bates and Bruce Wayne's Batman. As such, the titular American psycho is placed not only

5 See introduction for a reflection on Lauren Berlant's *Cruel Optimism*.

6 See chapter 5 for an in-depth analysis of the way in which the American cultural imaginary figures the serial killer as spectacular, thereby endowing them with celebrity status.

within a duality but within a serial duality that comes to perfectly describe Patrick Bateman's social position as well as his surroundings; not only is he caught between two poles, at once the epitome of Emersonian self-perfectibility and simultaneously consumed by insatiable murderous desires, he is also the mere copy of previous characters and peers, a scavenger of referentiality, even metaphorically cannibalizing himself. It comes as no surprise, then, that one of the cultural references which is repeatedly quoted throughout the novel is Brian de Palma's 1984 film *Body Double*, towards which Bateman carries an almost mechanical attraction as he states that "[t]hen, almost by rote, as if I've been programmed, I reach for *Body Double* – a movie I have rented thirty-seven times […]" (Ellis, 112). This notion of mechanical copying can be positioned into context with Walter Benjamin's seminal "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility", in which Benjamin remains concerned with the authenticity or *aura* of a work of art when technology allows for its endless *re*production: "In even the most perfect reproduction, one thing is lacking: the here and now of the work of art – its unique existence in a particular place" (103).

In *American Psycho*, all of the characters depicted can be regarded as mechanical in this sense; drawn as an endless list of copies or reproductions, for which the original has been lost, and Bateman in his name alone comes to epitomize this dynamic. This excessive doubling comes to signify a fetishization in itself within this thoroughly homogenous society that the novel sets in place. Conflated with a self-referential citationality in which signifiers have abandoned their signifieds, Bateman's characterization, for which the horizontal doubling of the name becomes a synecdoche, not only compensates but over-compensates for an absence, thereby exposing the character as an absence himself:

> Owen has mistaken me for Marcus Halberstram (even though Marcus is dating Cecilia Wagner) but for some reason it really doesn't matter to me and it seems a logical faux pas since Marcus works at P & P also, in fact does the same exact thing I do, and he also has a penchant for Valentino suits and clear prescription glasses and we share the same barber at the same place, the Pierre Hotel, so it seems understandable; it doesn't irk me. (Ellis, 89)

Bateman being mistaken for Marcus Halberstram illustrates his underlying homogeneity, while what is particularly significant in this instant is his reaction. The narrative in this instance makes a point of the fact that what is in essence a marker of him as an absence, rather than as a presence, does not "irk him" but appears instead as a "logical faux pas". A dynamic of serial doubling is not only drawn but dismissed as trivial and comes to stand for the underlying binary as an inherent, intrinsic part of American history. A nation built upon a paradox, its cultural imaginary equally draws upon the motif of the double which is so deeply inscribed into the fabric of a nation. Blake solidifies this aspect in her assertion that "a range of binarisms […] had

lain at the heart of the American "murder industry" for nigh on two hundred years," (202) adapting an Emersionian core argument in this sense, in which the individual's struggle for authenticity within his or her position as a member of society hinges excessively on binary oppositions that "[…] pitted the transgressive individual against the common good, the lone frontiersman against the machinery of urban-industrial life under capitalism, the autonomy of the American individual against the judiciomoral imperatives of the state" (Blake, 202). Taken to extremes, Bateman becomes a figuration of this irreconcilable binary which is ultimately manifested in a form of absence rather than presence in which signifiers are so plentiful that they have consumed their signifieds; however, these signifiers remain ever-insatiable and it is an insatiability which comes to lust for that which remains: the corpse.

Reflecting on Otto Rank's elaborations on the motif of the *doppelgänger* in "The Uncanny", Freud highlights the notion that the double was initially "an insurance against the destruction of the ego" in quoting Rank who isolates the double as an "energetic denial of the power of death" (235). In duplication, it appears at first glance that there is a reaffirmation of substantiality. However, Freud further asserts that upon overcoming the stage of primary narcissism "which dominates the mind of the child and of primitive man […] the 'double' reverses this aspect. From having been an assurance of immortality, it becomes the uncanny harbinger of death" (Uncanny, 235). Rather than a reaffirmation of substantiality, the double becomes the fragmentation thereof and marks its dissolution rather than substantiation. Inherently rooted in the motif of the doppelganger, we see this exact dynamic performed by Bateman throughout *American Psycho*. While in an initial step, his narcissism comes to overshadow the corpses he produces as harbingers of (his own) death, in his eventual confession he attempts to assert a self or presence, and as such, acknowledges his own mortality. In so doing, he recognizes the 'double' in its thoroughly uncanny dynamic; the mirror of an absence which marks his own lack of immortality. Increasingly confronted with his doubles, which only serve to highlight the absence in himself, Bateman's "identity is constructed solely from whatever pieces of 1980s consumer society he can integrate into his public persona" (Simpson ,150). As such, Bateman's absence can be read as the doubling of the society that he represents, in which his deviance also lacks acknowledgment as his psychosis remains utterly unheard: "[Evelyn] "Patrick is not a cynic, Timothy. He's the boy next door, aren't you honey?", "No I'm not," I whisper to myself. "I'm a fucking evil psychopath." (Ellis, 20). Overshadowed by self-perfectibility, the violence and death that he produces as a byproduct remains parenthesized. This notion becomes even more significant towards the end of the novel when Bateman's confession to all of his crimes remains equally unheard: ""Now Carnes. Listen to me. Listen very, very carefully. I-killed-Paul-Owen-and-I-liked-it. I can't make myself any clearer." My stress causes me to choke on the words" (Ellis, 388). This moment, in fact, marks the third reiteration of Bateman's confession; however, rather than being acknowledged by his counterpart,

Bateman is left to choke on his psychosis. Bateman's doubling, wilding, and the repetition of his final confession all perform the novel's serial format in which chapters, characters, and murders horizontally repeat themselves.

This conjunction of seriality and death can be read alongside Elisabeth Bronfen's reflection on the femme fatale in film noir, which consolidates the view that a compulsive seriality producing death is ultimately based on a lack of visibility, in not being seen, "[f]or the tragic corpses, whose production is the inevitable conclusion of a refusal to put a stop to a narrative of avoidance, only cement the fact that not seeing the other is tantamount to denying his or her humanity" (104). Bateman, in this sense, becomes a mimetic absence which merely imitates as he "[…] had all the characteristics of a human being – flesh, blood, skin, hair – but [his] depersonalization was so intense, had gone so deep, that […] [he] was simply imitating reality […]" (Ellis, 282). This lack or absence of substantiality is then fetishized by the novel through the implementation of seemingly endless doubles while, on the level of diegesis, the character himself comes to perform the fetishization of the corpse as a means to compulsively over-compensate for the absence he cannot *but* locate in his doublings. As such, Bateman's eventual turn to cannibalism marks the logical step in his misguided Emersonian quest for an authentic self; a lacking, unseen self, overwritten by the very doubles which define it for which he erects a memorial as a substitution as, "[…] there is an idea of a Patrick Bateman, some kind of abstraction, but there is no real me, only an entity, something illusory […]: *I simply am not there*" (376–77). Synthesizing himself as an abstraction which ceases to be present links to the fetish, in which Bateman's lack of identity creates a compulsion based on desire; tied to the substantiation of an absent self, he seeks to gratify his craving through the erotization of the other by means of fatal sexual encounters. In an article called "Children of the Pied Piper" written for the March issue of *Vanity Fair* in 1991, Norman Mailer addresses the sexual politics of the novel as a way to shock the unshockable in which "[…] the murders begin to read like a pornographic description of sex." Once Batemen's fetishization of eroticism is rendered unsatisfactory, it becomes ultimately reevaluated in the eroticization of absence-avant-la-lettre, death. The literal manifestation of all of this becomes cannibalism which shatters any remnant of distance between the living and the dead through not only touch, but ingestion; its fetishization of the flesh of the corpse is marked as an excessive overcompensation.

While in academic discourse, Bateman's notoriety does not seem to be rooted in his cannibalistic escapades per se, but rather remains more generally tied to his serial killing involving extreme sexual deviance and necrophilia, it becomes all the more telling that his cannibalistic desires surface only towards the end of the novel. While his sexual perversions, often involving the fragmentation of body parts, along with his explicitly extreme and deviant violent desires govern the novel from the very beginning, cannibalism serves as the final taboo to break. Similar to Bataille, in questioning cannibalism as a taboo, Visser also references Freud who questions

a seemingly inherent aversion towards cannibalism: "Freud pointed out, as Montaigne had before him, that it is curious we should feel so badly about eating people, when we frequently kill them and often sense only gratification for having done so" (5). Visser roots this aspect in cultural categorization, in which humans are strictly not categorized as food. However, the fact that cannibalism not only entails eating a human body, but a dead human body, demands a further layering of this notion. One not only breaks the rules of ethical categorization, but also becomes intrinsically linked to the dead body after consuming a human corpse. Feeding into the notion of the corpse, which rests uneasily on the *death paradox*, death's inability to be grasped properly by language, the conclusion which Visser draws comes as no surprise when she states that "[c]annibalism is a symbol in our culture of total confusion: a lack of morality, law, and structure; it stands for what is brutish, utterly inhuman" (6). This is reflected in the way in which Bateman's violent behavior peaks in his cannibalistic desire which is neither sophisticated nor ritualized; rather, he is drawn as an uncultivated serial cannibal following an urge in which his cannibalistic desire becomes a marker for his disorientation. Breaking the final taboo of consuming the flesh of his own species, it is thus a form of extreme obscenity towards which he turns as his unsubstantiated self not only disorients, but deteriorates.

The chapter that introduces Bateman's development from serial killer to serial cannibal highlights the aspect of experimentation, termed "Tries to Cook and Eat Girl" (Ellis, 343). Bateman's descent into cannibalism is further marked as relatively gradual (if not slow) in juxtaposition of his exponentially increasing acts of sexual violence and necrophilia. Before he experiments with physical ingestion of the corpse, Bateman initially only elevates the corpse to the level of food without consuming it yet: "I start by skinning Torri a little, making incisions with a steak knife and ripping bits of flesh from her legs and stomach […]" (Ellis, 304). Instrumentalizing violence as experimentation throughout the text, Bateman begins with initially aimless violent acts which allude to the kitchen as exemplified by the steak knife that he uses; however, Bateman remains unaware of his desire to eventually consume what he is essentially concocting. Visser asserts that "[v]iolence, after all, is necessary if any organism is to ingest another. Animals are murdered to produce meat; vegetables are torn up, peeled and chopped; most of what we eat is treated with fire […]" (3). It is, however, the final step to "[…] chewing [which] is designed remorselessly to finish what killing and cooking began" (Visser, 3) which Bateman prolongs when he continues his aimless experimentation in the allegorical dark as "I turn off the lights and […] rip open her stomach with my bare hands. I can't tell what I'm doing with them but it's making a wet snapping sound and my hands are hot and covered with something." (Ellis, 305). It is this dynamic of procrastination which renders Bateman an uncultivated serial cannibal, his desire is bestial, rather than colored with a sophisticated precision and purpose. According to Brillat-Savarin, taste "helps us choose form the variety of substances […] those which are best adapted to nourish

us" (45), an instinct which Bateman follows only subconsciously. While the element of violence is overtly present, what remains underdeveloped is the element of a specific taste for the corpse which Bateman convolutes with a general immersion into his murderous desires as his culinary endeavors are marked with a lack of differentiation, stating that: "[m]ost of her chest is indistinguishable from her neck, which looks like ground-up meat, her stomach resembles the eggplant and goat-cheese lasagna at Il Marlibro or some other kind of dog food […] (Ellis, 344–345). Immersing himself he describes his tentative dabbling in cannibalistic desires nevertheless as "[…] my reality. Everything outside of this is like some movie I once saw" (Ellis 345) and, as such, is indirectly attesting himself as a serial cannibal whose overcompensation for the lack of self, which the corpse ultimately signifies, is marked by means of a sexually driven violence which seemingly aimlessly peaks in the form of cannibalism. A form of cannibalistic desire that is inherently tied to the senses, but which is not yet attuned to taste.

While the intrinsic absence of an identity becomes increasingly traceable throughout *American Psycho*, the moment Bateman that first begins to cannibalize one of his victims explicitly fractures his self:

> I spend the next fifteen minutes *beside* myself, pulling out a bluish rope of intestine, most of it still connected to the body, and shoving it in my mouth and it's filled with some kind of paste which smells bad. […] I want to drink the girl's blood as if it were champagne and I plunge my face deep into what's left of her stomach, scratching my chomping jaw on a broken rib. (Ellis, 344, my emphasis)

Marked as a transgressive act between normal and abnormal, the passage highlights Bateman's desire to drink the girl's blood "*as if* it were champagne" illustrating a shift into pure deviance, the consolidation of his American psychosis. Visser asserts that "eating other people can seldom, perhaps never, have been ordinary" (4), which isolates the step to cannibalism, rather than necrophiliac sexual perversion, as the epitome of Bateman's insatiability, cannibalistic desire becoming the proverbial hunger. The fact that Bateman is *beside* himself attests to the extraordinariness of his deed in which "Bateman as cannibal conflates the unbridled consumerism in a late capitalist society with the voracious appetition of the serial killer" (Lee, 115). Fetishizing the corpse as such, in an act of ingestion, his cannibalistic urge becomes a substitution for his lacking self. The extension of his eroticism is developed into a cannibalism that flags his sexuality not only as deviant, but also that positions his fetish within the realm of the obscene. Bataille ties the concept of obscenity to a perceived continuity that we create for ourselves, stating that: "[o]bscenity is our name for the uneasiness which upsets the physical state associated with self-possession, with the possession of a recognized and stable individuality" (18). While beside himself, Bateman's desire is rendered obscene, removed from any remnant of stability. Written

into his deeds remains only the desire to consume; sexually, murderously, or through literal ingestion, the fetishization of which, however paradoxically, only pushes him further into fragmentation. As Lee points out with regard to 1980s America in particular, "[s]haped by the ideology of individualism, conservatism, and aggressive economic and social policies [which resulted in] solipsistic materialism – the pursuit of happiness [was] translated to the pursuit of hyper-consumerism" (108). What remains at the end of the American Dream, it seems, is the fragmentation of an inherently absent self which, is taken to extremes, in an attempt to find a substitute, over-compensates by means of the literal consumption of the corpse, the fetishization of cannibalism. It is then that the substitute, rather than the self which Bateman is able to hold onto, states that "[h]eaving the rest of her body into a garbage bag – […] I decide to use whatever is left of her for a sausage of some kind" (Ellis, 345). While his self may be marked by an absence that produces his fetish, it is also the fetish which he is unwilling to discard. Which is to say that while a lack of recognition does not "irk him", illustrating his compliance in acknowledging the substantiality of himself as absence, his resourcefulness regarding the fetishized, then designates the value that he ascribes to the corpse; it is the over-compensation, the fetishized memorial of his absence that he desires to preserve.

Bateman's urge to cannibalize is inherently rooted in his own absence which he compensates for by means of said "brutish and utterly inhuman" (Visser, 6) agency. As such, the way in which he conducts his fetish also obtains a narratological stance. By consuming a corpse, he attempts to make another person's flesh his own, writing death into his own body as "[a]fter all, cannibalism plays out, materially and figuratively, the integration of the self into the other, the other into the self […]" (Edwards & Graulund, 7). Once he has succumbed to his fetish, Bateman begins to write cannibalism into the fabric of society when "[i]n the kitchen I try to make meat loaf out of the girl but it becomes too frustrating a task and instead I spend the afternoon smearing her meat all over the walls […]" (Ellis, 345). By smearing "her meat" all over the walls, he is simultaneously smearing her meat all over the pages of the novel; what immediately follows this rudimentary form of writing is not only the ingestion of the corpse, "chewing on strips of skin [he] ripped from her body" (Ellis, 345) but an explicit reference to the CBS sitcom *Murphy Brown*, one of the endlessly repeated citations which characterize the novel. By sequencing the act of rudimentary writing with the governing principle of a reduplication of cultural references, Bateman is writing cannibalistic desire into the American cultural imaginary. As a consequence, and constructed as such, he becomes the "[…] serial killer as a monstrous cultural artifact" (Lee, 108). Bateman's authorial act seeks that exact attention which the framing through the novel's epigraph, quoting the band the *Talking Heads*, already dismisses as destined to remain unnoticed, stating that "And as things fell apart / Nobody paid much attention". While Mailer's assertion that at the end of the novel "Bateman […] remains a cipher" (*Vanity Fair*) rings true, it is all the more signif-

icant that we simultaneously find "[i]n the character of Patrick Bateman, […] a nightmarish manifestation of our greatest aspirations" (Lee 119) which points towards the irreconcilability of the American subject, who is left to fetishize that which has been omitted in the promise of a New World. In the character of Patrick Bateman, Ellis crafts cannibalism as a form of urged speculation that is overshadowed by an excess of aimless perversion. While Bateman succeeds in writing cannibalistic desire into the fabric of American culture, it is then only in his successor, Hannibal Lecter, that cannibalistic desire will not only come to be acknowledged but ritualized. Veiled with the sophistication of manners that are geared toward the obfuscation of the fact that "[…] [b]ehind every rule of table etiquette lurks the determination of each person present to be a diner, not a dish. It is one of the chief roles of etiquette to keep the lid on the violence which the meal being eaten presupposes" (Visser, 3), Lecter will not only come to carry on Bateman's legacy, but will even cement its signification through an elevation not only to culture but to the high arts.

4.2 Le cannibalisme pour le cannibalisme: Bryan Fuller's *Hannibal*

> I was gazing at a marvel.
> Its perfection, its lack of cause and object, filled me with a strange awe.
> *Hermann Karlovich, Despair*

While Bateman's cannibalistic urges form the cornerstone of the evocation of an intrinsic American desire to consume the corpse, its fully developed figuration comes to life in the character of Hannibal Lecter, rooted in Thomas Harris' series of novels. In 2013, Bryan Fuller adapted the literary text for the television screen in the serial *Hannibal* performing the seriality which the narrative sets into place on both level of form as well as content. Notably, throughout the entirety of its three seasons, the opening credits of *Hannibal* remain the same: a red liquid falls on a white canvas into figurations of what appear to be bodies only to then dissolve again; upon encountering the human physique, the liquid begins to gather and take on the shape of the protagonists' heads – John Crawford, Will Graham, and Hannibal Lecter. The first two, however, remain unfinished in their figuration, blurring into one another, and it is only Hannibal Lecter's head which is ultimately sculpted to perfection and displayed at a straight angle at which point the sequence cross-dissolves into the white canvas displaying "Hannibal" in sharply defined red letters. While the reference to blood and the implied convergence of life and death is overtly written into this opening, these credits also shine a light on the inherently aesthetic argument which the show makes throughout. Their repetition signaling a red thread that runs throughout the entirety of the show and these opening credits seem to echo Mary Harron's

2000 adaptation of *American Psycho*. Harron's film, which makes the salient point of placing the desire to consume at its very core, opens in the same fashion as *Hannibal*, with "a white background, an ominous soundtrack play[ing]. Red droplets begin to fall from the top of the frame, accompanied by a subdued *Psycho*-like discordant violin" (Lee, 11).

Initially directly referenced, it is in this instant that the two openings begin to diverge; while *Hannibal*'s red droplets begin to artistically figure its protagonists, Harron's adaptation solidifies a previous ambiguity with regard to the red liquid as "[…] the music transitions to a knowingly playful classical score, [and] it becomes apparent that the droplets are the decorative *jus* on a plate" (Lee, 111). Playing with the ambiguity of (human) blood and jus which, dependent on the side of which this *vexierbild* falls, propose either horror or pleasure, the opening sequence of *American Psycho* exposes "the fragility of the veneer that the rituals of polite behaviour provide to the all-too-human nature of animalistic physicality" (Bayman, 148). Cited in the opening credits of *Hannibal*, the repetition of the red droplets developed into artistic abstraction come to signify the cultivation of cannibalistic desire; while the droplets remain significant of gastromonic pleasure, Harron's opening merely hints at a fetishization of cannibalistic desires only to then break the created tension by anchoring the droplets in jus, rather than blood. Juxtaposed with the opening credits of *Hannibal*, we find a literalization of that which Harron only evokes; red droplets on a white canvas come to signify an actuality of blood which will be consumed. Quite significantly, while the novel does not explicitly focus on cannibalistic desire, it is nevertheless that quality which Harron chooses to play with in the opening of her picture, thereby setting the tone for the ambiguous implications of taste which become the undercurrent of Bateman's desires and the reason for his insatiability. Transposed onto the opening of *Hannibal*, it becomes all the more suggestive that the red liquid which forms Crawford and Graham also forms Lecter, thereby highlighting the similarity rather than difference between all three; this is a figuration which will be solidified in the series when Lecter locates the stain of human nature in the masses, not the individual, stating that "[t]he essence of the worst in the human spirit is not found in the crazy sons of bitches [serial killers]. Ugliness is found in the faces of the crowd" ("… And the Beast from the Sea"), which isolates the serial killer as symptomatic for a universal psychosis. The fact that the opening credits are staged in adherence with an aesthetically pleasing manner hints at the cultivation of the aforementioned ugliness. It is then also this notion of aesthetic principle which comes to differentiate the manifestation of the cannibalistic desires of Bateman and Lecter. While Bateman's cannibalism develops as a disoriented urge out of his necrophilia, Lecter comes to stand for the sophisticated ritualization of cannibalism. Accordingly, Harron's opening isolates the desire to consume, while *Hannibal* isolates aestheticism in the figuring of the consumer. This is a differentiation that is reflected in the juxtaposition of the adaptations of these two narratives; in

American Psycho, insatiability is made explicit, as opposed to *Hannibal*'s referencing thereof which points at the obfuscation of murderous desires towards a form of consumption by means of artistic appreciation.

Formally speaking, the claim that *Hannibal* makes is purely aesthetic, rather than mimetic. The text displays little interest in realism; rather, it performs an aestheticism which artistically stages the corpse by means of which it is elevating itself to the realm of sublimity through its visuality, thereby continuously juxtaposing the beautiful with the horrific. This can be read alongside Thomas De Quincey's infamous 1827 essay "On Murder Considered as one of the Fine Arts" in which the author makes a similar argument for an aesthetics of the immoral, claiming that "[m]urder, for instance, may be laid hold of by its moral handle, and that, I confess, is its weak side; or it may also be treated aesthetically, […] that is, in relation to good taste" (7). De Quincey's dismissal of moral principle in favor of artistic jouissance references murder not simply in relation to taste, but explicitly emphasizing *good* taste and raising the notion of connoisseurship. Inferring this form of superiority vis-à-vis the subject also holds true for the refinement of murderous desires that we find in *Hannibal*. While Ellis' Bateman may have displayed his cannibalistic desires in a disoriented manner, alluding to the Bakhtinian carnivalesque, *Hannibal* remains thoroughly sophisticated in form as well as content, staging an aestheticized and artificial visuality which is reflected in the cultivation of its protagonist who comes to actively juxtapose any remnant of the carnivalesque. As such, *Hannibal* is marked with the elegance of the high arts, itself becoming a De Quincian "great gallery of murder" through which the audience is guided "in delighted admiration, while [*Hannibal*] endeavor[s] to point your attention to the objects of profitable criticism" (De Quincey, 12). Placing an emphasis on the cathartic element of murder as "[…] the final purpose of murder, considered as a fine art, is precisely the same as that of Tragedy, in Aristotle's account of it, 'to cleanse the heart by means of pity and terror'" (De Quincey, 51), *Hannibal* is riddled with a sophistication that is synthesized by its titular serial cannibal. The series crafts aestheticized renditions of death explicitly as works of art in an attempt to strip death of its savagery. Tied to its cinematic claim, it is the camera that paints, as "the mechanical [which] produces […] the human, it produces it ex nihilo, so to speak, and what it produces is a corpse" (7) and while an assertion which Elsaesser makes regarding Hitchcock's *North by Northwest*, it rings equally true for *Hannibal*. The series not only produces the corpse ex nihilo, but furthermore molds it into an aesthetically pleasing element which is exclusively geared towards consumption, locating cannibalistic desire in the spectator. This notion is further reflected in the individual titles of the episodes, which comprise a meal in each season; feeding the audience's desire to consume the dead, *Hannibal* crafts the corpse into an allegorical meal for the spectator.

Similar to Bateman, Lecter's murderous escapades are not governed by an externally ascribable rationale, which is to say that he follows no identifiable motivation

save for the gratification of his personal pleasure. While Bateman succumbed to a bestial immediacy which layers his killings with a savage undercurrent, Lecter exemplifies a much higher level of self-control. Governed by corrupted relationships with the corpse, both characters fetishize the corpse as a means to overcompensate for an intrinsic absence of death through a form of hyperbolic consumption. In opposition to Bateman, however, Lecter's desires are impeccably cultivated, a level of sophistication which is mirrored in his character as "[b]esides being [..] a monster, [...], Lecter [...] also has something of the charm and enigma of Iago as well as the epic grandeur of Milton's Satan. He is also a bit of a vampire" (Baker, 94). Seemingly difficult to grasp, Baker's characterization of Lecter appears as a collage of celebrated antagonists; while he might be monstrous, he is tantalizingly monstrous. Hannibal Lecter displays a charismatic nature which is inherently tied to his profound interest in art and culture, of which he is a connoisseur. Reflecting on the connection between art and murder(er) Bayman states that "[f]requently, representations offer an image of the serial killer as a figure who is as disproportionately interested in culture as culture already is in it", a claim which Bayman consolidates in the recurring motif in which the cultural imaginary crafts the image of the serial killer as "*tasteful* [...] the Romantic proposition that the killer is an artist" (145). This notion Baker attributes to Lecter specifically, not only as a character trait but as the quality which allows to sympathize with him is "[...] the quality that ultimately heroizes Lecter: taste" (129). If it is in fact taste that elevates Lecter to grandeur, so its twofold implications deserve attention. On the one hand, taste comes to denote a form of cultural literacy which revolves around the binary of good and bad, thereby inferring a hierarchy between the respective conductors of taste; on the other hand, taste also alludes to a form of hunger in which taste becomes the unit of measurement for appetite. When woven together, these two aspects come to form an appetite which not only needs to be satisfied, but must be satisfied in the proper manner, in specific relation to good taste. Leaning on De Quincey again, it becomes evident that a dismissal of a moral principle with regard to good taste, then, bears dangerous implications. A shift in the framing of good taste, which dismisses juridical encoding in favor of pure aesthetics, shatters a seemingly axiomatic inhibition with regard to the consumption of the corpse. This is an ambiguity which, in *Hannibal*, is cemented in the first conversation between Special Agent Will Graham and Dr. Hannibal Lecter. In reference to murders committed by serial cannibal Garret Jacob Hobbs, Graham utters "tasteless" to which Lecter's "Do you have trouble with taste?" is filled with that palpable dramatic irony which the notoriety of his cannibalistic tendencies presupposes. When Graham responds that "[m]y thoughts are often not tasty" Lecter's ambivalent response of "[n]or are mine" ("Apéritif") exposes taste as riddled with ambivalence or, as Bayman points out, potentially "as both cannibalistic and cultivated" (148). Cultivating his tastes as those of a sophisticated serial cannibal, "Lecter is a particular type of serial killer [...] distinct from the fractures, unstable, transformative, or masked sub-

jectivities of other fictions, […o]thers do not assume his grandeur […]" (Baker, 130). This notion of grandeur that Baker identifies in Lecter is rooted in his elitist refinement, the agency which becomes a marker for his singular (but relentless) pursuit of art.

It is thus the television serial's ekphratic nature that is explicitly mirrored in its protagonist. Lending his name to the narrative, Hannibal Lecter, is above all a man of good taste, a connoisseur of the aesthetics of murder whom De Quincey would term "enlightened" given that he is governed by that gluttonous refinement which marks "[…] the enlightened connoisseur [a]s more refined in his taste" (De Quincey, 53). Fetishizing not only the absence which the corpse signifies but also its abject nature, the way in which Hannibal carries out his cannibalistic desires is also actively deviant from any animalistic savagery previously exemplified by the figure of either the zombie or Bateman. Lecter's cannibalism, unlike Bateman's, is stripped of all bestiality and this elevates him to a level of cultivation that teases out a form of humanity which stands in direct opposition to the animal as, according to Visser: "The active sharing of food – not consuming all of the food we find on the spot, but carrying some back home and then doling it systematically out – is believed, […] to lie at the root of what makes us different from animals" (1). It is the ritual, then, rather than the materiality of the meal itself which fashions, as well as serializes, the cultivation of cannibalistic desire. Impeccably dressed, sophisticated, and eloquent, Hannibal Lecter is depicted as a man who quotes Goethe where he "was rooting for Mephistopheles and contemptuous of Faust" ("Secondo"), paints his own Botticelli pieces and spends his leisure time composing operas. Executing control over nature, his governing force is the aesthetics, and he is above all, "preoccupied […] with style" (Elsaesser, 4), which classifies Lecter as a Dandy figure.

Illustration 19: Hannibal Lecter's dandyism, Hannibal, "Coquilles"

Often framed in his immaculate kitchen, concocting corpses to become the most exquisite dishes, Lecter rejects savagery and oozes sophistication and this feeds into the "compellingly supernatural, mythic and indeed almost god-like in effect. […]" (135) which Simpson locates in the fictionalized American serial killer. Dismissing any claim for ethics, Lecter reappropriates his cannibalism into a plea for artistic pleasure. Lecter's aestheticism follows the paradigmatic encoding of fetishism. It is not only an absence, but an absence that is riddled with the abject which death creates that is compensated for through the performativity of aestheticism. Smitten with Lecter's skill, Crawford maintains: "Have you seen him cook? It's an entire performance" which Lecter confirms when he adds the necessity for inspiration, "[a] feast is life; you put life in your belly and you live" ("Sorbet"). Ultimately seeking life through the consumption of death, Lecter's performance peaks in the orchestration of the culinary arts through the fetishization of the corpse, which further aligns him with the figure of the dandy who seeks to assume control over nature.

Echoing Oscar Wilde's dandyism at the fin de siècle, Lecter not only "[…] makes a cult of clothes and manners" (Elsaesser, 4) but also adheres to the other characteristics that Elsaesser ascribes to the dandy, a figure who:

> […] prefers fantasy and beauty over maturity and responsibility, he pursues the perfection to the point of perversity. He is, to quote and authoritative study, 'a man dedicated solely to his own perfection through a ritual of taste … free of all human commitments that conflict with taste […a]nd he despises everything that is vulgar, common, associated with commerce and a mass public. (4)

Repeatedly solidifying his preference for beauty over maturity, Lecter is presented throughout the series as a man 'dedicated solely to his own perfection through a ritual of taste', which in his case becomes the cultivation of the cannibalistic fetish. In *The Physiology of Taste*, Brillat-Savarin teases out the doubled function that taste comes to serve. On the one hand, "[t]aste is the sense which puts us in contact with our savorous or sapid bodies, by means of the sensation which they cause in the organ destined to appreciate them" (44) which isolates taste as a generator of pleasure; on the other hand, pleasure hinges on desire and desire is rooted in insatiability. As such, taste "[…] which can be excited by appetite, hunger, and thirst, is the basis for several operations which result in a man's growth and development, in his self-preservation […]" (44). Tied to aesthetic principles, taste becomes a signifier of immortalization as taste and "[…] invites us, by arousing our pleasure, to repair the constant losses which we suffer through our physical existence" (Brillat-Savarin, 45). The creation of art is not only an act of immortalization, but also the agency which feeds taste in its own volition. The dandy's excessive prioritization of aesthetic principles is formed against a perceived lack of beauty. Geared towards the production of beauty, by means of the corpse, cannibalism becomes a compulsion to re-create

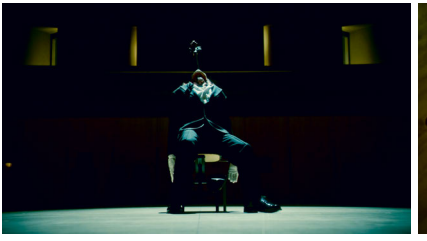
and consume death through a lens of good taste which ultimately involves the manufacturing of immortalization by means of aestheticism.

Constructed as a dandy, Lecter is not only fashioning the corpse but also thoroughly fashioning himself, something that becomes evident in his therapist's Dr. Bedelia Du Maurier's observation that "[y]ou are wearing a very well-tailored person suit" ("Sorbet") which classifies his entire personality, not only as performative but also inscribed with a level of control which is "well-tailored". While his intentions are murderous, they are simultaneously geared towards artistic rendition and the inherent shift of a seemingly universal morale being facilitated through his fetish, which may veil his psychosis, but which ultimately also marks it. Attempting to find the root of his deviance, he is psychologized by Du Maurier who repeatedly interrogates his past. Lecter, however, asserts that: "Nothing happened to me, I happened" ("Secondo") which is not only "a declaration of an identity self-begotten, free from the taint of 'influence'" (Baker, 131), but also a reaffirmation of his inclination to control and subdue external influences, a dandyesque "revolt against nature" (Elsaesser, 5). This element of control is then consolidated in his cannibalistic desires in which he assumes a perceived superiority vis-à-vis the corpse. Emerson asserts that "[l]ove of beauty is Taste. Others have the same love in such excess, that, not content with admiring, they seek to embody it in new forms. The creation of beauty is Art." (47), which, read against Lecter's exquisite concoctions marks his cannibalism not only as artistic, but also as excessive. While cultivated, Lecter's serial cannibalism is simultaneously insatiable, his psychosis Bateman's equal in compulsion. Hinging on good taste in its fetishization of death, exemplified by the exquisiteness of his concoctions, the corpse may be elevated to a level of the fine arts; however, it is then artistic principle that becomes the mere substitute for the absence which death intrinsically produces. Lecter essentially substitutes absence with beauty in the quest for artistic gratification, thereby compulsively transforming the corpse into a work of art. While Bayman is correct in asserting that "the very concept of serial killing confuses questions of purpose: through seriality, serial killing necessarily offers us a structure, but one that does not point to a particular direction" (155), Lecter nevertheless not only fetishizes the corpse but also the lack of direction into pure artistic purpose; in this sense, Lecter also cultivates the aimless, wilding serial killer. To Bateman's disoriented cannibalistic desire, Lecter, adds the confinements of control through ritualization, which is to say, in relation to good taste.

Loosely structured as a police procedural, *Hannibal* further frames a doubling of Lecter, reminiscent of (albeit less excessive) than *American Psycho*, by means of the plethora of serial killers the show examines. Serving as the backdrop for the exemplification of Lecter's cultivation of cannibalism, the artistic component which Lecter is so inclined to maintain in his unconventional dinner habits, is specifically mirrored by the introduction of serial murderer Tobias Budge. Similar to Lecter, Budge is driven by pure aestheticism and connoisseurship. A fellow dandy and serial can-

nibal, Budge fashions corpses as instruments which can be played and thus, not only consumed but consumed as fine art. Termed "Fromage" which, read as the allegorical meal for the spectator, marks a brief culinary excursion before returning to the main dish, the episode centring on Budge opens with the crime scene in which the corpse of his unnamed victim is displayed in midst of a stage.

Illustrations 20 & 21: Tobias Budge's victim, Hannibal, "Fromage"

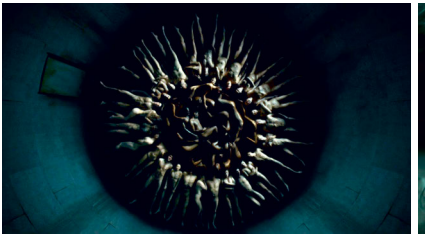


In accordance with the series' artistic undercurrent, the staging of the victim in this manner points towards spectacle (i.e., public acknowledgment and appreciation). This is solidified in Graham's observation which isolates Budge's desire to "put on a show" ("Fromage") and which also echoes De Quincey's claim of "[d]esign, gentlemen, grouping, light and shade, poetry, sentiment are now deemed indispensable to attempts of this nature [a fine murder]" (5). When faced with the details of the crime, Lecter seems to immediately recognize a peer in Budge stating that Budge is "a poet and a psychopath" ("Fromage"). Asserting his like-mindedness, Lecter further inquiries whether there was olive oil massaged into the vocal cords of the corpse, fashioned as strings of a cello. While Graham seems notably baffled at Lecter's correct speculation, he affirms Lecter's suspicion. As a connoisseur of the high arts, Lecter self-sufficiently states that "whatever sound he was trying to produce it was an authentic one" as the olive oil not only references the culinary backdrop, but also aids in "increase[ing] the life of the strings and create a sweeter, more melodic sound" ("Fromage"). What becomes evident is that it is the creation of aesthetics by means of the corpse, rather than the act of killing, which is central. It is spectacle and, hence, the resulting communal appreciation thereof which comes to mark Lecter's fetishization of death by means of the substitution of the high arts, a point which the series itself compulsively reiterates and, as such, ritualizes.

Hannibal's second season introduces an unnamed serial killer whose criminal profile appears dependent on targeting different shades of skin, an interest in color which later comes to expose that the uses corpses to produce a mural which resembles the human iris. Following his own agenda of artistic principle stripped of morals

and ethics, Lecter finds this serial killer before the police does and upon meeting his peer, Lecter voices his shared appreciation of fetishizing death as artistic principle stating "Hello. I love your work" ("Sakizuke"). Examining the as yet unfinished mural, the show frames the mural as a reflection in Lecter's own iris, implementing a mirror which highlights the sublime undertonality of a horrible crime scene fashioned as a beautiful image.

Illustrations 22 & 23: Elevation of murder to the high arts, Hannibal, "Sakizuke"



Reminiscent of Friedrich Nietzsche's infamous assertion that "[…] if thou gaze long into the abyss, the abyss will also gaze into thee" (91), Lecter finds himself irked by the mural's unfinished state and locates the missing shade of human skin in the original serial killing artist. Murdering him in the name of artistic principle, Lecter takes his peer's authorial place and stitches him into the mural, concluding it to perfection and murmuring that "I finished it for you" ("Sakizuke"), making a plea for his good taste which, for Lecter, is coded as the implementation of death which becomes a triumph over nature.

The fetishization of death in the form of artistic consumption hinges on the conjunction of sensuality and death under the governing principle of erotism, geared toward generating continuity beyond death. Bataille further ascribes this notion to poetry's artistic reproduction. With regards to this dynamic, Bataille in reciting Rimbaud, concludes that poetry can be analogized with eroticism because both concepts seek continuity: "Poetry leads to the same place as all forms of eroticism – to the blending and fusion of separate objects. It leads us to eternity, it leads us to death, and through death to continuity. Poetry is eternity" (25). This immortalization through the poetic is manifested in the series when, while profiling one of Lecter's murders, Graham states that the deceased's "death isn't personal. He is merely the ink from which flows my poem" ("Hassun") denoting the entire serial of murders as a poetic indulgence. Highlighting the eternal stance of the poetic, which is tied to the production of art as an act of immortalization, Lecter isolates the consumption of the artistically rendered corpse as valuable when, referencing himself, he asks Gra-

ham "this killer wrote you a poem. Are you going to let his love go to waste?" ("Hassun") Phrasing his question as such, Lecter aligns the murder with the tradition of the sonnet. In this instant, Lecter has staged the corpse as a confession of love for Graham in which the proper appreciation of its aesthetics becomes the conquest of the desired. This dynamic becomes all the more significant as Graham will ultimately be seduced by Lecter and this solidifies Lecter's skill as a poet, while simultaneously trivializing the corpses on which his oeuvre rests, a trivialization which hints at the naturalization of cannibalistic desire.

Thus, the aesthetics of the show ultimately point towards the universality of cannibalistic desire as written into its cultural backdrop of American history, for which Lecter's counterpart Graham becomes the metaphorical placeholder. Inferring cultural literacy, the serial profits from the notoriety inscribed into the figure of Hannibal Lecter and initially prioritizes Graham over of Lecter. The series' pilot, "Apéritif", opens with a crime scene; we meet special agent Will Graham whom we learn is a 'pure empath', profiling a crime scene and in doing so essentially *becomes* the murderer in his imaginary and this marks Graham's method of deduction. What is emphasized in this opening is the question of subjectivity in which boundaries between murderers and imaginary murderers are blurred through the figure of identification presented. While the series notably refrains from centering on the murdering cannibal who lends his name to the television show, the pilot episode of the serial immediately aligns Graham and Lecter as doubles of one another, placing the letters Hannibal upon Graham's body, above whose head towers the corpse, the first image displayed after the opening credits.

Illustration 24: Alignment Will Graham and Hannibal Lecter, Hannibal, "Apéritif"

Cutting from the artistically saturated opening credits to Graham teaching a class on serial killers, the statement which opens the serial is his assertion that "everyone has thought about killing someone, one way or another" ("Apéritif"). Endowed with the momentum of opening the serial, it is this form of murderous desire which frames the serial. The fact that the show initially characterizes Graham with the occupation of thinking about killing someone, the act of carrying out an imaginary murder, while also positioning him as the character of identification hints at a ubiquitous desire for murder within humanity. This argument finds its solidification in the conclusion of the first season when Lecter's indirect insinuation that "[p]erhaps you didn't come here looking for a killer. Perhaps you came to find yourself." ("Savoureux") is presented in a chiasmic structure which exposes the killer within Will Graham and, by extension, the spectatorial stance identifying with him. The diegetic Hannibal Lecter himself, then, is only introduced halfway through the first episode by his counterpart Will Graham who is still profiling the crime which led to the introduction of his character. Concluding his profile, he asserts about the serial cannibal they seek (Garrett Jacob Hobbs) that "[h]e's eating them" ("Apéritif") which introduces the cut to the titular Lecter, framed mid-meal, engorged with pleasure. Breaking the fourth wall when looking directly at the spectator with seemingly equal pleasure, Lecter holds the spectator's gaze for an eerily long time, which marks him as consciously deviant. It is Lecter, rather than Graham, who becomes the signifier of stability in the serial, even though Graham serves as the spectator's figure of identification. Not only aware of his deviance, but in control thereof, Lecter is the dandy and seducer under the spell of whose cannibalistic charms Graham eventually falls. Thus, it is deviant cannibalistic desire that comes to mark that stability against which Graham, standing in for the norm, cannot define himself and instead becomes devoured by.

When in the pilot episode Lecter's cannibalistic desire is mirrored in the serial cannibal Garret Jacob Hobbs, Graham comes to characterize the cannibal's consumption as an act of love in which consumption becomes the implementation of another's flesh into one's own: "He doesn't want to destroy them, he wants to consume them and keep some part of them inside him" ("Apéritif"). This isolates the act of consumption as an act of generating proximity between the consumer and the consumed. While the mirroring of Lecter is evident, the assertions which Graham makes about Hobbs (as an echo of Lecter) are reinforced through the staging in which Graham's elaborations on the individual pieces of the cannibal's victim are crosscut with Lecter's meticulous preparation of the lungs that Graham references into a tasteful dish crafted to perfection. What is highlighted throughout *Hannibal* is the aesthetic principle which governs the actions of these cannibals; artistic production rather than the vulgar destruction of the corpse. While the traditional figure

of the zombie savagely devours,[7] the sophisticated cannibal combines a gothic aesthetic[8] with the meticulous act of killing which, rather than remaining a metaphorical form of vengeful cooking[9] actually becomes an act of cooking and devouring the deceased in an attempt to approximate, and simultaneously elevate, the deceased to pure aestheticism. Through the implementation of taste, *Hannibal* frames cannibalism with etiquette. In refining Bateman's cannibalistic desire, Lecter is rendering the equation in which the corpse equals food formulaic; a cultivation of cannibalism does not merely render the flesh of the deceased edible, but even as concoctable provided that certain artistic principles are conformed to. This notion is exemplified by Lecter's rolodex of recipe cards, which he pairs with the individual business cards of the deceased whose flesh serves as the ingredients for the sketched dish. This fosters an alignment of the corpse with its culinary potential, something which is ultimately geared towards structuralization. The future use of these recipes for the crafting of nourishment not only writes cannibalism into the cultural imaginary, but also endows cannibalistic desire with sustainability.

The ritualization of cannibalistic desire through aesthetics and formula further renders it public, rather than private. While Bateman's cannibalistic urges remained both personal and private, Lecter's refinement of cannibalistic desire places the consumption of the corpse in a more public sphere, a notion which becomes allegorized by means of the serial's protagonists. While Lecter is doubled in the serial killers that the police procedural examines, he is explicitly aligned with Graham. As such, the show offers a morally unambiguous figure in Graham for spectatorial identification, only to let him gradually be seduced by Lecter. Cementing their similarity, rather than difference, the couple's final fall into the abyss which concludes the serial not only echoes Nietzsche but also exposes the underlining cannibalistic desire which is written into the fabric of the American cultural imaginary; what Bateman merely smeared upon the walls, Lecter not only concocted to perfection, but served his unwitting albeit smitten guests. Bon appétit.

7 See chapter 2 for an in-depth analysis of the zombie's hunger.

8 See chapter 1 for a discussion of the way in which the American gothic renders the corpse a work of art.

9 See chapter 3 for a detailed alignment of the politics of death with the politics of food as embedded in the structurally serial revenge plot.

5. Creator/Destroyer: The Serial Killer as an American Phenomenon

> They were showing more and better pictures of him around the clock, plastering his image all over the country. The story was so sexy […] there seemed to be this insatiable curiosity about [him] […] and *where he might strike next.*
> *Gary Indiana, Three Month Fever*

> This is where the killing never ends.
> *Noah Foster, Scream: The TV Series*

When Noah Foster, a character in the television serial *Scream: The TV Series,* observes that "[t]his is where the killing never ends," he is making a statement which is as self-reflexive as it is characteristic of the American serial killer narrative; these narratives are both never-ending and structurally serialized. In *Serien-Killer: Mord als Mission?*, psychologist Rolf Degen asserts that the serial killer is intricately tied to the "American Way of Life"[1] (47). The way in which American soil becomes particularly fertile for the compulsion to kill, that which Degen calls pure *Mordlust*, is consolidated in its cultural imaginary. In *Monsters in America*, Scott W. Poole discusses the fact that early modern European imagination crafts the United States of America not only as monstrous, but also explicitly as *ravenously* monstrous. In these early illustrations, the element of insatiability that is geared towards the dead is drawn as cannibalism as "[o]ne of the earliest allegorizations of America is Philippe Galle's 1580 "America" in which we see a giantess with a spear and a bow that has cannibalized a man and triumphantly carries his severed head" (31). It is not just Galle who figures the United States as, according to the painter himself, an "ogress who devours men, who is rich in gold and who is skilled in the use of the spear and the bow" (Galle qtd in Poole, 31). The construction of a metaphorical America that aligns the consumption of food

1 "[…] so ist der Serienmord des Einzeltäters doch auf besondere Weise mit dem „American Way of Life" verknüpft" (47).

with a hunger for the dead is a sentiment that is carried through a plethora of early imaginations of the New World. Paolo Farinati's painting from 1595 is another example that presents "[…] an allegorical representation of the New World as a monstrous cannibal [in which] the artist imagines the New World as a giant roasting a human arm" (Poole, 31). This early allegorical image of America-as-cannibal comes to illustrate, as well as solidify, two specific aspects. Firstly, in spite of its optimistic promise, there appears to be murderous agency written deeply into the fabric of the New World; secondly, the fact that the dead are not only killed but also explicitly devoured and become nourishment for the living, highlights an American appetite for death which perpetuates life. This is to say that there seems to emerge a compulsion to produce death in order to maintain life. Contextualized within the figure of the cannibal, this compulsion is rooted in the fetish; death is absence par excellence, but moreover, death has been absent in America's optimistic promise and is, thus, overcompensated for and fetishized in its cultural imaginary.[2]

19th century Europe's external gaze then further refines America's allegorical imagination as a metaphorical cannibal that ultimately comes to be manifested in the form of the serial killer, a figure that maintains an undying appetite for the production of the corpse, thereby rendering cannibalistic consumption not only metaphorical, but also as serial. British author D.H. Lawrence identifies the American soul as the soul of a stoic and un-melting killer,[3] while English author Anthony Trollope spends ample time commenting on the curious *Domestic Manners of the[se] Americans*[4] which become metaphorically cannibalistic. The figurative America that emerges from these external observations is a ravenous killer, a figure driven by an insatiable hunger for the dead. This is a figure that compulsively produces the corpse in order to cater to an insatiability that is ingrained in a cultural imaginary which is equally hungry for the corpse: A serial killer. It is here that we are reminded of the epigraph, which quotes Gary Indiana's *Three Month Fever* and which emphasizes an American "insatiable curiosity about [the serial killer] […] and *where he might strike next*" (318).

The sentiment of these external European voices is solidified by seminal American literary theoretician Leslie A. Fiedler. In *Love and Death in the American Novel*, he comes to similarly emphasize the endurance of murderous desire when asserting that: "[i]n our most enduring books, the cheapjack machinery of the gothic novel is called on to represent the hidden blackness of the human soul and human society" (27). As an American voice, Fiedler cements the observations of his European peers, thereby highlighting the genre of the gothic as canvas for this "hidden black-

2 See chapter 4 for an in-depth discussion of the figure of the cannibal.

3 See chapter 4 for the full quotation.

4 See chapter 3 for the full quotation and for a discussion of the dynamism of insatiability.

ness of the human soul".[5] In *Natural Born Celebrities*, David Schmid draws from the work of Karen Halttunen as he identifies the predominantly gothic discourse, which cloaks the figure of the serial killer because this discourse provides "the incomprehensibility of murder within the rational Enlightenment social order" (Halttunen qtd. in Schmid, 7). The claim here is that "serial killers, apparently so new and so threatening to the social fabric, are "not, after all, *new*, not really much of a surprise"" (Halttunen, 57). It is the repetition of death that the American cultural imaginary aestheticizes towards a food metaphor that formats death-as-absence into a perpetuity, which then paradoxically nourishes its cultural imaginary; ultimately, this overwrites death in favour of a reinstatement of life.[6] The figure of the cannibal who consumes the dead in order to remain alive, ultimately develops into the serial killer who metaphorically consumes the dead in order to sustain their subjectivity. Written into its cultural imaginary, the serial killer's repetition compulsion is then mirrored in the repetition compulsion found in the serialized narrative. A "play of mirrors that has no limits,"[7] (Foucault, 90) it is by means of this gesture of mirroring that the serial killer ritualizes the serial consumption of an aestheticized death through the repetitive structuring of the serial killer narrative.

Fed by the *death paradox*,[8] the resulting plethora of American narratives that aestheticize death develop a textual plurality into a narratological seriality. Continuously circling around death-as-lack, which is to say absence, the (serialized) text fetishizes the imagination of death.[9] It is thus that the serial killer narrative, through the repetition compulsion of the serial killer's agency, mirrors the structure of its format. Charles Brockden Brown's 1798 *Wieland; or the Transformation* echoes the gothic tonality mentioned previously in which the serial killer narrative is rooted. A gothic tale in which the entire family is ultimately obliterated, Brockden Brown's Jeremaiadesque *Wieland* also marks what is often regarded as the first American novel about which Fiedler maintains:"[f]or better or for worse, then, Brown established in the American novel a tradition of dealing with the exaggerated and the grotesque," (155) which he explicitly ascribes to the projection of internal fears in the following clarification: "[…] not as they are verifiable in any *external* landscape or sociological observation of manners and men, but as they correspond in quality to our deepest fears and guilts as projected on our dreams or lived through in 'extreme situations'" (Fiedler, 155, my emphasis). A reflection of the internal profile of the

5 See chapter 1 for an in-depth discussion of the American gothic.

6 See chapter 1 for a reiteration of the way in which the gothic text overwrites death in an act that reinstates life.

7 On the *death paradox*, see the Introduction for a detailed description.

8 See Introduction.

9 See chapter 4 for in-depth discussion of the fetish in connection with the *death paradox*, figured by means of the cannibal.

American individual, Brockden Brown's gothic novel, and the very first American novel, already *repeatedly* produces the corpse, thereby feeding its imaginary with an aestheticized death. As such, the novel also becomes exemplary of the American cultural imaginary, showcasing an aestheticization of that (abject) death which has been covered up by American optimism. It is also these *projections*, to use Fiedler's words, which come to haunt the American cultural imaginary, always present and ever-elusive as "[t]here are terrible spirits, ghosts, in the air of America" (*Studies in American Literature*, 81), an observation D.H. Lawrence made regarding Edgar Allen Poe's gothic meanderings in the early 19th century. If Poole's assertion is correct, that "[i]t is literature that, while often highly theoretical, can provide much insight into America's appetite for the monster" (12), then the repetitive reiteration of an aestheticized death within the serialized text in particular comes to outline a textual insatiability for the dead so overtly present in the *air* of America, which ultimately manifests as the image of the serial killer.

In outlining a psychological profile of the serial killer, psychologist Degen asserts that the serial killer's most intricate aspect remains their compulsion to kill without motive and without a particular "modus operandus" (46). Historically, as well as sociologically, the term 'serial killer' emerges as a behavioral profile in 1982, coined by the American Federal Bureau of Investigation. According to the FBI's official definition, a serial killer is "a person who kills more than three victims, during more than three events, at three or more locations, with a cooling-off period in between" (Innes, 2). That profile is refined by two seminal dynamisms: Firstly, perpetual repetition, as "the killings are repetitive; and they will usually continue until the perpetrator is identified and apprehended, dies or is killed" (Innes, 2).[10] This element highlights the serial killer's compulsion to kill again and again, which ties into the second aspect of the refined serial killer profile, *Mordlust*. The FBI's profile of a serial killer further emphasizes that "the first evidence that seemingly unrelated murders are serial is the distinguishable pattern of behaviour exhibited by the perpetrator and the absence of any apparent motive, other than the *desire* to kill" (Innes, 3, my emphasis).[11] What becomes evident here is that the singular aspect that ultimately characterizes the serial killer is seriality itself; lacking motive, the figure of the serial killer is governed simply by an intrinsic[12] and compulsive desire to kill over and over again.

If we accept Ralph Waldo Emerson's transcendentalist reflection on serial compulsion in which "[e]very ultimate fact is only the first of a new series" (227), based on the previously outlined trajectory, then the American cultural imaginary offers fertile ground for the production (as well as continuous repetition) of the serial killer

10 See also Degen, 48.

11 See also Degen, *Mordlust*, 48.

12 See Degen, 48.

narrative. The serial narrative partially amends finality through its own structural repetition compulsion, thereby providing an endless canvas for the figuration of an aestheticized death. Echoing the *death paradox* in its limitlessness, any form of conclusion in the serialized narrative ultimately is geared towards the superimposition of a next, thereby remaining inconclusive, structurally sustained by the series paradigm. In "Seriality", Elisabeth Bronfen, reflecting on Emerson, asserts that "to conceive of life as a series of concentric circles also defies the idea of settling any case once and for all" (273). In the context of the serial narrative, this aspect of perpetuity is epitomized in casting the motiveless and compulsive serial killer as protagonist. Governed by their own repetition compulsion, the serial killer is compelled to perform the same ritual over and over again with different victims (Degen, 52). It is here that the serial killer's agency performs an allegorization with the dynamic of an *appetite* because: "where food is concerned we can never let up; appetite keeps us at it" (Visser, 1). Aligning the serial narrative with its metaphorical consumption, the devouring of increments of the series becomes doubly ritualistic. Structurally, it allows for the natural progression of the serial killer figure's repetition compulsion while simultaneously catering to the audience's insatiable appetite. In "Series and Seriality in Media Culture", Tudor Oltean highlights the way in which the serialized text has a binding effect on its audience as "[t]he purpose of the serial transformation is to bind the audience to a narrative sequential process, maintaining its involvement as receiver of successive episodes, and attempting to seduce it as a co-author of the whole" (Oltean, 11). Formulaically binding, the serialized text, thus, perpetuates a repetition compulsion through reciprocity, ritualizing serial consumption both on a diegetic level as well as through the medium itself. Bronfen contends that "seriality produces meanings that implicate us, as viewers and readers, as well" (279) and it is by means of this ritualization, navigated at the hand of the figure of the serial killer, that the serialized text which aestheticizes death caters to that same appetite which it simultaneously perpetuates.

It is this binding aspect of the serialized narrative, the structural formula, which allows for a continuous cultural renegotiation of murderous desire, a *danse macabre* which echoes Fiedler's description of the gothic romance, thereby offering "its readers a vicarious participation in a flirtation with death – approach and retreat, approach and retreat, the fatal orgasm eternally mounting and eternally checked" (134). Structurally, serial narration caters to an ever-recurring appetite, one tied to a murderous desire that the serial killer narrative writes content for through structural compulsion, with form and content then mirroring one another. The illusion of perpetuity, which is structurally inherent in the series, which is to say its narratological stance, maintains "that one should be able to go on telling [...]," (Oltean, 27) complements the serial killer's compulsive desire. It is thus that the serial killer narrative satisfies, not through simply aestheticizing death but by *repeatedly* aestheticizing death as "[t]he audience craves satisfaction through continuous consumption, so too

does the serial killer. Both have a hunger with an inherent violence" (Lee, 106). Again, we are reminded of the opening epigraph, which quotes Gary Indiana's *Three Month Fever*, and that outlines an insatiable desire of an audience not only to see the serial killer, but in particular to see where they strike *next*. If the mode of the serialized narrative pretends to be potentially eternal, then so must its continuous content, even if its situational content is punctually exchanged. It is the series paradigm that remains and the serial killer emerges as self-referential and circular from within this dynamic.

At its structurally most comfortable, embedded in the serial narrative, the figure of the serial killer is marked as American, with serial killing as a "phenomenon, although it can occur anywhere in the world [being] particularly prevalent in the Americas. In fact, serial murder in the United States alone makes up more than three-quarters of the estimated world total" (Innes, 1). In essence, the serial killer is stained with an insatiable hunger for murder, a continually reappearing appetite which he implements compulsively and, in order to maintain it, also becomes its creator. This constructive repetition, which is inscribed in seriality, can be seen as a result of the *death paradox*, which causes a fetishized overcompensation by means of the production of the corpse. The serial killer produces the abject corpse that the serial killer narrative figures as an aestheticized imagination of the corpse that caters to the appetite of both the serial killer as well as the serial killer's audience, both of whom are equally insatiable for the corpse. Nurturing the American cultural imaginary through the production of the corpse, the explicit consumption of the dead then feeds into the paradoxical cannibalistic casting of death as that which nourishes and reinstates life; this is because, by consuming it, we maintain an "instinctive realization that by the very act we perform we are repairing our bodily losses and prolonging our lives" (Brillat-Savarin, 41). Through its compulsively repeated imagination, the serialized aestheticization of death becomes the root of that insatiable appetite that is not just governed by the *death paradox*, but to which it simultaneously caters in a perpetual gesture of reciprocity.

When read in the context of American history, American optimism can be seen as having overwritten an *a priori* desire for death for which the serial killer in particular and the serial form more generally become symptomatic. Mark Seltzer asserts that serial killer narratives "have by now largely replace[d] the Western as the most popular genre-fiction of the body and of bodily violence in our [American] culture" a development which he regards as the result of what he terms *wound culture*, "the public fascination with torn and open bodies and torn and opened persons, a collective gathering around shock, trauma and the wound" (1). This public fascination, marked by compulsion, almost seems to dictate the implementation of the proposed food metaphor through its structural demand for repetition. Marked with insatiability both on the part of the cultural imagination as well as on the part of the audience, the metaphorical hunger-as-serial then comes to adhere to the ritual of translating

the *death paradox* into a predictability which endows death with a level of graspability through its repeated staging and aestheticization. It seems that the savage cannibalistic image of America can allegedly be domesticated within the structure of the serial.

While previous chapters were concerned with entirely fictional texts, this final chapter will focus on the fashioning of actual events in fiction; the fictionalization of the real serial killer, which marks a repetition in itself as such. The serial killer is a relatively modern phenomenon, albeit one rooted in the tradition of the American gothic, as "[…] by 1900 a new kind of person has come into being and into view, one of the superstars of our wound culture: the lust-murderer, the stranger-killer or serial killer" (Seltzer, 2). When consolidating the perspective that the serial killer appears to be a prevalently American phenomenon as well as a recent development, the question which arises is that of production; why does America, after only two centuries of existence, seem to have produced a compulsive killer as one of its recurring myths? Lee outlines the conceptualization of the serial killer as iconic: "[…] while the concept of serial murder can be considered a product of modernity, the postmodern condition has allowed the serial killer to flourish as the contemporary icon/superstar" (106). This conceptualization of the serial killer as iconic, however, is not exclusively tied to an external accentuation. Degen maintains that while the serial killer's agency is rooted in a compulsion to kill, an emerging tendency for fame on the side of the serial killer can also be pinpointed in a significant amount of cases. While the serial killer's primary object is *Mordlust*, celebrity status[13] can manifest as a secondary force according to Degen. Once again mirroring their audience, Mark Seltzer diagnoses this dynamism of performative spectacle as rooted within American *wound culture* and this frames the serial killer spectacular: "These are the spectacles of persons, bodies, and technologies that make up a wound culture and the scenes that make up the pathological public sphere: the scenes, and the culture, in which serial killing finds its place" (22). What emerges is not just an insatiable appetite to repeatedly produce the corpse, but also an implicit connection between serial killing and the spectacular triggered by American *wound culture* which finds its place in its cultural imaginary.

As has been established, it is murderous desire that governs the killer's agency; however, it is the compulsive repetition thereof which governs the *serial* killer's agency, the formula of seriality becoming a specifically American trait due to its woundedness as "the subject of wound culture is not merely subject to recurrence but to the recurrence of recurrence itself" (Seltzer qdt in Lee, 106). Weaving together format and instance in order to explore the performative repetition within the serial format, the repetitive aspect of seriality offers itself to the aforementioned

13 "[…] dass auch die Gier nach Bekanntheit oder Publizität ein wichtiges Motiv ihres Handelns ist. (Degen, 52)

excessive recurrence (of death). Formally speaking, serial narration both implements and caters to a repetition compulsion, as stated in Stanley Cavell's "The Fact of Television":

> To say that the primary object of aesthetic interest in television is not the individual piece, but the format, is to say that the format is its primary individual of aesthetic interest. The ontological recharacterization is meant to bring out that the relation between format and instance should be of essential aesthetic concern. (79)

Focusing on the death narrative as an infinite continuation, rather than highlighting the individual parts, the serial representation of an aestheticized death as well as the representation of the serial killer are capable of elevating a deadly inevitability to an alleged level of immortality by means of refusing to find closure. Drawing on Benjamin, Bronfen maintains that the serial format becomes illustrative of "the conviction that there is something that cannot be directly communicated, yet toward which the evolving reiterations gestures, and which, in so doing, sustains the intensity of this ungraspable kernel" (275). In this regard, a serial repetition of death is that which remains constant and, ultimately, what repudiates that which it pretends to approximate, namely death as an eternal absence which is instead fetishized towards eternal continuation within the imaginary.

Catering to a proverbial craving, this overt performativity of compulsive serial killing is worked through in Wes Craven's seminal *Scream* franchise, this chapter's first primary object of analysis. The films were inspired by the actual Gainesville Ripper, a serial killer who terrorized a Florida town in 1990, killing six students within a stretch of a couple of days. The adherence to real life events, a common horror trope, does not diminishes the distance between audience and artefact; read in the context of this volume, the fictional fashioning of the real also insinuates the possibility of containment, which is enacted through channelling real death into the imaginary realm.[14] As such, the *Scream* franchise remains heavily fictionalized regarding the documentation of the Gainesville Ripper, while what is excessively re-enacted and laid bare in the franchise's overtly poignant self-reflexivity is repetition over the stretch of four consecutive films, which is to say a form of *seriality* which is specifically rooted in the compulsive production of the corpse. This comes to illustrate the cyclical nature of the serial killer, on which the *Scream* franchise draws a chronological and sequential image, which renders it a blueprint of contemporary television series. Unable to escape that repetition compulsion that the franchise puts in place, *Scream* was eventually rebooted as a television series, *Scream: The TV Series*. While said reboot lies beyond the scope of this book, we are reminded of the epigraph that quotes the show's Noah Foster reflecting on the serial narrative by ce-

14 This aligns with the notion of *taming*, see Michael Wood in the Introduction to this work.

menting the serial's eternal performativity.[15] The *Scream* franchise lays the basis for this serialization of the serial killer narrative by performing the *death paradox* explicitly through the figuration of the compulsive serial killer while simultaneously endowing the franchise with an overt self-reflexivity which further emphasizes the way in which the audience comes to mirror the serial killer's insatiable desire for the corpse.

While the *Scream* franchise organically spirals into its inherent serial nature technically isolating the compulsion to *repeat* killing rather than to kill itself, it is *The Assassination of Gianni Versace,* the second season of the 2016 television serial *American Crime Story*, which not only consciously implements the serial killer into the serial narrative, but also consciously fashions the serial killer, thereby becoming performative of the serial killer's seriality. This chapter's second object of analysis, *The Assassination of Gianni Versace* fictionalizes and thus figures the notorious persona of Andrew Cunanan specifically as a serial killer, which is mirrored by the format of the television serial. The series reinvigorates Cunanan's notoriety which in itself is based on a fantasy, as Gary Indiana maintains: "[e]gregiously, with little or no regard for accuracy, Cunanan's life was transformed from the somewhat poignant and depressing but fairly ordinary thing it was into a narrative overripe with tabloid evil" (29). As such, the text overtly masquerades serial killing as spectacle based on the mediated image which elevated Cunanan to the extraordinary and fashioned him as a serial killer as "[t]he boilerplate figure of the serial killer, familiar by then to most Americans, was extracted from specious accounts of Cunanan" (Indiana, 29). The fact that Cunanan cannot be conclusively profiled as a serial killer because "the serial killer paradigm failed to match the case […] he [also] didn't quite fit the "spree" pattern either; he finally became a mixture of two things he didn't resemble" (Indiana, 31) is less significant than the fact that Cunanan is actively (re)imagined as a serial killer in *The Assassination of Gianni Versace*. While Cunanan is a notorious fantasy, it is significant that this fantasy, which is to say the American cultural imaginary, not only fabricates but *serializes* him as a *serial* killer based on "the impossible tangle of myths Cunanan wove about his person" (Indiana, 30), which is to say implementing Cunanan's notoriety as a canvas for the figuration of the serial killer.

Gesturing to this element of the spectacular that the figuration of the serial killer carries within itself, the *Scream* franchise ultimately develops the final girl into that generic serial killer itself, conflating antagonist and protagonist while simultaneously casting the emerging voice of the serial killer as an authoritative one. *The Assassination of Gianni Versace* further develops this conflation into the figure of the pure serial killer, actively formatting him into seriality. Elaborating on contemporary television as "transgressive", Birgit Däwes asserts that: "[…] it is

15 He states that it is here "[w]here the killing never ends" ("Psycho").

no coincidence that so many transgressive television serials conflate the roles of protagonist and antagonist. The main characters we find ourselves rooting for are highly ambivalent in their moral and ethical points of view […]" (25). Both the *Scream* franchise as well as *The Assassination of Gianni Versace* showcase the performativity of serial killing in casting the figure of the serial killer as protagonist, while also anchoring the narrative in reality. As such, the fictionalization of the American phenomenon of the serial murderer within the serial narrative emerges as a form of encoding reality in retrospect, the text manifesting as a repetition that feeds off the same notoriety that it perpetuates.

Both the *Scream* franchise and the television serial *The Assassination of Gianni Versace* figure the serial killer through the serialized text. This echoes what Oltean terms the "performative mode […], the coherence and the credibility of telling rather than the accuracy of the depiction of reality" (8). Ultimately, the format is directed at the production of text, rather than the documentation of truth which spirals towards a form of obscuring. This dynamism is resonant of Jacques Lacan's definition of textualizing as a remodelling of the frightful in which "[…] we obscure the picture in the very process of painting it" (191). Both of these texts perform the American trope of insatiability of death on a metaphorical level and, as such, further develop the cannibal, a figure discussed previously. Fictionalizing real events as a reimagined fantasy, the American cultural imaginary produces the serial killer who has:

> […] been creatively deployed for some two hundred years as a means of articulating a sense of social dislocation and, […] as a means of examining the relation of the lone and often alienated individual to the […] society that he or she inhabits. (Blake, 197)

Fetishized by the American cultural unconscious, it is thus that both the *Scream* franchise as well as *The Assassination of Gianni Versace* showcase the serial killer as the only constant and unwavering center of the narrative. While it is arguable that Sydney Prescott (as the final girl) and Gianni Versace (as the tragic celebrity) obtain a structural agency, it is only through serial killing that this structural agency can be maintained. It is this serialized murderous agency culminating in iconicity, then, that not only defines, but also actively crafts the story. A story for which the audience is as insatiably hungry as the serial killer is compelled to indefinitely (re)produce the corpse.

5.1 Catering to a Compulsive Craving: Wes Craven's *Scream* Franchise

> After World War II, popcorn sales made a sudden rise – this time by an astonishing 500 percent! A survey conducted among [American] housewives proved the reason to be the new invention of television.
> *Barbara Williams, Cornzapoppin'!*

A phone rings, once. It is a landline. A young woman, blonde and attractive, reaches for the receiver. "Hello," she says. "Hello," a male voice answers. "Yes?" the woman says. "Who is this," the male voice inquires. "Who are you trying to reach?" the young woman counters. "What number is this?" the male voice insists, in response to which the young woman again asks "well, what number are you trying to reach?". "I don't know," the male voice states. "Well, I think you have the wrong number," the woman concludes to which the male voice says "do I?" "It happens, take it easy," the woman says before hanging up the phone and walking away. The phone rings again. Twice. The young woman picks it up again and repeats "Hello?". "I'm sorry, I guess I dialled the wrong number," the male voice apologizes, a repeated mistake which is emphasized by the woman asking him "so why did you dial it *again*?" "To apologize," the male voice says, to which the young woman states: "You're forgiven, bye now," explicitly signposting the conclusion of this conversation. "Wait, wait, don't hang up," the male voice insists. "What?" the woman responds. "I wanna talk to you for a second" the male voice urges. "They've got 900-numbers for that. See ya," the woman asserts before slamming down the receiver in exasperation, an action that we witness merely mirrored in the reflective glass of a window tainted by darkness. Briefly, a medium shot isolates a moving swing in the residential garden, on the other side of said darkly tinted window underlining a suburban setting. The swing is in focus, the ever-so-slight movement clearly audible, marking an unknown, potentially dangerous presence. The film cuts back to the residence's kitchen, to an extreme close-up of the stove, where the young woman fires up the gas and places a pan of *jiffy pop* popcorn on top of it. The hands that we had just closely observed handling the telephone receiver are now preparing a snack, which is explicitly associated with film and America in specific. As the young woman removes the wrapping lid, the phone rings again. At the other end it is the male voice, again, urging for a conversation while we hear the popcorn slowly being brought to a pop, and another one popping, and then another one popping. Audible repetition dominates the score. Pop, pop, pop.

This marks the notorious opening of Wes Craven's 1996 film *Scream*, which will come to be the first in a series of four films. This is an opening that challenges the

genre conventions of the slasher, in which the alleged final girl, the young woman, Casey, will be murdered within the next couple of minutes by the killer behind the male voice on the phone. Murderous agency is instantaneous in *Scream*; Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener reference Carol Glover's *Men, Women and Chainsaws* when stating that Glover "has shown how the so-called final girl, or the girl who eventually hunts the monster down extends an invitation to identify even to male teenage spectators […]" (110–111). At this point in the narrative, we are not aware that we have not yet been introduced to the entire franchise's actual final girl, Sydney Prescott. Casting an iconic celebrity such as Drew Barrymore as Casey as a marker of identification, only to immediately kill her off, places an intrusive and unexpected death at the very center of the narrative. Not only is the subsequent shattering of audience expectation of this opening sequence endowed with murderous notoriety, rendering this opening spectacular, but it also bridges the cornerstones of appetite (for) death, serial repetition, and the (specifically American) culture in which Craven's series is ultimately rooted.

Deeply written into this sequence is the notion of repetition. The ringing of the phone is repeated, their conversation is marked by doubling, the mirror image repeats Casey, and the extreme close-up of her hands becomes serial. It is the repetition of her hands that then also comes to align death, or rather, murderous desire, with appetite, her hands marking the bridge between the two; the very same hands that have so innocently concocted popcorn and absentmindedly fiddled with a kitchen knife during the initial phone call will also desperately cling to that same knife, a deadly weapon aimed at the killer in defence within the subsequent couple of minutes of the opening sequence.

Illustrations 25–28: Opening sequence alignment of food, death, film, Scream

It is then also the knife, a marker of the domestic sphere of the kitchen[16] as well as the killer's preferred weapon of choice, which comes to bridge and reiterate the alignment of food and murderous agency which is excessively repeated. Upon removing the killer's mask as a last deed before being stabbed, the perspective changes to Casey's point of view and the killer's identity remains as yet unknown; the last thing she sees is a knife turned deadly, her blood already tainting its tip.

Inscribed with self-referentiality, this aspect is reiterated in the significance of the popcorn which becomes threefold; first of all, made from corn it marks the sustenance of the American individual as Williams also contends: "Popcorn, in fact, is the oldest truly American confection" (13). Corn stands as a signifier of America itself. In *Much Depends on Dinner*, Margaret Visser discusses the many implications of corn, calling a chapter "Corn: Our Mother, Our Life" and, ultimately, tying corn *flakes* to a specifically American identity as "eating [it] is a habit known to many countries on earth yet universally recognized as typically American" (44). Secondly, popcorn is commonly associated as a snack for moviegoers and it, thus, mirrors the metaphorical consumption of film, and more specifically, the horror film, as *Scream* so avidly underlines. When the voice on the phone inquires about the noise that he can overhear, Casey confirms that she is making popcorn to which he states: "I only eat popcorn at the movies," a ritual she cements by stating, "I'm getting ready to watch a video […] just some scary movie," an explicit gesture to the audience. Finally, anchoring metaphorical as well as literal consumption, the fact that the concoctress of said consumption is brutally assassinated in the opening immediately aligns the food ritual with death. With a simple gesture, such as letting an assumed final girl converse with the killer while entangling the conversation with the preparation of popcorn, allows *Scream* to root the serial killer in a specifically American context, simultaneously implementing repetition as an underlying structure and establishing a connection between the consumption of food and murderous agency.

The fact that only a meager couple of minutes later we are faced with our alleged figure of identification Casey's insides, with the character hanging gutted and lifeless from a tree, reiterates the appetite for the corpse; echoing *American Psycho*'s Patrick Bateman, the killer's response to Casey's inquiry about his intentions is curiosity as he wanted "[…] to see what your insides look like". The fact that the male voice is repeatedly able to predict Casey's agency, which he translates into his successful chase and conquest, ultimately killing her, marks the serial killer explicitly as the narrative's structuring force. This dynamic is further maintained through the form of the franchise itself, which not only references a plethora of horror films but actively reflects on the genre, implementing the serial killer as a structural force, as:

16 For an in-depth discussion of the re-encoding of the domestic space of the kitchen in alignment with the revenge narrative, see chapter 3.

> Craven's runaway hit *Scream* took the basic premise of *Halloween* and deconstructed it. The film contained numerous references to other horror films, and the killers themselves are two slasher film aficionados whose fascination with the genre structures their mayhem. (Poole, 220)

Scream not only signals genre expertise, but also writes itself into the genre as a series through these repetitive acts by paying tribute to John Carpenter's *Halloween* and celebrating Craven's own *A Nightmare on Elm Street* by means of his cameo appearance as a janitor wearing a red and dark green striped sweater in allusion to his own Freddy Krueger. What could be read as playful intertextuality actually signposts the transgression of the *death paradox* from plurality towards seriality. As Valerie Wee points out, with regard to the film's "media-saturated" protagonists: "A significant proportion of the intertextual referencing in the *Scream* films functions *as text*," synthesizing that: "[t]he *Scream* films, therefore, take the previously subtle and covert intertextual references and transform it into an overt, discursive act" (47). In mirroring the audience's appetite for death, the excessive pleasure that is taken in the *serial depiction of death* isolates the serial killer as the metaphorical author of the story, thereby catering to the audience's appetite through the production of the corpse.

It is thus, that the *Scream* series' overt self-reflexivity that implements the genre of the horror-slasher as the formulaic recipe and as the undercurrent of its seriality. In *Men, Women and Chainsaws*, Carol Glover outlines the typical elements of the slasher, which she bases on Hitchcock's *Psycho*:

> The appointed ancestor of the slasher film is Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960). Its elements are familiar: the killer is the psychotic product of a sick family, but still recognizably human; the victim is a beautiful, sexually active woman; the location is not-home, at a Terrible Place; the weapon is something other than a gun; the attack is registered from the victim's point of view and comes with shocking suddenness. (23–24)

All of these elements are present in the opening of *Scream*, except for one; the location in *Scream* specifically is a home, but a home that is threatened; it is tainted with a dark presence which renders it uncanny. Throughout the entirety of its franchise, *Scream* continuously experiments with these elements, a repetition so heavily endowed with excess that it becomes fetishized in such a way that the horror film offers itself as particularly apt and it has the potential to "blow conventions into a million pieces and make a fetish out of excess" (Poole, xv). This formal fetishization that inscribes the films with seriality can be linked to Oltean's assessment of the serial format which dictates that "the same actor [is] to play the subject" (15). *Scream* implements character continuity with Sidney Prescott, the actual final girl, who maintains her persona throughout the franchise. At the same time, it is the figuration of the serial killer as Ghostface that also obtains a serial position. It is, thus, that

the franchise plays with the repetitive format of the television series as a blueprint formula; staged as a series, the *Scream* franchise figures the format through the serial killers' structural agency as the "very act of [serial] killing leaves the murderer hanging, because it isn't as perfect as his fantasy […]. His mind jumps ahead to how he can kill more nearly perfect the next time. There's an improvement continuum" (Ressler & Shachtman, 33). Death is rendered overtly serial while simultaneously becoming endowed with spectacle, its performativity geared towards a tangibility of the fetishized absence through repetition as "[…] every concrete tale (be it a novel, film or a television series) is performance – the result of a whole range of transformations of the most elementary and abstract structure into a realized construction" (Oltean, 11). Within this formula of seriality, murderous agency is ritualized while both the narratological concept of the serial, anchored in Sidney, as well as the narratological concept of the series, Ghostface's interchangeability, ultimately underline the notion of repetition or recurrence. It is this ritualization, which is then also reiterated in the alignment of the food ritual with murderous agency, that serves as a mirror that plays with the corpse's paradoxical nutritive purpose upon which the audience feeds by means of serializing the plurality of the *death paradox*.

When read within this formulaic serial structuring, the 1996 original *Scream* can be seen as a form of pilot episode that sets the tone as well as puts a recurring paradigm into place. Situated in the suburban, idyllic fictional town of Woodsboro, the trope of small town[17] security is challenged by means of the events that unfold throughout the film and that juxtapose the perceived notion of secluded safety. The implementation of the slasher offers itself to an abundance of aestheticizations of an abject death against this almost pastoral backdrop. As Barbara Creed's "Kristeva, Femininity, Abjection" points out: "[…] the horror film abounds in images of abjection, foremost of which the corpse, whole and mutilated, followed by an array of bodily wastes such as blood, vomit, saliva, sweat, tears and putrefying flesh" (66). It is the desire for the fictionalized abject that is explicitly staged as spectacle throughout the entirety of the series; the fact that this is excessively textualized by the protagonists' extensive knowledge of the slasher genre not only mirrors the audience's own appetite for the corpse, but ultimately diagnoses a collective unconscious that is marked as hungry for the corpse. Analogized as a mirror through its self-reflexive tone, this is epitomized in an emerging communal yearning to see the artificially abjected, aestheticized dead other. Randy Meeks, eagerly craving spectacle, exclaims: "Listen up. They found Principal Himbry dead. He was gutted and hung from the goal post on the football field," catering to the appetite of a nearby fellow teen, who responds: "Well, what are we waiting for? Let's go over there

17 See chapter 1, *Twin Peaks*: Trope the secluded small American town challenged by murderous agency.

before they pry him down!" In this instant the relentless desire to observe the abject within the other becomes evident.

This notion of spectacle can be linked to Seltzer's concept of American *wound culture* which not only stages recurrence, but which also highlights a public engagement with the corpse: "The crowd gathered around the fallen body has become a commonplace in our culture: a version of collective experience that centres the pathological public sphere" (Seltzer, 22). As the franchise develops, it is not just death but also simultaneously the explicit staging of death-as-spectacle that becomes serial, ultimately catering to the audience's appetite. Inscribing death with spectacle is then also mirrored in the diegetic public's developing obsession with the life of the film's actual protagonist, Sidney Prescott. As Sidney, recent survivor of an attack by Ghostface, finds herself fighting off hungry reporters, it is made abundantly clear that they do not merely voice an interest in her story but take it a step further, claiming the right to know, justifying their displaced interest: "So how does it feel to be almost brutally butchered? People want to know. They have a right to know! […] How does it feel?" This juridical legitimization can be read as a form of constitutionalizing murderous spectacle as rightful. As such, Sidney's victimization becomes a cultural commodity that is reflective of America's *wound culture*, something that Seltzer also contends: "[t]his world of half meat and half machinery [America's contemporary trauma culture] is one of the lethal places that make up our wound culture, in which death is theater for the living" (22). The journalists' wording, which emphasizes "brutally butchered" and isolates the people's right to know how that *feels*, highlights that it is not mere tragedy which the (diegetic) public craves; it is the fleshy tangibility of brutally butchering that ultimately fuels public interest and endows Sidney with celebrity status.

While *Scream* elevates the observation of murderous agency to an implied affective agency by means of the serial, it is the second film of franchise which adds poignancy to this aspect of the spectacular in its excessive play with the motif of the double. *Scream* 2 not only appears as a double of its predecessor on multiple levels, the sequel also actively draws attention to itself as a form of doppelganger, thereby marking itself as a recurrence, playing on the dynamism of seriality itself. In the opening sequence, we follow a couple to the movies, with the intention to watch *Stab*,[18] *Scream*'s own diegetic double; within the diegesis, *Scream* 2 performs what *Scream* extra-diegetically is – a slasher which is loosely based on actual events turned fatally spectacular. The avid level of mirroring which this mise-en-abyme puts into place provides room for the serial killer's horizontal, intra-diegetic expansion. In *Dark Directions: Romero, Craven, Carpenter, and the Modern Horror Film*, Kendall R. Phillips contends that: "[…] the film-within-film […] is essentially a 'fictionalized'

18 The fictionalization of itself as *Stab* also hinting at the knife as a marker of both catering to an appetite and murderous agency.

version of the 'real' events in *Scream*. The complicated interplay here also serves as a space for reflection" (91). Phillips argues for the recurring double as text coming to serve as a spatial expansion of reflective space. *Stab* proves to be an exact replica of the events of *Scream*, as we follow the distraught hands of a hyper-fictional Casey attempting to escape from the doubled, hyper-fictional voice on the phone turned Ghostface. It is not only within the self-reflexive mise-en-abyme that the serial killer is explicitly repeated; hinging on spectacle, a quick pan to the movie theater reveals that the audience has dressed itself up as a plethora of Ghostfaces, waving about artificial blades at hungry imitators not of the identificatory final girl, but of the serial killer.

Illustrations 29 & 30: Doubling of Scream in self-citation, Scream 2

The fact that the intra-diegetic couple, carrier of the mise-en-abyme, makes a spectacle of purchasing popcorn to accompany their cinematic experience additionally bridges not only the connection to its predecessor, but also the fetishization of repetition. What is on display is what Seltzer deems to be rooted in America's *wound culture*; an endless recurrence turned obsession with killing-as-spectacle that appears to find a vast audience lusting for more. It is also here that we are reminded of the journalist underscoring the public's right to know how it *feels*. It is the cinematic screen that allows the public to discover what it feels like, albeit in an aestheticized, detached, and tamed form.

As the film continues, various other aspects are repeated and this heightens the audience's self-awareness, challenging the boundaries between reality and fiction. Phillips further points out that:

> [a]t one level, the likely audience for *Scream 2* would be watching the film in a movie theater not unlike the one depicted in the film, thus working to break through the obvious barrier that separates filmic violence – contained by the screen – and the audience, seemingly safe in the confines of the 'real' theater. (Philips, 92)

A mirror is being staged that "draws our attention to the fact that we are about to see a film: a technology and an artefact which should not be mistaken for real life,"

(Elsaesser & Hagener, 63) Craven initially puts a dynamic into play that is shattered by the intrusion of an imitated abject death when one of the attendees, Maureen, is "brutally butchered" to death, becoming the imitated actuality which mirrors the spectacle. It is this immediacy which also echoes the opening of *Scream*, the proverbial pilot episode of the franchise, thereby establishing a structural connection not only via its recurrence on the diegetic screen through *Stab*, but also on a purely implicit level. In its opening sequence, *Scream 2* transgresses a former observational stance on the serial killer with a complex interplay between intra- and extra-diegetic levels, which ultimately casts the audience itself as the serial killer. Phillips is correct in asserting that screening the audience as such, Craven is "forcing the viewing audience to essentially view itself" (92). This creates a moment of simultaneity of the fictional and the hyper-fictional when harmless spectacle becomes threatening reality within these theatrics as Maureen is actually (diegetically) murdered by the actual Ghostface who is able to go unnoticed amongst his imitating peers. As Philips concludes: "Put in this position, we are called to reflect upon our own viewing habits and the strange fascination that draws us to watch fictional depictions of violent acts while being repelled by real violence in our midst" (92). Weaving the audience into the plot by means of implementing a mirror trope also adheres to the serial narrative itself as "[w]hat is striking is the constancy with which the media use as entertainment the serial patterns that involve and fictionalize the audience" (Oltean, 6). The proximity between murderous agency and audience that is generated remains pleasurable because it remains an imitation. This dynamic is resonant of Sigmund Freud's "Thoughts for the Times on War and Death" which maintains that "[i]llusions commend themselves to us because they save us pain and allow us to enjoy pleasure instead" (331); the cathartic effect and *Scream 2*'s metaphorical nutritive purpose is heightened by means of challenging the boundaries between reality and fiction. It is film student Mickey Altieri who asserts that we are dealing with a "classic case of life imitating art imitating life", which points to the perpetual reciprocity between reality and the cultural imaginary.

While the film initially draws a picture of a seemingly omnipotent serial killer, in the masked Ghostface, harboring the ability to appear almost out of nowhere, entering homes through closed doors and inhabiting an almost supernatural immortality, we later learn that in both *Scream* and *Scream 2* there were in fact two killers who were disguising themselves as Ghostface, which explains a previously eerie air of invincibility. The double that conceals itself behind the mask points to the doubling of agency that produces the corpse. While the production of the corpse continually increases, the serial killer's agency remains condensed to a singular image, that of Ghostface. This staging of Ghostface as a constant is reinforced by the rest of the *Scream* franchise which remains loyal to Edward Munch's scream mask and merely changes the agent behind it. It is then only by wearing the mask that the agent of death obtains omnipotence, feeding off its notoriety as that which renders Ghost-

face immortal. Once the mask comes off so does the killers' superiority, illustrated by Sidney's success in *Scream* as she overcomes her opponents in Billy Loomis and Stuart Macher who, when stripped of their protective mask, lose their potency. It is Sidney herself who, for a brief moment in the final showdown, wears the mask and asserts her power by becoming a part of the plurality of death agents. Echoing seminal figures from the horror genre such as Freddy Krueger or Michael Myers, it is through the act of murdering that these villains attain notoriety[19] and, thus, inscribe themselves into the cultural imaginary, thereby rendering themselves immortal. It is through death that they remain alive; such is the nature of the metaphorical cannibal who paradoxically nourishes the corpse in order to maintain their own immortal stance. The fact that this is avidly reiterated through interchangeable Ghostfaces in the *Scream* franchise further highlights the narratological stance that the serial killer comes to obtain; anyone can step into his/her mask and, thus, can structure the story when masquerading as the serial killer through the achieved status of spectacular notoriety.

Immediately marked with the spectacular, the third film of the franchise, *Scream 3*, opens with a helicopter-ridden close-up of the Hollywood sign, the ultimate signifier of imitation. Building upon the opening sequences of the previous films so avidly and engorged with fatality, the film translates death into the Hollywood sign by means of its structural formatting. In *The Hollywood Sign*, Leo Braudy describes the notorious landmark as:

> a group of letters, a word on the side of a steep hill that, unlike so many other cherished sites, cannot be visited, only seen from afar. Its essence is almost entirely abstract, at once the quintessence and the mockery of the science of signs itself. (2–3)

Playing on its elusive nature, this analogy is reiterated in the film by detective Mark Kincaid stating that: "to [him] Hollywood is about death […] you get haunted". Highlighting the interplay between Hollywood and death, hyper-real and real, the alignment of fashioning fictionality and murderous agency is carefully interwoven throughout the film. By re-reproducing Sidney's tragic life within the hyper-real, her individual reality is elevated to that of a work of art. In this elevation, however, it ceases to be her reality and instead becomes spectacular, a staged version which, in order to please the masses, has been polished, edited, and changed. These changes make it possible to elevate the mundane to the level of the sublime; however, this is only possible by means of aestheticization, as Benjamin observes in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" when he claims that:

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19 The same dynamism of notoriety produces the figure of Andrew Cunanan as a serial killer in fiction.

> [in] the film studio the apparatus has penetrated so deeply into reality that a pure view of that reality, free of the foreign body of equipment, is the result of a special procedure – namely, the shooting by the specially adjusted photographic device and the assembly of that shot with others of the same kind. The equipment-free aspect of reality has here become the height of artifice [...] (105)

In *Scream 3*, this notion recurs through the excessive doubling of both characters and spaces, resulting in the reproduction of a reproduction. In creating the heightened representation of art imitating art that imitates life, Craven imposes repetition on the already repeated fetishizing of its own seriality in continuously re-staging itself.

The franchise's third film specifically plays with this fetishized dynamic of recurrence when he lets the serial killer chase Sidney through a serialization of her home; this is an accurate replica of her home on the set of *Stab*. Sidney knows her way through the replica since it is a reproduction of her house. However, at a certain point she nearly falls from the first floor as one particular door leads into an abyss, pointing towards the fact that we are dealing with a mere replica after all.

Illustration 31: Sydney fooled by replica of her house, Scream 3

This shatters Sidney's implied familiarity with the set, thereby leading her back into reality, which is not the hyper-reality in which the *Stab* series takes place:

> [...] we find Sidney recreating her evasions from the first film on the set. Of course, the houses used for filming are not complete, and in what might be read as commentary on the filmmaking process, in one telling moment Sidney seeks to run into a second-story room and finds herself dangling in thin air from the incomplete set-house. (Phillips, 95)

While this scene reflects on Hollywood's artificiality, it can also be read analogously to the *death paradox*. The linguistic productivity that is produced by the fetishizing of the absence *per definitionem*, which death maintains, is an illusion that ultimately remains incomplete. While the replica of Sidney's home is the recurrence and repetition of her near brutal butchering and the traumatizing chase through what is ultimately a mere prop, forms an additional mirroring of her haunting past; the fact that the set remains incomplete illustrates that the *death paradox* itself remains textually incomplete. Formatting itself as a series, then, partially amends this deficiency; while death will always remain absent, its fetishization by means of recurrence accommodates the spatial linearity for its textual productivity. Tied to the semiotic domain, the translation of death not only into text, but into a serial structuring of text comes to cater to an unamendeable insatiability. It is this serial dynamic that is so apt for the implementation of a hunger metaphor. When Sidney W. Mintz states that: "[w]e more than abstract and desire it [food] – we really must consume it to stay alive" (5) he is pinpointing the punctual, but ultimately fleeting, satisfaction provided by the act of consuming:

> Our desire for it can grow far beyond anticipatory pleasure; desire can turn to pain. When we get some we must put it inside our mouths to be processed there so that it can enter digestibly into our bodies. Because of the satisfaction of hunger […] the feeling of eating can be intensely pleasurable. (Mintz, 5)

This intensely pleasurable sensation is bound to evaporate and be replaced by a subsequent appetite; a serial structuring ensures both the immediate satisfaction as well as the promise of a subsequent metaphorical meal.

While the serial killer's omnipotence finds justification in Ghostface's plurality, his immortal stance also becomes a structural device that connects the individual increments of the franchise by means of trauma. A text so heavily marked with recurrence becomes a traumatized text. As Bronfen explains in "Arbeit an Trauma: Wes Craven's *Scream* Trilogie", the serial killer is drawn as a nearly superhuman being because he is inherently connected to his victim, Sidney, being the personification of her nightmares (101). Illustrating this notion, Bronfen draws on *Scream 3*'s conversation between Sidney and detective Mark Kincaid. When asked to name his favorite movie by Sidney, Kincaid responds with: "My life" an answer which she has no choice but to replicate when she says: "Mine too" (101). This dialogue is preceded by Kincaid voicing his frustration regarding "ghosts that won't go away" referring to death as an abstraction of which Ghostface becomes a partial tangibility. Reading Ghostface as a personification of Sidney's repressed fear of death, and taking the fact that he is nearly impossible to overcome in his plurality into account, suggests that any textual fetishization can only ever serve as an approximation, never as a full compensation. The way each of the *Scream* trilogy films unfolds can be seen as a metaphorical meal, one which reflects on its own consumption. Structurally hinging on a sim-

ple protagonist-antagonist dynamism with an intra-diegetic Sidney and her serial killing counterpart Ghostface, the extra-diegetic level of the doubled audience is reflected in Ghostface's plurality. On an extra-diegetic level, Ghostface becomes the fetishized, over-compensatory placeholder for an absence; the hyper-real audience of *Stab* is then mirrored in the actual audience who is presented with the same canvas, all feeding on the same metaphorical meal.

Initially designed as a trilogy, it appears that the franchise remained unable to escape its own seriality or its own textual insatiability. Addicted to itself, the text seems caged by the structural paradigm of the serial killer. An inherent compulsion, as Seltzer asserts, "[s]erial killing has its place in a public culture in which addictive violence has become not merely a collective spectacle but one of the crucial sites where private desire and public fantasy cross" (1). It is thus that the fourth film of the series, which opened in theatres in 2011, an entire decade after *Scream 3*. Craven once again stages Woodsboro as the falsely believed safe place in which death strikes as a force of recurrence. Not only is the location repeated, but we further meet familiar characters that still reside in Woodsboro – Gale Weathers as well as Dewey Riley, the *Scream* series' former protagonists work as a bridge between generations which finds its peak in the presence of Sidney as the aunt of the next generation's protagonist Jill Roberts with the added twist that it is Jill who will turn out to be the murderer in disguise. Structurally, *Scream 4* maintains its ritualized seriality, but the tagline "New Decade, New Rules" rings true in the film's conceptualization of the serial killer. The repetition of location, as well as characters, plays into a serial inevitability hinging on the uncanny which manifests as an "[…] involuntary repetition which surrounds what would otherwise be innocent enough with an uncanny atmosphere, and forces upon us the idea of something fateful and inescapable […]" (Freud, 237). This is a familiarity that does not merely remain tied to location, but also shows that Woodsboro's next generation is equally hungry for death, something that is evident in the self-reflexive tone that is repeated to an even more extreme degree as well as in the recurring repetition of the *Stab* series in an actual 'Stabathon'. *Scream 4* presents itself as the performative repetition of the *Scream* trilogy that has been adapted and updated in content in order to saturate a contemporary hunger.

This notion of repetition is immediately evoked by the film's opening sequence which layers no less than three hyper-realities onto each other – the ending of *Stab 6* which simultaneously marks the beginning of *Stab 7*, which is watched by two residents of Woodsboro and, in adherence to its paradigm, as the opening act of *Scream 4*, end up murdered by Ghostface. The layering of these hyper-realities remain initially unannounced, thereby challenging the audience's perception of extra-, intra,- and hypo- diegesis; this is a notion that is repeated in staging the double (*Stab 6*) within the double of the double (*Stab 7*) only to maintain that the possible double of the double of the double (*Scream 4*) is not a rendition of a possible *Stab 8*, but that the audience now finds itself back in the reality of the film. Challenging the intra-

diegetic serial that the film puts in place, the opening sequence of *Scream 4* then immediately questions the borders of fiction within the fictional real and the hyperreal, thereby creating not only a hyper-self- reflexivity but further leaving the audience questioning its own safe space in a mirror image that is dictated by diegetic fluidity.

It is not only the boundaries between the fictional and the real that are challenged, but also the boundaries between victim and serial killer at the level of character development. Crafted to coincide within the same agent, the new decade's final girl Jill Roberts does not merely obtain the position of the victim, but ultimately reveals that she is the murderer behind the mask. Staging her own survival by crafting her own antagonist's serial killer persona, Jill desires to consolidate both antagonism and protagonism within her character. This gesture of conflation is entirely geared towards the spectacular. Jill wants to be famous, leeching off her aunt's notoriety as "it's about becoming you" is what she tells Sidney. Seduced by the prospect of iconicity, Jill claims that "[she doesn't] need friends. [She] need[s] fans". In combining both final girl and serial killer, Jill draws upon the spectacular amplification of the fame of each role. It is this self-administered fame, then, which she conceives of as a way to achieve immortality; masquerading as both final girl and serial killer, Jill emerges from the entirety of the narratological stance. This binding dynamic is reiterated during the meeting of cinema club during which Robbie Mercer and Charlie Walker point out that the one component that Ghostface is missing is a self-induced media presence. In an attempt to re-invent the serial killer, in order to become the "new new version", Charlie points out that "the killer should be filming the murders" and by uploading these clips into cyberspace "making your art as immortal as you". As will be later revealed, Charlie is also the second half of the killer duo behind the mask and in this instant is, therefore proclaiming, that by filming the murders he would render *himself* immortal.

Within this notion we find that aspect of immortality that is achieved by becoming famous as a serial killer, which is to say through the fame achieved by means of producing the corpse. As the final girl is revealed to be the serial killer, Jill becomes both creator and destroyer. *Scream 4* thus reifies American *wound culture* – both the creator and destroyer of the serial killer and bound to endless recurrence. It within this dynamism that the *death paradox* gains resonance, thereby highlighting the productivity of the text, which is attained through the production of the corpse. Jill is willing to not only other her own death in her own creation as an active murderer in order to achieve immortality, but will further stage her own death as a means to overcome it. In her repetition of Sidney, however, Jill finds herself unable to achieve her hitherto acclaimed immortality, eventually being overcome by Sidney, the original, who sums up this circular transformation in her final statement: "You forgot the first rule of remakes Jill, don't fuck with the original". The analogy with abject death becomes evident when placed in the context of the *death paradox*. The text can

merely fetishize, which is to say produce, an aestheticized and incomplete image, a *remade death*; however, the original (abject death) cannot be reiterated. What remains is only the serialized figuration of an image that will continuously be re-created and re-destroyed.

5.2 An American Tale: *The Assassination of Gianni Versace*

> The battle for the mind of North America will be fought in the video arena – the video*drome*. The television screen is the retina of the mind's eye. Therefore the television screen is part of the physical structure of the brain. Therefore whatever appears on the television screen emerges as raw experience for those who watch it. Therefore television is reality, and reality is less than television.
> *Prof. Brian O'Blivion, Videodrome*

> The people's shudder of admiration for the "great criminal" is addressed to the individual who takes upon himself, as in primitive times, the stigma of the lawmaker or prophet.
> *Jacques Derrida, Force of Law: The "Mystical Foundation of Authority"*

In "The Electronic Funeral: Mourning Versace", Daniel Harris voices his bewilderment at the trivialization as well as commodification of public grievance. When Italian fashion mogul Gianni Versace was assassinated in Miami Beach on July 15th 1997, "the paramedics wheel[ed] him away to the morgue on his blood-spattered gurney [when] thousands of tributes placed by seemingly disconsolate fans astonished by his assassination flooded the internet" (154) Harris states further that marking this flood of mourning prominently involves "spontaneous eruptions of bewilderment and sorrow plagued by bad taste" (154). It is the dynamism of fandom that is conducted in *bad taste*, both overtly histrionic and superficially non-substantial, which appears to resonate with Harris. The unwarranted public grievance that he observes appears to be one of quantity rather than quality, which alludes to that form of fan-

dom that *Scream 4*'s Jill Roberts attempted to set into motion for herself. The spectacular (corpse) will live on when its iconicity is continually fed by its numerous fans; in the case of Gianni Versace, it was "a sob fest, an act of mass hysteria with a distinct note of competitiveness" (155) as Harris maintains. Ultimately, Harris consolidates that what he considers to be empty lamentations fueled by the actuality of Gianni Versace's corpse reify a collective unconscious, which is marked by apathy:

> The tributes testify, not our sensitivity to violence, as the mourners would have us believe, but our collective numbness, our indifference, our inability to respond to the headlines as anything more than an opportunity to engage in a grisly spectator sport, fascinated by atrocities we savor from a vantage point of domestic invulnerability, safely ensconced behind our television sets. (155–56)

A testament to America's *wound culture,* which is marked by a hunger for violence from a distance, Harris is echoing the pertinent sentiment of the "New Decade" and its "New Rules" which *Scream 4* established. The spectacle and spectatorship of violence, which lie at the heart of American's *wound culture,* emerge as a repetition compulsion which appears so avidly tied to a screen; this is a screen which can be read as the Foucauldian mirror which fragments itself into episodic pieces when textually attempting to capture death. Based on the *death paradox*, it is the staging of death in a plethora of different aestheticizations that remains ever-productive, fueling the engagement in a "grisly spectator sport" as Harris contends.

An inherently serial nature can be related to these minds of insatiability if the television screen is, in fact, the retina of the mind's eye, an allegory of a collective unconscious, as David Cronenberg's 1983 horror film *Videodrome*'s alleged voice of education and scientific pursuit, Prof Brian O'Blivion claims. The screen, as both canvas and mirror, becomes a platform for the simulated reiteration of the repetition of murderous desire. The camera, as has been asserted by Walter Benjamin, is a tool that facilitates the confrontation with the unconscious: "Clearly, it is another nature which speaks to the camera as compared to the eye, 'other' above all in the sense that a space informed by human consciousness gives way to a space informed by the unconscious" (117). It is the screen that feeds the literal eye of the spectator and the metaphorical I of the American cultural imaginary. In staging the serial killer narrative, it is the television screen which serializes this metaphorical gesture of consumption into ritual. What emerges is a compulsive desire to consume an aestheticized death as an act that relates to the formation of the subject as:

> [i]n the new scheme of things, what one consumed became a changing measure of what (and of who) one was. Status did not so much define what one could consume; what one consumed helped to define one's status. The individual – a producer – came to be redefined as a consumer; her desires were continuously remodeled. (Mintz, 78)

In the context of the serial killer narrative, this metaphor extends to the signification of the audience being fed by the fictionalized serial killer within the episodic format of the series that formally ritualizes that same consumption. The television serial, which showcases the serial killer, embeds formula into content in its rendition of a cultural unconscious that seems to be marked by insatiability. The medium of television, seminal as a "[…] key agent in the production and circulation of cultural meanings" (Däwes 27) and its prominent format the serial, "serves as an ideal laboratory for the diagnosis of contemporary American epistemes and cultural codes […]" (Däwes 27). Maintaining a formula where "[…] we may hope for the next episode [….]" (Däwes, 28), the medium of television picks up on an American promise which allows hope to craft a dream for each individual; while the serial killer narrative itself also allows for that debris which has been cast aside to reappear, as Harris noted, it is "a vantage point of domestic invulnerability, safely ensconced behind our television sets" (155–56). It is also from this vantage point that Versace's assassinator, Andrew Cunanan, emerges as a myth. Indiana maintains that:

> […] the scariest aspect of the Andrew Cunanan Story was the insensible proliferation of media coverage following the shooting of Gianni Versace: the killer, widely ignored while he left a trail of bodies from Minnesota to New Jersey, became, abruptly, a diabolic icon in the circus of American celebrity […]. (29)

While a conclusive categorization of Cunanan as either spree or serial killer cannot be officially provided,[20] it is the fictionalization of this sudden diabolic icon as a serial killer which becomes characteristic of the American cultural imaginary's repetition compulsion.

Composed as an anthology of true crime, the television series *American Crime Story* fictionalizes the story of Andrew Cunanan[21] specifically as a serial killer narrative in *The Assassination of Gianni Versace*, thereby lending the title to the series' second season.[22] The opening episode, "The Man Who Would Be Vogue", begins on the day on which Gianni Versace was assassinated, July 15th, 1997 in Miami Beach Florida; this temporal and spatial setting engraved in white letters on a black screen marks the first image that is shown. Feeding off the notoriety with which this situating is pregnant, given the context of the serial, the opening image visualizes a juxtaposi-

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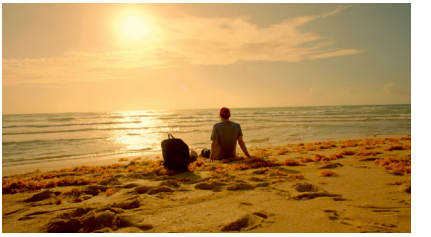
20 See Indiana, 31. Similar to the figure of the zombie, Cunanan's status as serial killer refuses final categorization which simultaneously endows his figuration with interpretability, see also chapter 2.

21 In what follows, any mention of "Andrew Cunanan" specifically references the figuration of his persona in *The Assassination of Gianni Versace*, not the actual Andrew Cunanan, unless where explicitly specified.

22 Thematically different each season, the first season of *American Crime Story* centers on the O.J. Simpson trial, while the third season is concerned with the impeachment of Bill Clinton.

tion of Versace's luxurious morning routine against a forlorn figure on the beach. Both men are overlooking the same ocean, a metaphorical imaginary.

Illustration 32 &33: Alignment of Versace and Cunanan, The Assassination of Gianni Versace, "The Man Who Would Be Vogue"

While Versace is cloaked in luxury, a figure marked by excess, the as yet unnamed Cunanan appears meagre in comparison; his clothes seem ragged and all his possessions are reduced to a backpack which has been carelessly dumped on the ground; this is another aspect which clashes with Versace's meticulously polished palace. While these two men are marked by difference, they are simultaneously aligned in their vision. Both of them are gazing at the ocean and both of them are visualized from behind which allows the audience to share their same vision. The alignment is thus triplefold; Versace, Cunanan as well as the viewer are overlooking the Atlantic Ocean in a moment of peace, which is to be shattered by death; by the looming *Assassination of Gianni Versace*.

Naming the first episode of the season "The Man Who Would Be Vogue", the serial narrative immediately suggests that this is not the story of fashion mogul Versace himself. This is not the story of a man currently en vogue, but rather this marks the beginning of the forlorn figure at the beach who would be vogue. This wording implies that it is the figure of Versace, which has to be overwritten by his assassinator Andrew Cunanan, a notion which is solidified by a close-up of Cunanan's possessions that he fiddles with at the beach, visually setting his agency into place. Rummaging through his backpack, Cunanan places a copy of Caroline Seebohm's *The Man Who Was Vogue: The Life and Times of Condé Nast* in front of him. What comes to overshadow the: "[P]ersonal recollections and confidential company archives to reveal the life and times of the man who revolutionized magazine publishing and design in America and set still-intact standards of taste" (blurb) is the gun that a distraught Cunanan places on top of the book.

Illustration 34: Condé Nast and gun, The Assassination of Gianni Versace, "The Man Who Would Be Vogue"

Before the opening credits are shown, the television serial already aligns text with a murderous desire that is embedded in a visual allusion to iconicity itself. The agent holding the gun on the day on which Versace will be assassinated is the figuration of serial murderer Andrew Cunanan. This is his American crime story, his claim to fame. As Andy Warhol suggests, in regard to said fame, "[t]he right story in the right place can really put you up-there for months or even years" (Fame, 45) highlighting the way in which storytelling feeds into celebrity culture. Not yet vogue, he is the man who *would* be vogue because of his murderous agency, which the image cements. Only mere minutes later, we will come to witness Andrew Cunanan shooting Gianni Versace with the gun with which we are already familiar; an act which renders serial murderer Cunanan the centre of the story. Opening the series as such, it is evidenced that murderous agency directed at celebrity carries enough spectacle to endow Cunanan himself with a level of celebrity status. It is Andrew Cunanan who becomes the television series' structuring force and protagonist.

The immediate assassination of Versace that precedes the episode's opening credits echoes that invocation of the spectacular, something with which the opening of the *Scream* franchise also plays. An instantaneous confrontation with murderous agency renders both the agent thereof and the story spectacular, by creating a form of excess.[23] While we know that Versace will be assassinated, the way in which his assassination is screened is not only immediate, but is fragmented with quick cuts revealing more and more of his lifeless body. It is this form of visual repetition, which formally fetishizes the corpse that is not just any corpse but the celebrity

23 A similar dynamic regarding spectacle and storytelling is at play in the opening of *Twin Peaks*; see chapter 1.

body, thereby adding to the pertinent sentiment of an instantaneous over-exaggeration of death. In *Natural Born Celebrities*, David Schmid isolates criminal activity directed at celebrity as marked with the machinery of fame, exemplifying "as Mark Chapman found out when he killed John Lennon, by attacking the famous, you become famous" (10). Read alongside *The Assassination of Gianni Versace*, it becomes evident that the television serial becomes textually productive in telling the story of Versace's murderer, Andrew Cunanan. While the Italian fashion designer lends his name to the series, the fragmented narrative circles around his assassin Andrew Cunanan who is not only staged as a serial killer, but who also becomes the structural force of the serial killer's narrative episodic format. While the audience already knows that the objective of the television series is the assassination of Gianni Versace, it becomes all the more telling that rather than working towards the cathartic outcome, the narrative is framed by the shooting of Gianni Versace. Crafted as an ellipsis, Gianni Versace's initial assassination is visualized from Versace's point of view. Marked with recurrence, the motif of the double feeding into the fragmented narrative, the final episode of the series, "Alone", will come to repeat the same scene from Cunanan's point of view. The series, thus, concludes by repeating the beginning, but reformats the alignment of perspective; re-encoding the recurrence of the assassination in such a manner cements the active outlining of the serial killer with an authoritative voice. After all, this remains an American Crime *Story*, a fabricated narrative in which the serial visualization of a story on a screen – *Videodrome*'s North American arena – caters to the mind's appetite through its retina; and the appetite emerging from America's *wound culture* craves the serial murderer.

The dynamism of repetition or *recurrence*, as Seltzer terms regarding *wound culture*, gains momentum when taking the view into consideration that prior to assassinating Versace we observe Cunnanan walking into the ocean. Surrounded by crashing waves, Cunanan voices an internal exasperation in a few excruciating screams.[24] Marking just one of many baptizing rituals that the character undergoes, Cunanan is prominently visualized taking showers or diving into swimming pools, frequently immersing himself in water throughout the entirety of the season. This overt notion of cleansing, read as a baptizing gesture, seems to allude to Cunanan's compulsive reinvention of his personality.[25] In a flashback, "The Man Who Would Be Vogue" showcases a conversation between soon-to-be-vogue serial murderer Cunanan and the object of his murderous desire, currently en vogue fashion designer Gianni Versace. Staging himself as a repetition when masquerading as one of his many personae, Cunanan pretends to be a novelist musing that he would "change my name to Andrew Da Silva […] when they make a movie of my novel" ("The Man Who Would

24 This is a gesture that calls to mind Laura Palmer's final excruciating scream, which reinstates her as alive in the closing episode of *Twin Peaks* (see chapter 1).

25 See also chapter 2 for an account of the baptizing that the figure of the zombie undergoes.

be Vogue"). A movie based on a purely fabricated novel never to be written, Cunanan stages himself as an author believing his story to be endowed with enough potential for spectacle. It is a different story that will be told, however, only over his dead body which comes to overshadow and feed the episodes that follow. Ultimately, Andrew Cunanan has to die while his ensuing iconicity as a serial killer maintains "an unparalleled degree of visibility in the contemporary American public sphere. In a culture defined by celebrity, serial killers […] are among the biggest stars of all, instantly recognized by the vast majority of Americans" (Schmid, 1). It is not the plethora of personae that Cunanan masquerades as which render him worthy of storytelling; instead, the repetition of his murderous agency is the one constant that he maintains and this feeds the audience's appetite and catapults him onto the television screen.

Stripped of his post-mortem celebrity status as serial killer, Cunanan marks the epitome of an American ordinary. When his utilitarian love interest, Norman Blachford, debunks Cunanan's charade by stating that: "I'm saying that your name is not Andrew Da Silva. It's Andrew Cunanan" ("Descent") and proceeds to expose Cunanan's actual and unspectacular family history Cunanan is horrified and refuses to acknowledge his ordinariness. Having fabricated many dazzling stories about his past, hinging on a plethora of personalities which he has crafted, when Blachford further inquires what it is he finds insulting about the mundane, Cunanan responds "it's ordinary", thereby identifying ordinariness as a threat to his self-perceived extraordinariness ("Descent"). Dismantling Cunanan's compulsion to pretend, in "Creator/Destroyer", the eighth episode of the series, we learn that Cunanan's immigrant father is of Philippine origin and has come to adopt the American Dream as his life's quest. Outlining the root of Cunanan's obsession with the spectacular, the flashback reveals that at a job interview Cunanan's father Modesto states that "[t]he United States [is] the greatest country in the world" based on its promise of prosperity which he solidifies by rejecting his given name, thereby urging his interviewers to "call me Pete" ("Creator/Destroyer"). Modesto's job interview is mirrored with a young Cunanan's own interview at Bishop school where he is asked what his one wish would be. Cunanan's answer stands as an epitome of the American Dream when he elaborates: "[a] home overlooking the ocean. Two Mercedes. Four children, three dogs and a good relationship with God" (Creator/Destroyer"). Having been indoctrinated by his father, who constantly reassures Cunanan that he is special, extraordinary even, when Cunanan is then called out for his answer containing more than one wish, he counters with his one wish being "to be special" ("Creator/Destroyer").

Anything but special, expanding on Cunanan's origins, the series debunks Cunanan's family history as heavily charged with the promise of an American Dream. This promise is, ultimately, exposed as corrupted when Modesto has to flee the country in order to avoid embezzlement charges and, more poignantly, when Cunanan's

supposed extraordinariness leads his father to sexually abuse the boy, urging him "not to make a sound" ("Creator/Destroyer"). The slow dismantling of the false American Dream, the Cunanans have been attempting to capture simultaneously challenges the mantra by which Cunanan has been brought up, while also allowing him to fashion his personality as pure canvas; much like how his father's compliance with the American Dream was corrupted, Cunanan himself spirals into becoming a corrupted projection screen. As such, he is staged as a core trope of the American imaginary; providing a canvas for a promise which he attempts to keep by becoming spectacular. Cunanan specifically marks himself as American when referencing his grandmother as an American-Italian who has never been to Italy vis-à-vis Versace in a flashback to his alleged first encounter with Versace. As such, he is marking himself as American and is anchoring his persona in a type of Americanness. An extraordinary Americanness that the series figures into the fame of the serial murderer, which "in American popular culture that addresses serial killers because these figures not only connote monstrosity but also personify another iconic American figure who inspires sharply contradictory feelings: the celebrity" (Schmid, 8).

"Creator/Destroyer" heartbreakingly ends with Cunanan's realization that "I'm a lie", an epiphany that he has after confronting his father Modesto with his embezzlement charges and return to the Philippines. Contesting the promise of the American Dream, which Modesto dismantles as corrupted and after he has been forced back to a shack in the Philippines, he tells his son that: "[y]ou can't go to America and start from nothing. That's the lie. So I stole" ("Creator/Destroyer"). Read alongside Lacanian psychoanalysis, one could claim that as Modesto is dismantled, the more the symbolic crumbles and the more Cunanan turns himself into a fabricated image, not only perceiving himself as a lie but also adapting telling lies as a form of labor, turning his identity into an imaginary. This dynamic is solidified in "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" when future victim Jeff tells Cunanan's current love interest and additional victim David: "He's got no one. He's got nothing. Everything he's told you about his life is a lie. You know that, right?" It is this emptiness, this "nothing" which Cunanan commodifies and fetishizes into the spectacular overcompensating for an absence with extraordinariness. Having staged himself as a rich entrepreneur in order to impress David, Cunanan references his own compensatory compulsion when he says: "I know that I over-exaggerate sometimes" ("Descent"). While the narrative's fragmented chronology formally underlines Cunanan's manifold cons, it becomes ever more uncertain which of Cunanan's accounts are true and which remain purely fabricated. Having anchored his Americanness with his return from the Philippines, this dynamism further alludes to the American trope of storytelling as that fabric which crafts something from nothing. When he states that "I have nothing" ("Don't Ask, Don't Tell") his storytelling is that which comes to fill the text with emptiness, thereby substantiating an absence in which he crafts his stories both large in number and "over-exaggerated" into something substantial. The fact that he ultimately

emerges as a serial killer writes a compulsive serialization of an aestheticized death into the American cultural imaginary with "[…] the huge serial killer industry that has become a defining feature of American Popular culture since the 1970s" (Schmid, 1). The fact that the real Andrew Cunanan cannot be conclusively classified as either spree or serial killer becomes less significant than the fact that the serialized text instrumentalizes his iconicity specifically to produce him as a serial killer.

Cunanan's obsession with Versace becomes symptomatic of his strive for extraordinariness against the backdrop of Cunanan's own origin story. Versace comes to literalize Cunanan's manufacturing of his self in his manufacturing of clothes; Cunanan praises the icon's self-reliance when he admiringly states that:

> […] the man invented his own fabrics. When they told him what he wanted wasn't possible he just created it himself. […] I see the man behind it [something nice]. A great creator. The man I could have been. ("Manhunt")

It is pertinent here that Cunanan adds that Versace is the man that he could have been, a statement which he commemorates by taking a baptizing shower which cements his desire to become Versace, to overwrite the fashion mogul in order to reinstate himself as vogue. This aspect is further cemented in the same episode's concluding scene in which we observe Cunanan at a nightclub. Surrounded by extravagant sound and lighting, he engages in a conversation with an unnamed stranger. Introducing himself using an abbreviation of his real name, he states "I'm Andy". Upon being asked by the stranger "So what do you do?" Cunanan states "I'm a serial killer". This is an answer which is swallowed and digested by the noise, coinciding with sensory excess, the stranger asks for a reiteration when he yells "what?" Being granted a moment of correction, which is to say, being able to readjust the potential error in translation Cunanan elaborates:

> I said I'm a banker. I'm a stock broker, a share-holder, I'm a paperback writer, I'm a cop, I'm a naval officer, sometimes I'm a spy. I build movie sets in Mexico and skyscrapers in Chicago. I sell propane in Minneapolis, import Pineapples from the Philippines. You know I'm the person least likely to be forgotten. I'm Andrew Cunanan. ("Manhunt")

Referencing the personae that he has previously crafted for himself, his overt listing culminates in the desire to become immortalized, as someone "least likely to be forgotten".

Textually reminding us of the excessive doubling in *American Psycho*,[26] Cunanan's fragmentation of identity is solidified by the nightclub's flashing lights, which come to visually fragment his body as well as the conversation that he is conducting. Illuminated as such, with the repetitious lighting jumping back and forth, Cunanan

26 See chapter 4 for a detailed analysis of *American Psycho*.

is rendered both visible and invisible. The sequence marks the end of the episode and the scene then concludes with a completely black screen and only then do we hear him utter the words: "I'm Andrew Cunanan" ("Manhunt"). Merely audible but no longer visible, this voice-over accompanying darkness, absence, formally echoes that which Seltzer terms senseless murder, "where our most basic senses of the body and society, identity and desire, violence and intimacy, are secured, or brought to crisis" (Seltzer, 2). An assertion of his actual identity, "I am Andrew Cunanan" is underlined by the black canvas, which he comes to personify as a serial murderer. Rooted in Cunanan's initial statement, which asserts that he identifies as serial killer, the surrounding atmosphere of sensual deprivation through chaos facilitates "[t]he emergence of the kind of individual called the serial killer is bound up […] with a basic shift in our understanding of the individuality of the individual" (Seltzer, 2). Composed as such, Cunanan is marked as a deviant canvas, not a white but a black projection screen; the serial killer as celebrity sustaining the opposite of benevolent success, outlining a corrupted American Dream fed by malignancy, while simultaneously having been produced by the same ideology of optimistic promise. A result of the same machinery of fame, Cunanan, alongside his many personae and against the backdrop of a black projection screen, marks a deviance that prevails.

The text thus writes Cunanan's self-proclaimed occupation of serial killer into the fabric of the American cultural imaginary by means of the serial narrative, with the format mirroring his repetition compulsion. Further echoing Ellis' Patrick Bateman,[27] Cunanan asserts his own performativity when he states: "I tell people what they need to hear" ("Manhunt"). Through his constant reinvention, Cunanan challenges the boundaries of his own subjectivity. Apart from his stance as serial killer, which cements the only constant part of his personality, his self becomes thoroughly fluid. This dynamism is highlighted early on in the narrative, the pilot episode, when an unnamed friend confronts Cunanan's theatrics asking, "[d]o I pretend to know the person you're pretending to be? I can't keep up. Every time I feel like I'm getting close to you, you say you're someone else" ("The Man Who Would Be Vogue"). Adding the fact that he predominantly stages himself as working in the film industry, in the crafting of movie sets for high-grossing films such as *Titanic* in particular, he states "I make movie sets. Right now I am building the sets from the *Titanic* movie" ("Ascent") which illustrates the way in which he seems to spiral further and further into a fabricated image, a mere performance, a *story*. His substantiation is purely artificial, which his friend Lizzie exposes in "Descent" urging him to maintain "who [he is] trying to be", ultimately pointing to Cunanan's fragmented self; this is a self which he does not want to acknowledge as singular because this would simultaneously reinstate his own mortality. Instead, he duplicates himself into many personae, all of

27 See chapter 4 for a full discussion of Patrick Bateman's fragmentation which develops into rudimentary cannibalism.

whom hinge around his singular defining character trait, that of being a serial killer; this involves bestowing mortality upon others in order to write himself into immortality. He refuses to be ordinary and crafts an image of himself as extraordinary; this is an image that can only be sustained through his murderous agency, however. Diagnosing ordinariness as a lack, the way in which acknowledgment feeds into Cunanan's murderous agency is then further solidified in "Ascent" when Cunanan ties rejection to a form of premature death, stating that: "[f]or me being told 'no' is like being told I don't exist". "No" becoming a carrier of absence, this statement explains why Cunanan spirals into a compulsion to kill upon being rejected by object of his desire, David, namely by over-exaggerating his own absence through the absence of an other. This sentiment is cemented when his love interest David confronts him with his murder of Jeff in stating: "He finally saw the real you and you killed him for it" ("House by the Lake").

Dissatisfied with his ordinary origins and scrambling for an identity, Cunanan adapts serial killing as a lifestyle in much the same way as Seltzer describes:

> By the turn of the century, serial killing has become something to do (a lifestyle, or career, or calling) and the serial killer has become something to be (a species of person). The serial killer becomes a type of person, a body, a case history, a childhood, an alien life form. (4)

It is then the serial format which also becomes particularly apt for the narratological development of the figure of the serial killer. Television formats have recently developed towards complexity, as Birgit Däwes claims, "[s]ince the 1990s, television series and serials have become increasingly complex in their narrative patterns and time structures", Däwes further anchors this structural evolution of the serial format in Jason Mittell's seminal definition of complex TV, marking a:

> new paradigm of television storytelling […], redefining the boundary between episodic and serial forms, with a heightened degree of self-consciousness in storytelling mechanics, and demanding intensified viewer engagement focused on both diegetic pleasures and formal awareness. (qtd. in Däwes, 18)

Building on this dynamism, in "Forensic Fandom and the Drillable Text", Mittell further defines complex television as said *drillable text*, thereby highlighting the "narrative complexity of media storytelling, especially on television" (1) which manifests in "increased seriality, hyperconscious narrative techniques such as voice-over narration and playful chronology, and deliberate ambiguity and confusion" (Mittell, 1). Expanding on Mittell, and weaving in Schmid's assertion that serial murderers "[…] exert equal parts repulsion and attraction, a fact that ensures their simultaneous abjection from and ingestion into the social in a process that is potentially infinite" (8), it is this conceptualization of infinity that is avidly reflected in a serial format. Mirroring its protagonist's subjectivity, the chronological depiction of events in *The*

Assassination of Gianni Versace is thoroughly discontinuous. While there is a punctual situating for every jump, the narrative does not follow a temporal linearity but remains fragmented and pluralistic; the series' narrative complexity is marked by recurrence. This can be theorized alongside Seltzer, in the consolidation of the formatting that the series contains and that mirrors the trauma of *wound culture*. This is to say that rather than through temporal and spatial chronology, *The Assassination of Gianni Versace* provides structural linearity by means of a trauma which manifests as the serial killer's repetition compulsion.

In telling the serial killer, the serial narrative comes to fetishize its own seriality. The format comes to mark an (over-)exaggeration itself; while the serial killer destroys the series creates and thus compensates the absence(s) left by the serial killer through its encoding. The figure of the serial murderer then ritualizes murderous desire through the performance of a fetishized recurrence of murderous desire, which, in itself, is ritualized through that serial encoding. This notion culminates in the machinery of the serial which, like a cannibal, sustains life through the consumption of the dead, thereby becoming *re*productive:

> […] the 'suspicion' that media are putting to maximum use the same, very productive and already verified machinery; that, metaphorically or not, this machinery exists and constitutes one of the most characteristic instruments of the contemporary culture. (Oltean, 6)

The machinery of limitless reproduction becomes a signifier of contemporary culture and the overt fragmentation of narrative in *The Assassination of Gianni Versace* further refines an established medium towards a distinguished palate. Accepting Oltean's comparison of serials to a dinner ritual, when stating that "[t]he serials lay all the narrative banquet dishes – which cannot easily be consumed simultaneously (because of the interwoven plots) – on the table" (18), the narratological structuring thus renders the story of Andrew Cunanan a complex meal. When read as a banquet dish, *The Assassination of Gianni Versace* reminds us of Hannibal Lecter's refined dinner parties and sophistication; marking the metaphorical evolution of the serial killer narrative towards cultivation.[28]

This dynamism of heightened formal complexity is not only present in the fragmented staging of Cunanan's story, but is further reified in the content's conceptualization. When an escort agent inquires whether Cunanan "can […] hold [his] own at a dinner table conversation" ("Ascent"), he instrumentalizes the prompt by outlining himself as spectacle when he states: "I am the dinner conversation" ("Ascent"). Continuously fashioning himself as the dish to be devoured, Cunanan consciously caters to an appetite by providing that which others crave. Cunanan crafts himself

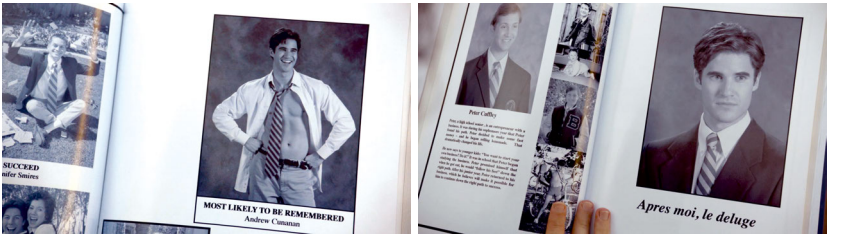
28 See chapter 4 for an in-depth analysis of Hannibal Lecter who emerges as a sophisticated cannibal.

as spectacle; as the simultaneous authorial figure and protagonist of his own spectacle, he does not simply desire to be seen. Instead, he wants to be craved and devoured. When the same escort agent refuses to add Cunanan to her repertoire, based on his Philippine heritage, which she "cannot sell," he counters by saying: "[t]hen I'll sell myself" ("Ascent"). As such, he not only proposes to turn his body into currency but also, rooted in his compulsion to lie with regard to his personality, posits a commodification of a crafted, fictionalized self. What emerges from the hand of the serial killer is a form of self-fashioning that hinges on the repetition of a plethora of different selves, which ultimately stand in contradiction to his singular physical mortality. Composing himself as the dinner conversation, Cunanan desires to be *both* the diner and the dish which ties back to an impossible desire for visibility. At his most successful, overlooking the ocean alongside Blachford, Cunanan states: "Oh, if they could see me now". When Blachford inquires "who?" Cunanan over-exaggerates, saying: "everyone" ("Ascent"). So desperately desiring to be vogue, so desperately wanting to be seen, he has crafted himself as a body of spectacle, weaving himself into a communal fabric in order to remain remembered, immortal.

Deconstructing Cunanan's proverbial "Ascent", the season's penultimate episode introduces the ensuing dismantling of Andrew-Cunanan-as-construct. It is here, in "Creator/ Destroyer", a title hinging on an American bipolar dynamism of creative destruction,[29] that Cunanan crystallizes not only as a serial killer, but predominantly also as a celebrity gone awry. Once upon a time voted "most likely to be remembered" by his classmates, Cunanan's yearbook showcases his eccentricity when he is depicted with an unbuttoned uniform, his tie loosely hanging over his exposed chest. In a flashback, it is revealed that Cunanan very consciously performs into the visibility that this deviant behavior grants him ("Creator/Destroyer"). The *enfant terrible* among his high school peers, the quote, which he chooses to commemorate himself in his yearbook, is "Après moi, le deluge" – after me, destruction – positioning him not only implicitly as creator, but more predominantly as destroyer.

29 See chapter 1 for a detailed discussion of creative destruction in the context of the American gothic.

Illustrations 35 & 36: Yearbook Cunanan, The Assassination of Gianni Versace, "Creator/Destroyer"



Fashioning iconicity through deviance, Cunanan performs as the undying celebrity body, crafting a form of visibility that is related to immortality. The fact that eventually it will be his murderous agency becoming that characteristic which renders him extraordinary is avidly underlined by "Après moi, le deluge". Ever the dinner conversation, the fact that his peers cannot stomach him, sets his metamorphosis from creator (of himself as spectacle) to destroyer (of others as spectacle) in motion. His notoriety comes to hinge exclusively on the repetition of destruction; this is what renders Cunanan visible, but which also cements a distance. We are reminded of Harris' assertion that wound culture's fascination with violence is only perceived as pleasurable when it is tied to a screen, observable from a safe distance. It is, thus, Cunanan's deviant claim to fame, the black projection screen that he manifests, which captures him in a golden cage. Ever so visible, he is also utterly alone.

This aspect culminates in the series' final episode, "Alone", which hinges on the self-referential and circular loneliness of the serial killer as celebrity. In *The Beast and the Sovereign*, Jacques Derrida reflects on mortality, arguing that subjectivity precedes and is, ultimately, bound to a lone sovereignty, contending that:

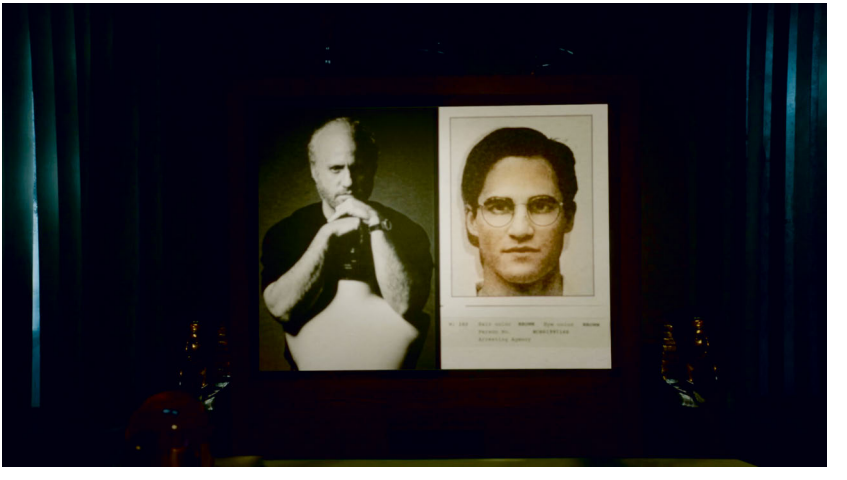
> I am alone. Not: I am alone in being able to do this or that, to say this or that, to experience this or that, but "I am alone," absolutely. "I am alone" does moreover mean "I am" absolute, that is absolved, detached or delivered from all bond, absolutus, safe from any bond, exceptional, even sovereign. (22)

Being absolute in one's subjectivity while isolated becomes pertinent in "Alone" in which the fact that Cunanan's identity is anchored in serial killing, while all other aspects remain fluid, is problematized. The final episode performs both the fame as well as the loneliness of the serial killer as celebrity. Through his murderous agency, Cunanan has achieved that notoriety which he so avidly craves; however, his claim to fame also adds volition to Fiedler's pertinent question of "[…] differentiation; How could one tell where the American Dream ended and the Faustian nightmare began?"

(143). Caught in an American Dream turned Faustian Nightmare, Andrew Cunanan is currently most wanted; however, it is not the celebratory fans, but rather the FBI, who seeks him out, not to celebrate but to punish him. He is still exceptional, but it is an extraordinariness based on his only constant character trait, his stance of *absolutus*, through that serial killing agency that has rendered him much more visible than any of his other theatrics. Cunanan ultimately emerges as pure destroyer and as someone forced by his origins to both fetishize creation and overcompensate by means of crafting a plethora of personae. "Après moi, le deluge" suddenly harbors a visibility that becomes threatening to his freedom, when the entire world turns its panoptic gaze on him.

Abhorred rather than admired, Cunanan's American Dream turns into a Faustian Nightmare. Hunted by the FBI, he finds himself surrounded by the reduplication of his manifold doubles as images of him flash on every television screen. A television screen marked by increasing proximity, rather than distance, becomes a dire reality for Cunanan; while completely alone, *absolutus*, he is not distant from and therefore not protected by the screen. The real Cunanan's identity, as lack, is catching up with the plethora of stories that Cunanan had previously crafted in order to amend his own inadequacies, to compensate for his ordinariness. Haunted by a plethora of images flashing on every screen in Miami, it is one in particular that stands out and which captures Cunanan's attention. Momentarily, Cunanan's notoriety places him next to his idol, but names him the destroyer of Versace, Cunanan's deviance as serial killer providing the only reason for their fleeting, shared fame.

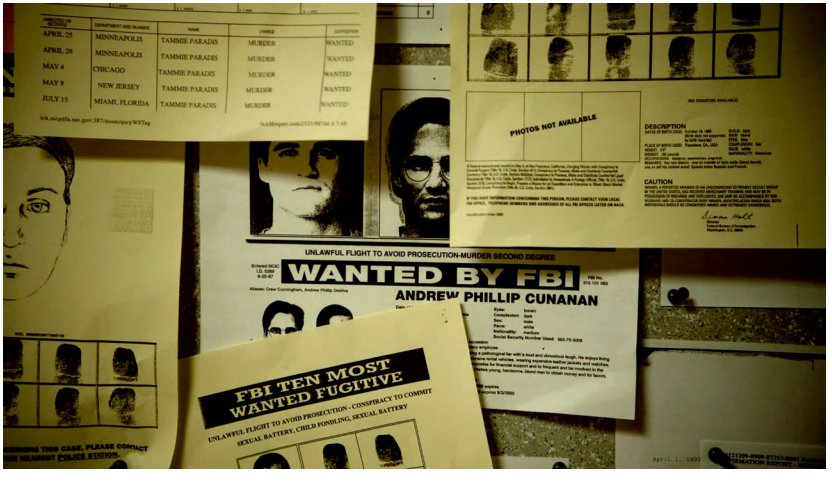
Illustration 37: Doubling Versace and Cunanan on television screen, The Assassination of Gianni Versace, "Alone"



Visually adjacent, Versace's superiority remains intact while Cunanan's masquerade is debunked. We are reminded of the manifold grievances over Versace's demise outlined by Harris; this is a mourning which is framed by antagonism towards Cunanan. No longer is he banker, spy, pineapple farmer, architect, or stockbroker. No longer is he a creator. No more reinvention, no more baptisms. Cunanan is reduced to pure destroyer. The debris that remains is Andrew Cunanan, serial killer. This is visualized by Cunanan observing his own suicide in a mirror, exerting his structural stance as serial killer in a self-serving circularity.

As *The Assassination of Gianni Versace* concludes, the narrative comes to reinstate Versace's benevolent iconicity while rendering Cunanan malignantly mundane. This aspect is cemented through the juxtaposition of the protagonists' graves which come to symbolically stand for the two men. A testament to their popularity, their perceived *vogueness*, Versace's mausoleic shrine exerts an overt superiority in comparison to Cunanan's modest grave, which disappears among all of the others which look exactly the same; this is a juxtaposition which echoes the television series' opening scenes; it is a juxtaposition which ultimately characterizes Cunanan as serial. It is a serialization which the series had already alluded to in its second episode, "Manhunt". Temporally situated after the assassination of Versace, we briefly witness a detective on the case, Lori Wieder, passing an FBI board which displays the currently *most wanted*. What stands out is the fact that Cunanan does not stand alone and has already been overwritten by others, becoming serial before slowly disappearing into the background. Marking an oversaturation with serial killers, this brief scene both illustrates the serial killer's exponential growth as well as the ordinariness that the figure ultimately has come to acquire.

Illustration 38: FBI board, The Assassination of Gianni Versace, "Manhunt"



What remains is only repetition compulsion. What disappears in the process of the serialization of murderous agency is identity. If, as Seltzer consolidates, "[…] the serial killer […] is an individual who, in the most radical form, experiences identity, his own and others, as a matter of numbers, kinds, types, and as a matter of simulation and likeness," (4) then it is this form of simulation and likeness which also marks the serial killer's identity. Any iconicity that was achieved remains tied to a repetition compulsion to kill; the repeated production of the corpse feeds the serial killer's subjectivity. *The Assassination of Gianni Versace* emphasizes the way in which the American cultural imaginary not only fashions the myth that surrounds the actual Andrew Cunanan as a fictionalized serial killer narrative, but also highlights the way in which it is the serial killer narrative, not the serial killer, that ultimately prevails. Reiterated by the television format, the serial killer's seriality renders him serial and thus overwriteable; there will always be a next in a context dictated by *wound culture*. As this particular *American Crime Story* comes to an end, Andrew Cunanan might have been devoured and served up to quench an appetite, but this appetite has only been temporarily sated. A subsequent craving will follow, one dictated by an ever-recurring hunger and satisfied by the series' binding ritual. What emerges is not purely an American appetite for death, but more specifically a craving for the recurrence of murderous agency; it is that constant which manifests as the flipside of American optimism, as the serial compulsion to aestheticize death. *Over and over again*.

Conclusion: Death. *Again*.

Death makes a killer comeback.
Tagline Happy Death Day 2U

Illustration 39: Poster Happy Death Day 2U, 2019

The introduction of this volume used Christopher Landon's 2017 film *Happy Death Day* to illustrate the way in which the American cultural imaginary produces aestheticized representations of death through a dynamism of repetition compulsion; that which I root in what I have called the *death paradox*, and which I endow with a food metaphor, that characterizes American culture as metaphorically *hungry*

for death. It is this exact insatiability that is compellingly performed by the release of the sequel to Landon's film in 2019 with *Happy Death Day 2U*. *Again*, we watch Tree Gelbman repeatedly die in the same recurring narrative which re-catapults her into the same death loop that was staged in the original.

"Death makes a killer comeback," the sequel's tagline, is governed by an illustrative and productive ambiguity and this renders the use of the word 'killer' doubly interpretable. Read as an agent, death makes a comeback, i.e., it recurs navigated through an agency appointed to a killer. At the same time, when read as an adjective of qualitative assessment, 'making a *killer* comeback' also connotes that the recurrence of death is successful; death, as an agentless comeback, is 'killer' insofar as it is satisfactorily catering to an audience. Culminating in the assertion that death not only reinvigorates the (recurring serial) killer, but also metaphorically 'kills' the appetite of its audience, the sequel's tagline circles around the linguistic productivity of the *death paradox* within an American context. While remaining a successor to its original, *Happy Death Day 2U* recalibrates the ending of its original as a way to reintroduce the same diegetic setting as the original into which the characters are once again propelled. The element that changes is quantitative, not qualitative; the film hinges on the same dynamic as the original, showcasing a plethora of ways in which Tree Gelbman must die. The sequel becomes actively performative in cementing this book's claim: that the serialized aestheticization of death cannot find closure and remains insatiable and, thus, is preoccupied with reproduction. The American cultural imaginary remains ever so hungry for death and continuously produces aestheticized figurations of death; this hunger is visually reiterated on the poster for the sequel, still featuring the original's fatal cupcake of the original held out by the masked killer. Emblematic of the food metaphor that this volume sets into place, the poster of the exemplary *Happy Death Day 2U* visually characterizes an insatiability for death that is negotiated in the American cultural imaginary, as death indeed makes a *killer* comeback.

Joel Black contends that death "can be represented only as an artistic fiction or simulation. In this guise, murder is no longer a social reality; it has been neutralized and tamed as a supposedly harmless form of popular entertainment" (17). Here, Black implicitly references that which I have called the *death paradox*. It is this simulated recurrence of death that surfaces as a serialized and aestheticized imagination in the American cultural imaginary which is mediated through the *death paradox*. Illustrative of an inherent and axiomatic inaccessibility of an abject death, the figuration of death becomes linguistically productive as abject death is reshaped into manifold tangible (re)figurations by means of reformatting representations of death towards an aesthetic. The *death paradox* flourishes with particular momentum against the backdrop of a cruel American optimism that covers up death and instead institutionalizes the preservation of life; after all, it is by means of this life-affirming parenthesizing of death that an *insatiability* for the aestheticized repro-

duction of death reappears in its cultural imaginary. What emerges is a plethora of aestheticized imaginations of death, all seemingly dictated by a compulsion to repeat the same imaginations over and over again. This book's objects of analysis were specifically chosen to exemplify the way in which the American cultural imaginary appears unable to stop the production of seemingly limitless aestheticized renditions of death, compartmentalizing them at best within the form of the serialized text which does not resolve anxieties about death, but instead performs an act of *taming*[1] through the reshaping of an abject conceptualization of death into an aesthetic imagination.

Deploying an insatiability that manifests itself as an appetite that is ritualized, in a taming gesture, the aesthetic figuration of death develops into the structural formula of the recipe through the *serialized narrative*. It is also the appetite for the perpetual aestheticization of death that binds these different texts, its unifying factor becoming a formal necessity to repeatedly perform death and to produce the corpse. When read through the lens of death, we find the manifestation of an unconscious myth in the American cultural imaginary. The serialization of an aestheticized death emerges as "a popular and powerful narrative" and an "anchor and key reference in discourses of 'Americanness'" (Paul, 11), or as a myth that reappears as an unconscious counter reaction to an American pathos of optimism. It is exactly *because* the conceptualization of death surfaces as an unconscious desire that it develops as a hunger or appetite. Rather than a meticulously crafted ideology, the serialization of an aestheticized death emerges as a gluttonous craving, manifesting as an appetite which is endorsed by an equally hungry audience and which spirals into a continuum based on reciprocity. This dynamism is mirrored in the way in which this volume has developed its trajectory, as a progression towards the ritualization of the consumption of aestheticized images of death became evident. All of these different chapters have circled around the serialization of figurations of death which cater to an appetite by negotiating the staging of the corpse. Margaret Visser reminds us that "a meal can be thought of as a ritual and work of art, with limits laid down, desires aroused and fulfilled, enticements, variety, patterning and plot" (19) while Terry Eagleton further maintains that food "makes up our bodies just as words make up our mind [and] eating and speaking [...] continuously cross over in metaphorical exchange" (207). In a final self-reflexive gesture, this book itself may be codified as a meticulously orchestrated dinner ritual that performs such a metaphorical exchange.

Analogizing this volume with a dinner ritual becomes primarily illustrative of the sequencing of the individual chapters alongside its narrative trajectory. Crow reminds us that the genre of the American gothic "is, simply, the imaginative expression of the fears and forbidden desires of Americans" (2). It is within this voic-

1 See Wood in Introduction.

ing of an American optimism, rendered cruel, that Edgar Allan Poe's short stories stand out as an initial serialization and aestheticization of death, the entirety of his oeuvre showcasing the variability and productivity of the *death paradox* against the backdrop of American optimism. While his short stories are anthological, rather than episodic, it is David Lynch who picks up on the serialization of death through a gothic aestheticism with *Twin Peaks* and *Twin Peaks: The Return* explicitly, thereby ultimately allowing the text's seriality to overwrite or *devour* the dead as a means of reinstating them as living. Ritualizing Poe's variability through the televised serialization of the American gothic, *Twin Peaks* implements a form of creative destruction in its serial storytelling that cultivates the aestheticization of death as a repetition compulsion that caters to an audience which it binds through ritual. The eventual reinstatement of the dead as living, as well as the narrative ending with the insinuation that it may all have been but a dream, further highlights the way in which an optimistic claim about death is made possible, navigated through the discourse of the American gothic. The way in which the genre of the gothic allows for the text to overwrite the corpse, to the extent that it reinstates it as living, speaks to an impossible desire to overcome death which is so productive throughout the mode of the American gothic. Amending the cruelty with which Berlant diagnoses American optimism, the genre of the gothic allows for the figuration of an impossible fantasy. As such, the analysis of Poe and Lynch as mediators of the American gothic in this book's first chapter marks an initial flirtation with the corpse, the supernatural tonality of the gothic producing a utopic, which is to say, a reversible figuration of the corpse. Conceived of as a dinner ritual, it is thus that the first chapter becomes an *aperitif* that opens the composition of the metaphorical meal.

Beginning with the aforementioned aperitif, opening the argument with the American gothic renders the first chapter a complementary prelude to that which is to follow. Jenny Ridgwell quotes the first mention of the cocktail in print in stating that "a cocktail is a stimulating liqueur [that is] supposed to be an electioneering potion" (6), which precedes a meal. As such, like a stimulating and electioneering potion, the American gothic is thematically resonant, becoming the tantalizing liquid that precedes the meal and which serves as an entryway to the entire dinner ritual. It simultaneously sets the tone for the entirety of the meal and is intended to spark an appetite for more. Not yet solid food, the first chapter stands as transitional beverage which announces the participation in a dinner ritual. Similarly, using the final images of *Twin Peaks: The Return* to suggest that the entirety of the narrative was all but a dream, not only allows for the performance of an impossible optimistic fantasy of immortality but also marks its engagement with death as a mere unconscious meandering. It is, however, a dream which *Dawn of the Dead*'s protagonist Francine is jerked awake from as she rises to a world suddenly riddled with walking corpses in the subsequent second chapter. Concluding with a state that questions the absolute state of the corpse, the first chapter of this volume then

also invites a transition to the analysis of the figure of the zombie, or in other words, this metaphorical dinner ritual's titillating *amuse-bouche*.

Specifically re-appropriated as a consumerist monstrosity that is characteristic of American capitalism, Romero reconceptualizes the Haitian zombie from an externally governed puppet body to an insatiable, undead, and self-governed corpse. Refusing final categorization as either living or dead, the figure of the zombie remains a site of negotiation and is rendered heterotopic in its stance as a figuration of death. The zombie becomes a heterotopic counter-site to the dead as well as the living as an echo, or mirror image, of both life as well as death. The zombie narrative then also contextualizes the corpse as a graspable manifestation that contests the living as well as the dead body in contrast to the American gothic which proposes a utopic dream of immortality. Characterized exclusively by their hunger for the living, the manifold figurations of the zombie throughout Romero's oeuvre further showcase the necessary trivialization of the undead corpse as antagonist by means of its serialization as antisubject within the zombie horde. While his films ultimately develop the figure of the zombie towards a rudimentary form of subjectivity, it is the television serial *iZombie* which proposes the protagonization of the zombie as subject. It is through individualization and a progression towards living that the zombie as protagonist gains a voice. Still characterized by insatiability, playing excessively on the zombie's hunger, *iZombie* cultivates the zombie as subject into a foodie which aestheticizes not only the figure itself towards the living, but also allows for the reformatting of its hunger into seriality. Theorizing the zombie as protagonist as a gourmand refines its hunger and it is its *appetite* which is appropriated as that which, through ingestion, (in)forms its subjectivity, which simultaneously becomes the television serial's narratological force. While the zombie remains both insatiable as well as a corpse, it is through this cultivating modification that it acquires a level of subjectivity in which the zombie's voice is rendered the televised serial's productive narratological force. Ultimately aestheticized *towards* but not becoming a living entity, the zombie remains heterotopic, dead, yet alive, ever caught in oscillation and eternally hungry.

An analysis of the figure of the zombie, in terms of a dinner codification, can then be read as that amuse-bouche, which "is light but piquant so it will enhance the meal that is to follow" (Budgen, 7). A classification as a metaphorical amuse-bouche highlights an oral quality that reiterates the devouring element that the zombie puts into place; characterized by pure hunger turned refined appetite, it is also this hunger that produces the zombie's narrative. Gravitating towards a living subjectivity that is predicated on its hunger, it is with the analysis of the figure of the zombie that, within our metaphorical dinner ritual, the distribution of solid food begins and thus the targeted quenching of an appetite begins in earnest. Picking up on the utopic corpse, which is produced by the American gothic, the zombie body as corpse simultaneously complements the previous aperitif and serves as a transi-

tion to the *first course*, the revenge narrative which will come to actively produce the corpse. Resonant of the American gothic, in terms of the way in which the corpse comes to produce narrative, the zombie also marks an expansive proliferation which renders it significant of a serialization; the production of the corpse itself formats the structural seriality of the revenge plot. In this sense, it becomes that piquant enhancement or amuse-bouche which foreshadows the first course, the revenge narrative.

This volume's third chapter proposes an analysis of the revenge plot as a structural serialization of the production of the corpse. The way in which the revenge plot unfolds as a repetition compulsion geared towards a cathartic moment of pleasure, which is both predicated by a previous murderous act as well as producing a murderous act, then picks up on the American gothic by means of its haunting quality. At the same time, the perpetuity of the expansive revenge narrative, which predicts a potentially limitless production of the corpse, conceptualizes the previous serialization of the corpse as emphasized in the figure of the zombie. However, in the revenge narrative, it is no longer the undead, but rather the living avenger, who is hungry to produce the corpse, an appetite which mirrors the audience's alignment with the revenge plot's emotional charge. As such, the revenge narrative no longer rewrites the dead, but instead actively writes the dead. Through emotional codification, the revenge plot reformats the zombie's hunger into a libidinal drive for murderous agency rendered pleasurable because it is based on a previous corpse, aligning the hunger for the production of the corpse specifically with the living protagonist rather than the (un)dead antagonist. It is here that the hunger metaphor becomes particularly significant in the reification of contradictive murderous desire when, through emotional codification, the revenge plot also caters to the audience's desire to witness a gratifying moment of murder.

The formula of revenge, like a recipe, reiterates the serial production of the corpse. Tarantino's revenge narratives, which hinge on the personal as well as collective gratification orchestrated through vengeance, flesh out the insatiability for which the American cultural produces these aestheticizations of death. Visually as well as narratologically aligning the politics of food with the politics of death, Tarantino illustrates the way in which vengeful desire manifests as an appetite to produce the corpse within a formulaic paradigm that produces an encoding through a recipe for an ever-recurring hunger. Contextualized as a metaphorical meal, the chapter on revenge thus comes to stand as its first course; the first course, according to Lesley Mackley, "[…] should serve to whet the appetite for the courses to follow. It should not overpower the main course, but built to it as temptingly as possible" (8). Manifesting as a tempting prelude to the main course, the revenge plot implements the expansive production of the corpse at the hands of the living which is tied to a justifying element, however, one which connects the production of the corpse to a moment of retribution. As such, the revenge narrative, as the first course, cements

its predecessors while not becoming an overpowering pendant to the subsequent main course. Illustrative of the expansive production of the corpse, the revenge plot provides a recipe; however, it does not yet demand the ingestion of the corpse and it is here where our metaphorical meal transitions into its pure substantiation; the figure of the cannibal, our *main course*.

The figuration of the cannibal compellingly illustrates the fetishization of the corpse that the cannibal literally ingests in order to sustain life. In *The Rituals of Dinner*, Visser states that: "[d]eath is remembered at feasts, just because food is life, and such a concrete, certain, but temporary joy" (149). Visser's contention here inherits an additional layer when read in the context of the figure of the cannibal, thereby adding a denotative element to the statement that "we have seen how bloody death could come to mind at dinner-time as a natural association of ideas, and how the dead may be thought of as joining the living at dinner" (149). Cultivating the production of the corpse towards a gastronomic work of art, the cannibal becomes resonant of the American gothic's elevation of the corpse to classical art. Furthermore, the cannibal refigures the zombie's hunger to become its mirror image, the living craving the corpse. As such, the cannibal also cements the production of the corpse as observed in the revenge narrative, albeit one stripped of its retributive emotional charge. Building on all of these aspects, the cannibal's fetish is marked by an additional doubling. The fetish in itself is defined as an overcompensation of an absence, a dynamism which is amplified through the cannibal who fetishizes death (which in itself marks absence). It is thus that his overcompensation also becomes overt, given that the figure not only produces but also ingests the corpse. Tied to gastronomic desires, the figure of the cannibal ultimately ritualizes the consumption of the corpse while also elevating the consumption of the corpse to a dinner ritual, thereby cultivating it as (serially formatted) sophistication. The fourth chapter of this book discussed the way in which, contextualized as serial cannibals, Ellis' Patrick Bateman as well as Fuller's Hannibal Lecter emerge as figurations of the cannibal that reify and literalize the fetishization of a lacking death in American optimism by means of an overcompensation which writes the serialization of an aestheticized death into the American cultural imaginary. Not only aligning but combining death and food in their agency, the cannibal *performs* the food metaphor which this volume puts into place and, therefore, becomes this metaphorical banquet's substantial main dish by means of gearing insatiability towards a serialized fetishization dictating the dinner ritual.

As the metaphorical main course of this book, it is the figure of the cannibal who marks the substantial core of the dinner ritual, the "climactic creations" of the dinner ritual which "if a meal were a musical offering, this part would have to be an organ chorale" (Visser, 216). As the main course, the fourth chapter of this volume builds upon all of the previous chapters, which is to say that it builds upon all of the previous courses which were designed to lead to, as well as complement, an analysis

of the figure of the cannibal. Analogous to the main course, the figure of the cannibal references the aperitif, the American Gothic, in which the text cannibalized the corpse by means of overwriting it and thus reinstating (not yet sustaining) life. Furthermore, it also manifests as resonant of the amuse-bouche, the figure of the zombie, whose contestation of life and death becomes cannibalistic when endowed with that subjectivity which renders the zombie a living subject who desires human flesh. Finally, the cannibal marks that complimentary continuation which the first course, the structural figuration of revenge, sets into place because it is the repetition of cannibalistic agency that repeatedly produces the corpse which is ingested, catering to an appetite that is no longer metaphorical. Read as the main course of the meal, the figuration of the cannibal is that which reifies this book's core argumentation, but which does not have the final word thereupon. As the main course, it ultimately rests as the precursor to a conclusory, cathartically charged dessert in the serial killer narrative. A prelude to the analysis of the serial killer, the serial cannibal then explicitly literalizes the serial killer's metaphorical desire to produce and internalize the corpse.

The trajectory of this volume culminates in the serial killer narrative where the serialization of aestheticizations of death are both contained and carried by the serially formatted narrative governed by the serial killer. It is this hunger for an aestheticized imagination of death that is *ritualized* and thus finds its logical apex in the television serial which is carried by the serial killer. No dinner ritual is complete without a dessert towards which the entirety of the previous ultimately develops, and Sally Taylor contends that "[t]here can be no doubt about desserts – they are the crowning glory to a meal, the final expression of the thought and care you have taken in preparation and cooking" (7). The serialized serial killer narrative, then, marks this crowning thought that concludes this book, performing a repetition compulsion to produce the corpse in which the serial killer's insatiability is governed by an unprecedented desire, or hunger, to kill. Combining a structural compulsion with murderous agency, it is the serial killer's continuously reemerging appetite for the production of the corpse which also endows the figure of the serial killer with the spectacular, catering to an audience equally eager to consume the figuration of the serial killer.

The final chapter of this volume outlines a discussion of Wes Craven's *Scream* franchise serving as a blueprint for the serial killer narrative which established the way in which the serial killer narrative became an unconscious myth that prevails in America. Its perseverance is rooted in American *wound culture*, which is to say that the serial killer's agency ties into the spectacular in its figuration because it is predicated by a pure desire to produce the corpse, pure *Mordlust*. Stripped of the emotional charge that is resonant of the revenge narrative, the serial killer builds upon the cannibal's desire to produce the corpse and is compelled by a hunger, rather than a justifying reason. It is this aspect that fascinates and is thus endowed with specta-

cle, and that caters to an audience's appetite which it simultaneously binds through the ritualization of repetition as an aestheticized serialized narrative.This dynamic is cemented through the figuration of Andrew Cunanan specifically as a serial killer in the television series *The Assassination of Gianni Versace*, which serializes the serial killer's agency. Re-encoding Cunanan's obscure past, specifically as a coming-of-age tale of a serial killer, reifies the serial killer's stance as spectacular, while also maintaining that it is the serial killer narrative, rather than the serial killer, that ultimately prevails. As its conclusory piece, the serial killer narrative read as a dessert also implicitly reminds us of the dinner ritual as paradigm. As such, the serial killer narrative is not so much reiterative of the *killer* as it is reiterative of the *serial* that caters to an insatiability; this serves to emphasize the repetition compulsion to aestheticize death in the production of the corpse.

All of these individual courses are vital to the composition of the entirety of the meal, even while these are also components of a meal paradigm in which the meal itself is only part of a series of dinner rituals which are continually repeated. It is this dynamism that marks the advantage of an analysis of American death alongside a dinner ritual. The hunger metaphor, alongside which the trajectory of this book has been built, might even be said to amend that ingraspability that is inherent in death itself, which the *death paradox* extends onto the conceptualization of death. It is here that the significance of the food metaphor again gains resonance. Ultimately, the American cultural imaginary cannot escape its deathlessly designed cruel optimism; it is thus, that it produces an aestheticism in the imagination of death that hinges on serialization. Aestheticized imaginations of death emerge as a cultural unconscious and develop into a serialization in form and culminate in the serial killer narrative that solidifies the episodic structuring as a serial. In the context of American optimism, the *death paradox* not only flourishes but also manifests in a serialization that maintains a taming effect on the figuration of death by means of its expansive circular structuring which is governed by a repetition compulsion. Eternally adding another circle around one drawn previously, the serial structuring of an aestheticized imagination of death obtains a reassuring quality by means of implementing the comfort of prediction and perpetuity which eliminates finality. While circling around the figuration of death, the serialized structuring paradoxically becomes a reaffirmation of life rather than death which is orchestrated through the consumption of the corpse. What ultimately remains is a repetition compulsion for which an ever-recurring hunger illustrates that insatiability which emerges as America's cruelly optimistic promise: that in its cultural imaginary death will indeed make a *killer* comeback.

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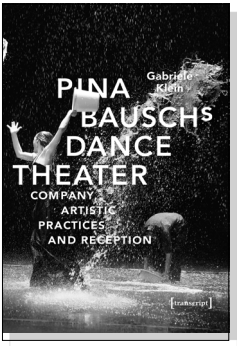

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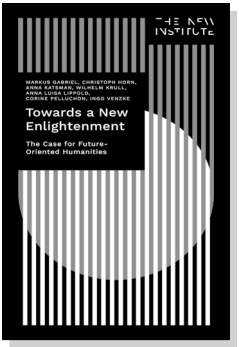

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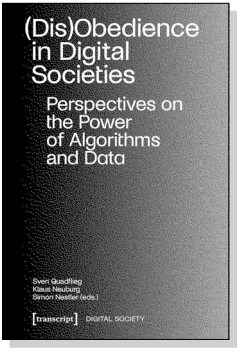

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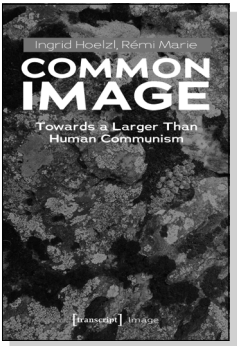

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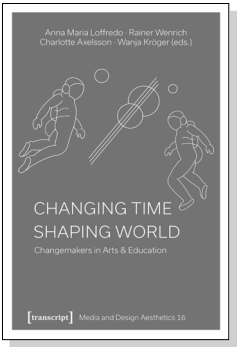

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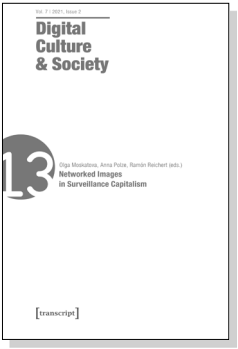

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