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Book Review: Women and Death in Film, Television, and News

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***Women and Death in Film, Television, and News* by Joanne Clarke Dillman. 2014. Palgrave-Macmillan, New York and Basingstoke, Hampshire. 207 pages. Photographs and Index included Hardcover and Softcover: \$95.00; e-Book: \$74.99**

By Jarice Hanson¹

The subtitle of Joanne Clarke Dillman's very thoughtful book is "Dead But Not Gone" and the clear message she has for readers is that once images of dead women are a part of the media landscape, those women become symbols of cultural interpretations of the role of women in society. The author makes persuasive arguments for exploring feminism in the 2000s by focusing on the deaths of women characters in visual texts and the way missing and murdered real women are portrayed in news as symbolic of male aggression toward women, set against the social and political gains women have made since the 1960s and 1970s. She carefully outlines how film, television and news present images that contradict feminist goals by juxtaposing codes that support feminist goals while focusing on representation of a woman's prominence that occurs because of death. The sensationalism caused by representing images that reify violence against women in contemporary entertainment and reality-based genres of media may be more realistic than in earlier televisual portrayals, but as the author reminds us, they carry a profound cultural meaning. According to the author, these images became myriad in film, television, and news during the first decade of the twenty-first century.

In the six chapters of the 207-page book, the author provides a number of examples to support her position that once graphic images of death are presented to audiences, our social realities are forever changed and the image of the dead woman becomes a part of our collective consciousness. The book uses thirteen still pictures and frame grabs from televisual texts as references to the programs and situations the author discusses, but while the images provide a useful reference to the reader, the reproduction of the images is not the best quality. Still, this is a small point when considering the utility of the text and the original thesis provided by the author.

The chapters are meticulously researched and the extensive endnotes provide a theoretical framework for illuminating the author's interpretations. For example, in citing Bordieu, the author describes the meaning of *habitus* and how actions are become both routine and naturalized. As a result, the notes often provide more than just a quick reference, but also, when needed, a more in-depth understanding of how and where the concepts she uses are related to previous seminal works. By not getting bogged down with explaining these types of concepts while developing her own points, the author's thoughts flow, but can still be linked to ideas and theoretical concepts that make this book a contribution "to the interdisciplinary field of visual culture" (p. 4).

The bibliography is a useful reference to key scholars in the field of feminist culture, reception studies, and image scholarship. The work of Bill Nichols, Elisabeth Bronfen, Teresa De Lauretis, Susan Sontag, Julia Kristeva, W.J.T. Mitchell, John Berger and many more provide the background for the development of the author's original contributions, but I was pleased to learn of a host of scholars with whom I was less familiar. The author writes that she adapted her approach

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from the method used by Mieke Bal, whose final book in a trilogy of the role of women in biblical texts uses speech act theory that situates the role of the dead woman by “speech, focalization, and action” (p.8). In fact, one of the outstanding features of the book is the consistent methodology, which, for me, makes this book even more valuable for readers who specialize in feminism and representations of women in the media, but also, for people who look for other reinforcing concepts in other forms of media beyond those addressed in the text. I also made a note to myself to read more of the work of Deborah Jermyn, Elke Weissmann, and Grace Chang, all of whom are prolific authors in areas I was not aware of, and whose perspectives seem insightful and original.

The book makes a strong contribution to interdisciplinary studies that often fall into the category of “post-millennial” works of fiction and non-fiction. While most of the authors who claim to work in this category come from literature (George Saunders), theatre (Tony Kushner, Ann Nelson), and film, (Quentin Tarentino), it is refreshing to see a scholarly book that deals with the same themes. Thanks to Clarke Dillman, we now know that a number of “newish” scholars are grappling with these cultural tropes and themes. In fact, one of the strengths of the book is that it frames media and spectatorship in a novel way. By addressing cross-genre images and finding consistency, the author reinforces the validity of her perspective.

Readers who focus on film, television, or news might well favor the chapters dedicated to examples from these genres, but the author’s approach to the work as outlined in the Introduction (chapter 1) is quite persuasive and original. By consistently pointing out the connective tissue that anchors the author’s position that dead women in the 2000s reflected contemporary thoughts of feminism and post-9/11 meaning, the “dead but not gone” concept is rich in cultural significance. The timeliness of the author’s position is clearly articulated in the section titled “Three Components of the Historical Context” (13-20) that include globalization, 9/11 and its aftermath, and antifeminism and postfeminism as lenses with which to view the examples in the following chapters. The introduction also serves to anchor the author’s study in the appropriate era in the evolving field of reception studies.

Chapters 2 and 3 are dedicated to film narratives and in the introduction to the films in chapter 2, *Minority Report* (2002), *Déjà Vu* (2006), and *Corpse Bride* (2005) the author explains the “dead-but-not-gone” convention. She concludes that the gendered violence perpetrated in each of these films serve to discipline women for their actions within environments that are constituted by advanced technology, science fiction, and fantasy genres. Chapter 3 focuses on the films *The Lovely Bones* and *Disturbia*, both “family films” that take place within the context of a serial killer upsetting the status quo. The two chapters on filmic portrayals are highly detailed and well documented, leading me to think that much of Clarke Dillman’s work must be in film, but if she had not included the chapters on television and news, her framing of the issues would still provide a provocative approach to understanding the “dead but not gone” analysis. What she has done by developing her argument consistently in early chapters, is to show how similar treatment of dead women are in media, even though the subject comes up in a story (such as film), episodic narratives (like TV), and how these themes crossover into genres where you might not expect the same tropes and themes to dominate—such as in news.

Television narratives from the early 2000s in chapter 4 include the television series, *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* and *Dead Like Me*. By targeting recurring themes in series television, the author makes a strong case for the element of time and familiarity for which audiences repeatedly get the message that women’s bodies are the site of male dominance enacted through violence. I found the analysis of *Dead Like Me*, which the author describes as a “black comedy” highly original and insightful. In this section the author makes the claim that the protagonist of this

series, a teenager killed by space debris, serves to “channel the grief and mourning that Americans suffered in the aftermath of the attacks” on 9/11 (106-107). By arguing that the various episodes of the series enact different, but related forms of empowerment for the teenage female protagonist, the “dead-but-not-gone” convention becomes a metaphor for accidental death, postmodern feminism and the postmillennial zeitgeist.

In the final analysis (chapter 5) the author examines news coverage of the real women, Chandra Levy, Laci Peterson, and Natalee Holloway during the period in which these women were missing and presumed dead. In this chapter the author’s position that news frames are often similar to those images of dead (and presumed dead) women in other televisual genres. Representative of the way in which news casts subjects as “news objects” rather than “news subjects” (p. 129), the author further explores the way in which news draws on the cultural assumptions that cross genre conventions and feed cultural expectations. The analysis presented in this chapter is extremely helpful to those looking for a model of systematically applying rigorous analysis to a subject that is often overlooked in reception and image studies.

What Clarke Dillman has done so well, is present a novel way of approaching a subject and maintaining scholarly rigor in her very thorough analysis. The comparisons she uncovers among genres and the reading of images of dead women demonstrate objectification and female power/empowerment and its absence. This book would be an excellent model for anyone attempting to research different genres with a very specific interpretive frame in mind. In fact, as I was reading the book, I kept thinking of all of the graduate students who would benefit from such a thorough, theoretically grounded, yet readable text. And if anyone seems queasy about reading a book about dead women, I can assure you, you will be captivated by the strong argument the author puts forth. The book is thoughtful, but accessible; scholarly, but specific.

The concluding chapter is short, but makes an important point about the consistency of visual images and the way they are repeated in mediated form. Earlier chapters wrap up each section nicely, so the author is wise not to use the concluding chapter to reaffirm what she has already written. Instead, she references the cultural impact of the dead woman in both image and cultural impact. As such, this book expands the range of post-millennial thought and scholarship, and it does so with content that avoids zombie fascination and deals with the very real importance of woman who attain importance because they are missing or dead.

Joanne Clarke Dillman teaches at the University of Washington, Tacoma, and is a Lecturer in Communication Arts and Culture. While the cost of this book probably makes it prohibitive to be used as a course textbook, her work is an excellent resource for those engaged in image studies, feminist analysis of cultural texts, and media analysis in the United States. Her book provides solid references and demonstrates how a thoroughly detailed argument can be both provocative and intellectually stimulating.