

## BOOK REVIEW/ COMPTE RENDU

**Fishman, Jessica M.** *Death Makes the News: How the Media Censor and Display the Dead*. New York: New York University Press, 2018, 336, \$30.00 paper, (9780814760451).

Fishman's *Death Makes the News* provides readers with a powerful and informed dissection of the presentation of both death and the corpse in contemporary American media. Weaving a rich tapestry, she presents, documents and traces how the American viewing public tends to encounter death but, for the most part, not the corpse itself. In just under two-hundred and fifty pages of carefully crafted, meticulously copy-edited and beautifully type-set prose, accompanied by a cacophony of images, she presents a holistic account of the role and treatment of the corpse in both historic and contemporary American media. Divided into two main parts, *Death Makes the News* begins with the problems of deaths concealment in which Fishman invites questions, crafts and hones evidence, and presents innovative hypotheses concerning the presentation and censorship of the dead; with the second part of the monograph focusing on exceptions to these rules.

Fishman draws readers towards 'alarming images' (19-27) and a discussion concerning the presentation of distressing images in the media or, as maybe the case, their lack thereof. This presentation leads onto the many alternative images presented in place of the dead either through the use of life-lost metaphors, the destruction of the inanimate, the escape from the grasps of death by survivors, or even the presentation of death by proxy through the presentation of the grieving (28-46). Though, as Fishman asserts, the use of alternative images to portray or dispossess the deceased is not due to the lack of images available to the media from either press associations, photo-journalists or staff photographers. As she documents, it is the place of the staff reporters to 'hurry up and wait' (51) when photographing the dead. Although trained to arrive early at the scene of an incident to create visual narratives, the photographer, when dealing with death, is poised to wait at the scene until such a time in which the corpse is shrouded, covered, or otherwise obscured. As such, rather than presenting death, Fishman suggests that the media seeks to acknowledge and insinuate the *occurrence* of death, and outlines how photo-jour-

nalists and staff photographers discover, without formal training, the unwritten rules of photographing death. As she suggests, the premise of photo-journalism is to remove ambiguity and create proof through the photograph (71). The images captured are a highly valuable tool and resource within journalism, though there 'value ... dramatically plunges' (107) when the dead are present. Fishman does an admirable job documenting these paradoxical approaches to the presentation of the corpse in the media, noting that whilst editors speak to the powerful and emotionally charged images of the corpse, at the same time they speak of the corpse as 'non-image' (82) with little content and marginal value. This, too, is underlined with her first-hand evidence that speaks to the editors' preference for photographs which allow their viewership to remain at an emotional distance from the content.

The second part of the monograph, Fishman describes as the 'exceptions to the rule.' Fishman first begins by critiquing approaches to both the popular supposedly-inflammatory tabloid and historically high-brow broadsheet press and their usage of images of the dead (111-128). The book then moves across discussions concerning nationhood and how the non-American corpse tends to be fetishized in media presentation of death, as 'dark-skinned bodies, regardless of their nationality, are much more likely to be shown dead than others' (131). Moreover, although Fishman argues that the death of an American citizen garners considerably more media attention than non-American deaths, visual documentation of their death will, for the most part, not make the editors cut (149). The following chapter outlines similarities pertaining to the documentation of innocence and images of the child's corpse.

Of personal interest, however, was chapter thirteen, 'victims seeking visibility' (205) and cases in which families of the deceased have actively encouraged the taking of images of their family members. For example, Fishman discusses a 2014 gang-rape and subsequent murder of two teenage girls in a village of Uttar Pradesh, northern India. In this case, she documents that their families actively encouraged local, national and international media attention to garner support for an investigation into their children's deaths, which the families believed would go uninvestigated otherwise, due to their low-caste status. In addition, the rendering of the racially-aggravated historical case of Emmett Till, an African-American who was brutally murdered aged fourteen whilst visiting family in Mississippi, saw his mother drawing media attention to the crimes which had taken place. As Fishman notes, 'because of the brutality captured in the photographs, she [Till's mother] believed the images would inspire

fighters against racial injustice' (208). Here, Fishman's examples speak back to society casting the net wider than media bias and encompassing, documenting and providing critique and challenging pre-existing racism and xenophobia. The dead, by their very nature, are quiet. Yet, contemporary American media considers the presentation of the corpse as loud, abrupt and—at its most extreme—pornographic in nature. As this powerful chapter documents, sometimes the noise that the corpse generates is necessary to garner attention and engender social change. However, as Fishman records, the loudest images of all are that of American white-national corpses, though, as discussed above, these tend not to make the editor's cut.

The one factor that lets down this monograph for this reviewer is its use of grayscale images. This text includes sixty-seven images which are all necessary and powerful illustrations to Fishman's thesis. Yet in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and the mass-consumption of news in digital form, the use of colour printing to highlight, for example, the brightly coloured scarves from which the young girls hung (206) or the 'greyish hue and blue lips' of the dead in Syria (162-163) would have only strengthened Fishman's approach. This is by no means a critique of Fishman's scholarship, but to truly understand the power and noise which these images are believed to create, viewing them as intended, whether colour saturated or black and white, would have assisted their retelling.

In *Death Makes the News*, Fishman has presented a carefully considered and thoughtful thesis of value not just within the discipline of Sociology, but of wide appeal across the social sciences, social policy, history, media studies and the humanities more generally. Much as the monograph's tongue-in-cheek cover censoring the corpse the Andrei Karlov, the Russian Ambassador to Turkey who was assassinated in 2016, Fishman draws attention to the muffled noise of corpse photojournalism across *Death Makes the News* and has such created a powerful and engaging monograph.

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