

# Media Development

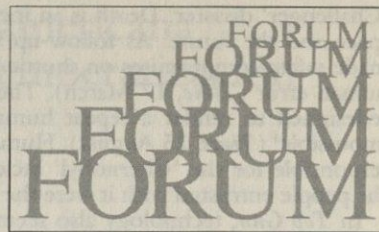
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# Portrayal of death in US media



*The thoughtful editorial introducing Media Development's illuminating issue devoted to 'Mass Media Facing Death' (4/1992) identifies the paucity of research on the subject. It also points out the importance of studying Western media representations of death in entertainment shows and in the news. Responding to this challenge, the following article aims to contribute to research by investigating the fiction-fact distinction. The authors analyse, compare and contrast the most important aspects of death treated in feature films and news magazines in the US during a single year.*

The year is 1986, a time recent enough for our analysis to be valid today, yet distant enough to permit a dispassionate view of events. We analyse every issue of the weekly magazines *Newsweek* and *Time*. On-going stories are our focus. The news coverage thus emerges as narratives, more closely resembling feature films than single events. The three topics sequentially dominating domestic US coverage were the explosion of the space shuttle 'Challenger', the 'war on drugs', and the spreading AIDS epidemic. On the international scene, 'terrorism' in Western Europe and the subsequent US response, and the 'Chernobyl' accident were prominent, while the brutal Iran-Iraq war continued in the background. The magazines also reported the deaths of an assortment of noteworthy figures.

Numerous films released in 1986 contained death. Among the most commercially successful or artistically worthy (sometimes both) and their genres were *Top Gun* (action), *Platoon* (war), *Salvador* (fact-based contemporary), *Aliens* (horror/monster), *The Mission* (historical drama), *Little Shop of Horrors* (off-beat comedy), *F/X* (thriller), *Blue Velvet* (contemporary gothic which became a cult-classic), and the annual Woody Allen film *Hannah and Her Sisters*.

We analysed the treatment of the following elements of death central to the news stories and movies: the killers, science and technology, the killed, children, and sex and humour. Because our objective is ambitious and the space limited, our discussion of the media's content will inevitably be terse and procrustean.

## Killers as opposites

Killers are not necessarily evil: heroes, villains, and those in between have all been known to kill. The perpetrators of such deeds, moreover, can be portrayed in a variety of ways. In our study the differences are striking. The news magazines set killers apart from the rest of us, stress their idiosyncrasies, highlight their mental imbalances and lack of reason. In contrast, the films show the universality of killing, drawing an extremely fine line between murderers and average, everyday people.

The films *Platoon* and *Top Gun* show that killing for self-preservation is acceptable, if not desirable, and well within most people's capacity. *Salvador* adds the pursuit of power as another reason why ordinary people must sometimes turn to murder. *F/X* introduces the profit motive as a legitimate justification. In *Little Shop of Horrors*, the protagonist Seymour is involved in murder for money, success and, most of all, love.

This message of getting what you want through killing is directly

opposed to the news magazines' coverage of terrorism (see also Paletz and Schmid, 1992). Repeatedly, they emphasise the randomness of the killings and failure to have their desired effect. The terrorists are portrayed as self-deluded egomaniacs, erratic lunatics with a distorted world vision (*Time*, 13 January). It is impossible to empathise with them.

Similarly, the war between Iran and Iraq is conveyed by the news magazines as an irrational slaughter. Faceless and nameless 'misguided fanatics' are sent to their deaths by two crazed rulers (*Newsweek*, 3 and 10 March). Readers could not possibly identify with either the troops or their leaders.

In contrast, even the vilest film characters are somewhat humanised, their behaviour made comprehensible. *Blue Velvet*, shows the universality of sporadic, deranged behaviour and, in the extreme, of murder. Relatedly, *Aliens* visually depicts the killer inside us all.

Even in their coverage of the drug problem, the news magazines do not universalise killers or portray them particularly sympathetically. 'The athletically gifted are different from you and me' begins an article on the drug deaths of several athletes, emphasising the distance between these self-murderers and the average person (*Time*, 25 August). For the most part, the magazines' killers have little or no resemblance to everyday people. There is no legitimate outlet in the world depicted by the news magazines for rational people's supposed 'killer instincts'.

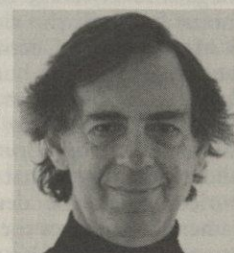
The universal, and often sympathetic, nature of screen killers may in fact provide an outlet for these 'instincts'. Though the cathartic element in film aggression and violence is debatable, we would hazard that it exists with respect to death. Power over life and death is granted to film characters and audiences vicariously experience this power.

By portraying killers in opposite ways, news magazines and movies may produce identical results: making killing by ordinary people illegitimate and, more importantly, unthinkable. Instead of leading people to think that they should not kill, the media may lead them to believe that they cannot kill.

## Science and technology

Technology is involved in most of the spectacular death-related events of the period we studied. Initially, it is blamed for the

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'Challenger' disaster. Death is an inevitable price for reaching into space and the future. As follow-up stories report that NASA had made safety compromises on shuttle flights, blame is transferred to human error (*Time*, 17 March). The now blameless technology is redesigned to render a repeat human error catastrophe 'virtually impossible' (*Time*, 25 August). Human error is also eventually held responsible for the 'Chernobyl' incident. Not the technology but the people entrusted with it were the danger.

In *Top Gun*, technology also seems initially to be at fault but is ultimately vindicated by the hero, Maverick.

Indeed, the view usually conveyed by the movies and news magazines is that the more advanced the technology the better. A common refrain in 'Chernobyl' stories in *Time* and *Newsweek* is that the superior technology of US nuclear plants make this type of accident impossible. Technology is portrayed not as a killer but as a way to avoid and limit death.

The inverse relationship between high technology and number of deaths is shown clearly in the treatment of the Iran-Iraq war. Iran especially did not possess the capabilities to fight a modern, surgical war. 'Reduced to using 20-year-old technology' Iran 'has lost an estimated 250,000 lives' (*Time*, 1 September). Of course, weapons' technology would enjoy its apotheosis in the US media five years later during the second Gulf War.

Technology also makes its appearance as a way to limit death in the terrorism stories. Tighter airport security in the form of better metal detectors is called for (*Time*, 13 January).

Technology as a way to limit death, not increase its power, is also common in the movies. *Aliens* goes even further: in this film technology both combats and overcomes death. The alien herself is eventually conquered by technology.

Science appeared in the news magazines as a battler against death in stories involving disease. Thus 'breakthrough' is used to describe the AIDS' drug AZT, and 'remarkable' and 'extraordinary' to describe its effects (*Time*, 29 September). Lesser 'breakthroughs' are called 'hopeful' and 'enthusiastic' (*Time*, 7 April). A cure is achievable and would be inevitable, although it is at least five years away.

Science and technology are effective combatants against death in news magazines and in films. Death is portrayed, like the alien in *Aliens*, as something powerful that is to be avoided. When a confrontation is inevitable, technology is on our side, ready to fight the attacker. The protagonists of both *Top Gun* and *Aliens* defy death. They are, for all intents and purposes, immortal. It is this idea of immortality through technology that the media spread.

### The dead in different guises

The dead tend to be portrayed in two extremes: either as dehumanised, faceless and nameless, or personalised and thus sympathetic. Both types are present in most of the news stories and the films.

Dehumanisation dominates depictions of the dead in the news magazines' coverage of the Iran-Iraq war. The soldiers are anonymous 'fanatics' who clear mine fields with their bodies (*Newsweek*, 3 March). The 'Chernobyl' victims are equally massified initially; later, they are partly humanised by being compared to their potential American counterparts.

The enemy in *Top Gun* and *Platoon* is nameless and faceless, mechanical. *Top Gun* accomplishes this by encasing the Soviet pilots in dark gear that includes a black face shield. Their deaths are buried within the destruction of their planes. In contrast, the camera lingers over the body of an American pilot as the film's hero mourns the loss of his friend. In *Platoon*, enemy ground troops are hidden by the surrounding trees and by the night. Their deaths are brief, anonymous. Not so for US soldiers who have time to speak their final thoughts before they die. Both films feature battles shot entirely from the perspective of the Americans.

In some films death is presented as a desirable or at least appropriate preventive or punishment. And not just in films: according to *Time* magazine (28 April), Gaddafi 'richly deserved to be targeted'. Death is the only way to stop the evil villain of *Blue Velvet*. Death is deservedly meted out for the characters who would have mistreated the hero in *Little Shop of Horrors*; and because their

demise is comic, audience sympathy is precluded. Indeed, the expendables are so dehumanised in some of the films that they cease to be human.

On the other hand, certain people in the films are depicted sympathetically as victims. *Platoon*'s Vietnamese villagers are not deceptive collaborators but mothers and children who fear for their lives. Several of them are individualised, becoming familiar to the audience. They scream with pain during their deaths. The Indians in *The Mission* are similarly humanised, their suffering made palpable.

*Salvador*, in many ways a contemporary version of *The Mission*, also portrays the victims of right-wing murders very sympathetically. Several eventual victims, from an American nun to a local boy, are followed through the film until their deaths. Their dead bodies appear on screen for an extended period as the hero, our surrogate, mourns over each one.

The only news story in which an effort is made to personalise all the dead is the 'Challenger' accident. The news magazines detail the life accomplishments of each of the seven astronauts. They are honoured in their deaths, described as 'heroes', 'remarkable', 'hard-working' and so on. In other words, each received an extended obituary.

Obituaries of three to five notable people appear in each news magazine weekly. Emphasis is on the life lived, not the death died. Almost all the information provided is favourable. Only 14 of *Time*'s 186 obituaries (data for *Newsweek* is similar) recount something negative about the deceased. These people are usually former Nazis, cult leaders, or mass murderers.

Deaths caused by AIDS and drugs are treated similarly to each other. Famous people, such as athletes and celebrities, are personalised; everyone else is lumped into depersonalised statistics. These dead are sympathetic to the extent that more famous people represent them.

The films and news magazines' stories leave us, then, with four perspectives on death: as an inevitable outcome for blindly obedient, faceless masses; as a cruel fate visited on good but hapless people, particularly in the 'Third World'; as a deserved even necessary preventive or punishment for evil-doers; and as the undesirable end of famous people killed by AIDS and drugs, and of most of the subjects of obituaries. In all these cases, death is portrayed as something to be avoided at all costs.

### Children: victims in need of help

The media portray the death of children as especially tragic. Children are innocent and helpless. They have not had the chance to live their lives, to realise their potential. Thus *Newsweek* represents all human suffering with a photograph of a trapped, brown-eyed Colombian child dying under the rubble of her destroyed home (6 January 1985). In many of the 'death' stories of 1986 the news magazines focus on children. These include stories involving children directly as victims, such as those killed by terrorist strikes or dying of AIDS, as well as children left behind by dead adults, such as those of 'Challenger' astronaut Christa McAuliffe.

Those responsible for the death of children are almost always vilified. Several children, including eleven-year-old American Natasha Simpson were among the terrorists' victims in Rome and Vienna in late 1985 (*Time* and *Newsweek* 6 January). Her death is mentioned by both news magazines in every general article on terrorism and/or Gaddafi for the next two months. The Iranian leadership in particular and Arabs in general are condemned for sending teenagers out to die in the Iran-Iraq war. That these boys 'volunteered' is used to show Khomeini and company to be manipulative and evil, lacking regard even for their own children (*Newsweek*, 10 March).

The bombing of Tripoli by the US, in which Gaddafi's two-month-old daughter was killed, brings a twist to the vilification theme. The Libyan leader is blamed for keeping his child in an obvious target area and for sponsoring terrorism in the first place (*Time*, 28 April).

The vast majority of the news magazines' stories about individual victims of AIDS concern children. They are the innocent victims who do not acquire the disease through voluntary behaviour of



their own. Adults are implicitly blamed for imposing such suffering (*Newsweek* and *Time*, 3 November). The same is true of the drug story. *Newsweek* (17 March) has a cover story entitled 'Kids and Cocaine' which includes three examples of good children and young adults whose lives have been ruined by crack.

The 'Challenger' disaster is portrayed as especially tragic because one of those killed was the schoolteacher Christa McAuliffe. Many schoolchildren were watching on television. Both magazines emphasise that this may have been the children's first direct encounter with death. Photos of and quotes from children are a frequent feature of the coverage: a photo of a child looking up in wonder is the second image seen in the *Newsweek* articles after the exploding shuttle itself (10 February).

Adults involved or faced with death often behave childishly in the films. They deny its inevitability, try to evade it, submit to comforting 'authorities'. After the death of his friend, the hero of *Top Gun* quits his training programme; after killing his brother, *The Mission's* protagonist hides in a prison for six months waiting to die then is saved by converting to the Jesuit order. And in *Hannah and Her Sisters*, the character played by Woody Allen himself, believing he has a brain tumour, seeks out any person or institution that might possibly be able to support and comfort him, starting with Catholicism.

Children are our innocent and helpless selves. They need guidance and reassurance. More importantly, they are our future. When mountains of children's carcasses are discovered in *Salvador*, what the hero-protagonist sees through his camera lens is El Salvador's future, dead and decaying.

The final scenes of both *Blue Velvet* and *The Mission* exemplify this equation of children with the future. In the former, the husband is killed but the child is not. He is seen playing with his mother in the park. The end of *The Mission* shows a single, naked girl walking through the raised mission. She picks up a violin and walks toward a boat full of other children waiting for her. For now they, along with our futures, seem safe and secure.

### Sex and humour

These appear in the films but are virtually absent from the news magazines (aside from the sex-AIDS relationship).

Sex in particular is connected to death in most of the films. Rape precedes the death of the four nuns in *Salvador* and is a central theme in *Platoon*. The making of new aliens in *Aliens* entails the death of humans. More positively, successful murders and encounters with death lead to sexual success in *Top Gun*. The Woody Allen character in *Hannah and Her Sisters* decides to enjoy life as the best way to deal with his supposedly forthcoming death. This means love and marriage to his former sister-in-law. The final scenes shows this erstwhile impotent man with his new-born. Mastery of death leads to sex and, by extension, life.

Many of the deaths in *Little Shop of Horrors* are funny, as is Allen's accidental suicide attempt in *Hannah and Her Sisters*. News stories about death, in contrast, are rarely amusing.

One reason for the association of sex and humour with death in the films is that creative artists can combine imagination and license in their telling of tales. Journalists for news magazines, however, are limited to the details and, when dealing with death, they fear to offend, and they try to avoid irreverence.

In conclusion, our findings are intriguing, even suggestive. Some aspects of death, such as sex and humour, can be found only in movies. Other elements, most notably children, and science and technology, are not only contained in news magazines and films, they are treated similarly. The dead also appear in both types of media, but they are treated in various ways: as dehumanised or personalised, and as deserving or undeserving of their fates. Killers, however, are portrayed quite differently in movies than news magazines, even though, the effects on the audience may turn out to be similar. ■

### References

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## Iniciativa latinoamericana en favor de la democratización

*Con la decisión de promover la articulación de un amplio movimiento en favor de la democratización de la comunicación, concluyó el encuentro latinoamericano de medios de comunicación alternativa y popular, realizado en la ciudad de Quito, del 19 al 23 de abril de 1993.*

*Como primera iniciativa en favor de la democratización, los asistentes acordaron promover en el marco de la conferencia mundial sobre derechos humanos a realizarse en Viena, del 14 al 25 de junio de 1993, la incorporación del derecho a la comunicación en la Declaración Universal de los Derechos Humanos. Este es texto de dicha propuesta.*

Considerando como verdades fundamentales que todos los humanos son creados iguales, dotados de ciertos derechos inalienables, entre ellos el derecho a tener opiniones sin interferencias de ninguna clase y a buscar, recibir e impartir información e ideas a través de cualquier medio de comunicación y sin consideración de fronteras.

Constatando que para asegurar todos los derechos la comunidad de naciones definió también en el derecho humano a la comunicación e información social, incluyéndolo en el Artículo 19 de la Declaración Universal de los Derechos Humanos.

Tomando en cuenta que el derecho humano a la libertad de opinión es fundamental en la lucha por la democracia verdadera; que la libertad de opinión no es suficiente sin la libertad de expresión; y que en tiempos modernos ni la libertad de opinión ni la libertad de expresión son suficientes sin que haya libertad de prensa.

Considerando que cuarenta y cinco años después de la Declaración Universal el mundo ha cambiado en forma dramática al entrar la humanidad en la era de información y opinión pública universal.

Considerando que la Declaración del Derecho al Desarrollo, aprobado por la Asamblea General en 1986, establece que la participación, que incluye el libre acceso a la comunicación, es la base del disfrute pleno de todos los derechos humanos.

Observando que la empresa privada y los gobiernos concentran y controlan la mayor parte de los flujos de comunicación mundial, ejerciendo un poder homogeneizador sobre las ideas, la cultura y el comercio.

Tomando en cuenta que los ciudadanos(as), los pueblos, y sus organizaciones necesitan recursos adecuados para satisfacer la necesidad humana de comunicación en la práctica de la democracia; que para usar esos canales deben tener un acceso a ellos que sea justo y equitativo sin discriminación ninguna; que los sectores más diversos del pueblo deben tener acceso a los canales globales de comunicación social para poder así tomar parte en los asuntos públicos, para poder ejercer cualquier otro derecho humano y para poder disfrutar de una libertad fundamental.

Considerando que la información es el oxígeno de la democracia; y que en un mundo interconectado por canales de información, los medios de comunicación masiva no solamente pueden defender y fomentar los derechos humanos cuando hablan de violaciones y de conflictos; sino que cada vez se ve con mayor claridad que la comunicación y la información social son componentes centrales de los derechos humanos.

Proponemos que se reglamente el Artículo 19 de la Declaración Universal y demás instrumentos afines para que se afirme y fortalezca el **derecho a la comunicación**, como derecho inalienable de las personas y de los pueblos y como instrumento fundamental de la democratización de la sociedad. ■