

## Conclusion: Death. Again.

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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*<sup>1</sup> through the reshaping of an object 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-

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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 contradictory 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 ingrassability 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.

