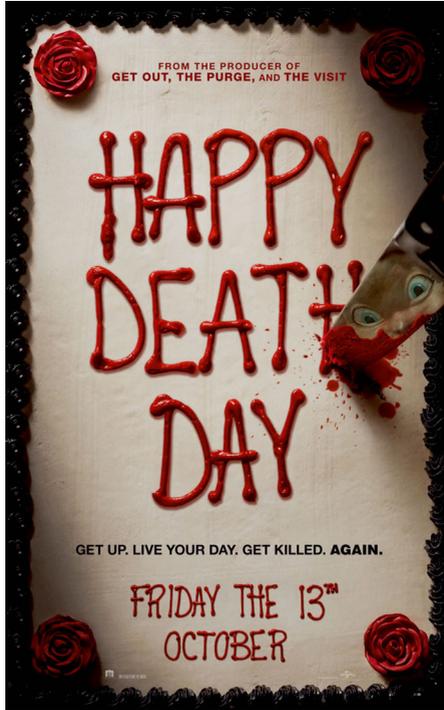


Introduction: The Paradoxical Nature of Death in America

The end of man would seem then to be that which cannot be *lived* by any man.
Barbara Johnson, "The Last Man"

In that sense death is also the powerful limit of all mortal knowledge; its ground and its vanishing point.
Elisabeth Bronfen, "The Power of Death in Life"

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. Manifest 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 pre-conditioned 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.*

