



Dead Matter: The Meaning of Iconic Corpses. By Margaret Schwartz. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2015. 168 pp. ISBN: 9780816694341.

As a universal experience, death occupies a prominent position in everyday life. Tracing how technological changes have altered mourning practices and rituals, Margaret Schwartz's *Dead Matter: The Meaning of Iconic Corpses* argues that the mediation of a deceased public figure's corpse is a highly political representation that addresses larger political, economic, and social struggles in cultural politics. *Dead Matter* distinguishes the ways in which postmortem photography initiated a shift concerning how society engages with death as both a biological phenomenon and a cultural practice. The corpse, for Schwartz, is a highly multifaceted object of mediation that plays a critical role in communication, and she identifies how postmortem photography ultimately creates a representational hierarchy in which select corpses are privileged in public discourse according to the politics of visibility.

Symbolic of the “intertwining of the discursive and the biological” (p. 3), Schwartz contends that the corpse is an intriguing component of visual culture due to how images of a deceased body interact with, and are mediated by, political discourses. Schwartz draws upon Deleuze and Guattari's notion of assemblage to support her operationalization of the corpse in *Dead Matter* in order to highlight the variety of elements composing a dead body as an object of mediation. A deceased person is not a singular object but, rather, represents for Schwartz a corpus, a dynamic artefact assembled out of a variety of narratives, texts, and cultural practices that are continuously subject to negotiation. Schwartz's framework of the corpus allows her to identify the larger power dynamics embedded within the construction of iconic corpses and the ways in which the image of a deceased public figure creates a memory that circulates in public discourse to symbolize larger sociopolitical struggles.

In addition to utilizing assemblage as a theoretical framework, Schwartz elevates her argument on the corpse's mediation in visual culture by positioning her work within the context of iconicity. Schwartz focuses her analysis on what she refers to as “iconic corpses,” defined as bodies of well-known personalities or those individuals whose deaths were highly public events. She identifies three categories of iconic corpses that perform different social and cultural functions: those representing the body of the nation (Abraham Lincoln, Vladimir Lenin, and Eva Peron); martyred bodies (Emmett Till and Hamza al-Khateeb); and tabloid bodies (Princess Diana, Michael Jackson). Icons represent sacred deities while simultaneously possessing godlike powers. The term's connections to religion represent a complex history negotiating between totems, image, the flesh, and the transcendent. The corpse, for Schwartz, is an ideal object to illustrate the politics of iconicity due to how image and the ethereal are juxtaposed against death, a phenomenon itself representative of the flesh. Iconic corpses thereby signify the process in which a physical, deceased body transforms into

a legacy or memory, and it is the politics involved in this metamorphosis that underlies Schwartz's critique of iconic corpses. The corpse negotiates between notions of visibility and invisibility according to the deceased's role in society and the larger social, political, and economic contexts in which they died. Schwartz contends that deceased bodies perform an inherently political function; corpses related to issues of social justice are made highly visible in public discourse, in contrast to tabloid corpses, which are concealed to preserve the economic potential of a celebrity persona as a marketable commodity following their passing.

Central to her exploration of iconic corpses is the role of mortuary rituals, and how technological advancements contributed to the ways in which dead bodies are mediated in society through highly visual practices of embalming and postmortem photography. These mortuary rituals are central to the construction and mediation of iconic corpses since they support social hierarchies while also distinguishing the material and imaginary boundaries between life and death. Representative of the nineteenth-century trend of preservation, embalming and postmortem photography helped create cultural imaginaries of death as a form of everlasting sleep, functioning as an iconic reference that stabilizes the deceased's identity. Schwartz contends that embalming and postmortem photography are media practices that manipulate time and space, enabling the corpse to play a central role in public discourse that amplifies with the rise of commodity culture. She references the death of Lincoln, viewed as an attack on the body politic of the nation, to illustrate how embalming and postmortem photography change not only how society mourns but also the ways in which the corpse circulates in visual culture. Embalming enabled Lincoln's corpse to travel across the United States for public wakes in accordance to Victorian mourning rituals, representing an emerging form of mass communication that performed an ideological function by contributing to the nation's collective healing. Photographs of the body lying in state were prohibited and destroyed in accordance to Mary Todd Lincoln's request. Schwartz contends that the suppression of such imagery is the result of what she identifies as photographic indexicality. Photographs are stable yet polysemic artefacts, and according to Schwartz, the potential for multiple interpretations can "threaten its privileged reference to a corpus" (p. 36). Distinctions between reality and what a postmortem photograph depicts are further distorted by embalming, a process that complicates the deceased's relationship to the body politic it represents in the context of iconic corpses.

Schwartz concludes *Dead Matter* by addressing the role of death within advanced capitalism. The corpse, while once a highly visible object in visual culture, is now predominantly concealed from public viewing in order to preserve the economic potential of its commodity form. The ways in which the images of deceased iconic figures are strategically veiled to maintain capitalist production creates new labour practices; Michael Jackson's artistic legacy, for example, is upheld through the distribution of his music, and the work involved in maintaining this surplus value represents for Schwartz an act of dead labour that is "congealed as capital" (p. 106) to comprise the singer's corpse. *Dead Matter* ultimately argues that death is a critical yet unique communication practice that can only be directly experienced through imagery produced in part

by technological advancements and economic changes. It is integral to understand how images of the corpse circulate in public discourse since such representations construct a cultural imaginary of death, which is the only means one can engage with this life experience.

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