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Death in Prime Time: Notes on the Symbolic Functions of Dying in the Mass Media

By GEORGE GERBNER

ABSTRACT: The cultural (and media) significance of dying rests in the symbolic context in which representations of dying are embedded. An examination of that context of mostly violent representations suggests that portrayals of death and dying serve symbolic functions of social typing and control and tend, on the whole, to conceal the reality and inevitability of the event.

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DYING in the mass media—both news and entertainment (a distinction increasingly hard to make)—has a symbolic function different from death in real life but investing it—and life itself—with particular meanings. We can begin to consider what these might be by reflecting on the nature of representation.

A symbol system is an artifact par excellence. It is totally invented to serve human purposes. It can serve these purposes only if those interpreting it know the code and can fit it into a symbolic context of their own. They must share the rules of the invention and the interpretative strategies by which it should be understood.

Symbolic narrative, a story, has two basic elements of invention: fictive and selective. Selective invention is factual narrative such as news. Presumably true events (facts) are selected from an endless stream of events. A narrative is invented to convey some meaning about the selected facts as interpreted in a previously learned framework of knowledge.

Fictive invention is fiction and drama; the “facts” are invented as well as the narrative. (Selection is of course involved in both.) The function of fictive invention is to illuminate (literally to embody and dramatize) the invisible structure and dynamics of human life. It is to show how things *work*. Invention that can only select events but not create them must be more opaque; it can only show what things *are* but rarely why or how they work. The full development of the connections between events and human motivations and powers requires the freedom and legitimacy to invent the “facts” in a way that illuminates the otherwise hidden dynamics of existence.

In this totally invented world of symbols—selective and fictive—nothing happens without some purpose and function (which need not be the same). Let us use as example the world of television which we have studied for some years.¹ This discussion also applies to other media and cultural forms, with the difference that television is the generally non-selectively used universal storyteller of modern society. It is, therefore, more a symbolic *environment* than a traditional medium.

People are not born into the world of television. They are selected or created for a purpose. The purpose is usefulness to the symbolic world (called news values or story values) that the producing institutions and their patrons find useful for *their* purposes. More numerous in both news and drama are those for whom that world has more uses—jobs, power, adventure, sex, youth, and all other opportunities in life. These values are distributed in the symbol system as most resources are distributed in the society whose dominant institutions produce most of the symbols: according to status and power. Dominant social groups tend to be overrepresented and overendowed not only absolutely but also in relation to their numbers in the real population. (For example, men outnumber women at least three to one in television and most media content.)

Minorities are defined by having

1. The long-range project was first described in my article on “Cultural Indicators: The Case of Violence in Television Drama” in the *Annals*, Vol. 388, March 1970. The most recent report, including a description of methodology, appears in George Gerbner, Larry Gross, Nancy Signorielli, Michael Morgan, and Marilyn Jackson-Beeck, “The Demonstration of Power: Violence Profile No. 10,” *Journal of Communication*, vol. 29 (Summer 1979).

less than their proportionate share of values and resources. In the world of television news and drama, this underrepresentation means lower numbers, less usefulness, fewer opportunities, more victimization (or "criminalization"), more restricted scope of action, more stereotyped roles, diminished life chances, and general undervaluation ranging from relative neglect to symbolic annihilation.

DEATH IN NEWS AND DRAMA

Death in such a context is just another invented characterization, a negative resource, a sign of fatal flaw or ineptitude, a punishment for sins or mark of tragedy. It is always a reminder of the risks of life, cultivating most anxiety and dependence for those who are depicted as most at risk. In other words, death is one feature of the more general functions of social typing and control.

Obituaries are the Social Register of the middle class. Even a "nobody" of modest status and power (i.e. a person of no symbolic existence in the common culture) becomes a "somebody" if the flicker of his or her (and it's mostly his) life can leave its final symbolic mark of existence in the obituary column.

Death in the news is a tightly scripted scenario of violence and terror. Murders, accidents, "body counts" and catastrophies scatter a surfeit of impersonal corpses in ghoulish symbolic overkill across the pages of our family newspapers and television screens. By the time we grow up, we are so addicted to this necromania of our culture (and we are not alone), that its constant daily cultivation seems to add to a morbid sense of normalcy.

Yet it is all well (if unwittingly) calculated to cultivate a sense of

insecurity, anxiety, fear of the "mean world" out there, and dependence on some strong protector. It is the modern equivalent of the bloody circuses in the Roman empire's "bread and circuses" that were supposed to keep the populace quiescent.

At the center of the symbolic structure of death is the world of stories invented to show how things work—fiction and drama. The most massive and universal flow of stories in modern society (and history) is of course television drama, most of it produced according to the industrial formulas developed to assemble large audiences and sell them to advertisers at the least cost.

That is a world in which practically no one ever dies a natural death. Assembly-line drama generally denies the inevitable reality of death and affirms its stigmatic character. Violent death, on the other hand, befalls 5 percent of all prime time dramatic characters every week, with about twice as many killers (many of whom also get killed) stalking the world of prime time. The symbolic function of death in the world of television is thus embedded in its structure of violence, which is essentially a show of force, the ritualistic demonstration of power.

THE STRUCTURE OF VIOLENCE— AND POWER

Dominated as it is by males and masculine values, much of the world of prime time revolves around questions of power. Who can get away with what against whom? How secure are different social types when confronted with conflict and danger? What hierarchies of risk and vulnerability define social relations? In other words, how power works in society.

The simplest and cheapest dramatic

demonstration of power is an overt expression of physical force compelling action against one's will on pain of being hurt or killed, or actually hurting or killing. That is the definition of violence used in our studies of television drama. Violence rules the symbolic world of television. It occurs at an average 10-year rate of 5 violent incidents per hour in prime time and 18 per hour in weekend daytime children's programming—a triple dose.

Violence as a demonstration of power can be measured by relating the percent of violents to the percent of victims within each social group. That ratio shows the chances of men and women, blacks and whites, young and old, to come out on top instead of on the bottom. Conversely, it shows the risks of each group to end up as victims instead of victors.

Table 1 is a summary of these "risk ratios" based on annual samples of prime time and weekend daytime (children's) programs major dramatic characters, a total of 3,949, from 1969 through 1978. It shows for each of several demographic and dramatic groups the ratio of violents over victims (including killing) and of only killers over killed (or the other way around) within each group. It also shows the percent of characters in each group involved in any violence as either violents or victims (or both). For example, of the 415 children and adolescent characters studied, 60.5 percent (65.0 percent males and 49.1 percent females) were involved in violence. Of the males, victims outnumbered violents by 1.69 but killers outnumbered killed by 3.00. In other words, for every 10 child and adolescent violents there were about 17 victims, but for every 10 killed there were 30 killers in that group of characters.

Overall, 63 percent of all characters

were involved in some violence. For every 10 violents there were 12 victims, but for every 10 killed there were 19 killers. However, as we have just seen, involvement in violence and its outcome—as with values and resources—is not randomly distributed.

Some features of the distribution of violence as a demonstration of power can be illustrated by selecting a few risk ratios from the Table, showing how these victimization rates define a hierarchy of risks within which the depiction of dying (and killing) is embedded.

A hierarchy of risks

Combining prime time and daytime characters, we find that victimization rates define a social hierarchy of risks and vulnerabilities. For every 10 characters who commit violence within each of the following groups the average number of victims for

white men is	12
nonwhite men is	13
lower class women is	17
young women is	18
nonwhite women is	18
old women is	33

If and when involved in violence, women and minorities, and especially young and old as well as minority women characters, are the most vulnerable.

Now let us look at dying (and its dramatic counterpart, killing) in that context. We can compute a lethal pecking order by relating the number of killers to the number of killed within each group. Unlike violence in general, killing eliminates a character and must be used more sparingly, either as curtain-raiser or as the "final solution." Therefore, in most role categories, there are more killers than killed. "Good" men, the

TABLE 1
RISK RATIOS¹: MAJOR CHARACTERS IN ALL PROGRAMS (1969-1978)

	ALL CHARACTERS				MALE CHARACTERS				FEMALE CHARACTERS			
	N	INVOLVED IN VIOLENCE	VIOLENT- VICTIM RATIO	KILLER- KILLED RATIO	N	INVOLVED IN VIOLENCE	VIOLENT- VICTIM RATIO	KILLER- KILLED RATIO	N	INVOLVED IN VIOLENCE	VIOLENT- VICTIM RATIO	KILLER KILLED RATIO
All Characters	3949	63.3	-1.20	+1.90	2938	68.4	-1.18	+2.02	956	46.1	-1.34	+1.20
Social Age												
Children-Adolescents	415	60.5	-1.60	+3.00	297	65.0	-1.69	+3.00	116	49.1	-1.33	0.00
Young Adults	813	64.5	-1.36	+2.00	539	69.6	-1.23	+2.17	270	53.7	-1.82	+1.33
Settled Adults	2212	59.8	-1.12	+2.07	1698	65.7	-1.12	+2.13	513	40.0	-1.12	+1.60
Elderly	106	47.2	-1.15	-1.75	80	50.0	+1.07	1.00	26	38.5	-3.33	-0.00
Marital Status												
Not Married	1873	65.6	-1.23	+1.90	1374	69.7	-1.18	+2.02	491	53.8	-1.44	+1.30
Married	987	45.5	-1.27	+1.67	626	52.9	-1.27	+1.82	361	32.7	-1.25	+1.11
Class												
Clearly Upper	269	59.5	-1.38	+1.50	182	67.6	-1.26	+1.57	87	42.5	-2.00	+1.25
Mixed	3549	63.4	-1.19	+2.07	2650	68.3	-1.17	+2.20	844	46.3	-1.29	+1.20
Clearly Lower	131	69.5	-1.25	-1.11	106	73.6	-1.20	-1.13	25	52.0	-1.71	1.00
Race												
White	3087	60.1	-1.19	+1.97	2235	65.1	-1.16	+2.11	852	46.9	-1.31	+1.26
Other	360	55.0	-1.33	+1.69	280	61.1	-1.27	+1.69	77	31.2	-1.83	0.00
Character Type												
"Good"	2304	58.4	-1.29	+2.93	1659	63.7	-1.24	+3.85	622	43.2	-1.51	-1.60
Mixed	1093	61.4	-1.22	+1.33	807	65.8	-1.21	+1.27	262	44.7	-1.31	+1.50
"Bad"	550	88.0	1.00	+1.84	471	89.4	-1.01	+1.86	71	77.5	+1.15	+1.67
Nationality												
U.S.	3100	58.1	-1.20	+2.06	2263	63.2	-1.16	+2.23	827	43.9	-1.38	+1.18
Other	264	73.5	-1.31	+1.31	203	80.8	-1.29	+1.27	61	49.2	-1.47	+2.00

¹ Risk Ratios are obtained by dividing the more numerous of these two roles by the less numerous within each group. A plus sign indicates that there are more violents or killers than victims or killed and a minus sign indicates that there are more victims or killed than violents or killers. A ratio of 0.00 means that there were no victims or killers or violents or killed. A +0.00 ratio means that there were some violents or killers but no victims or killed; a -0.00 ratio means that there were victims or killed but no violents or killers.

male heroes of prime time drama, are at the top of the killing order. For every 10 "good" men killed, there are 38 "good" men killers. Next are young men and American men; for every 10 young males killed, there are 22 young male and American male killers. The killed-killer ratio of all white males is only slightly lower: 21 killers for every 10 white males killed. In other words, if and when involved in some fatal violence on prime time television, "good," young, American and white males are the most likely to be the killers instead of the killed. They kill in a good cause to begin with or are the most powerful, or both.

Women do not fare so well. Their most favorable ratio is 20 killers for every 10 killed, and that goes to foreign women. The second highest female kill ratio goes to "bad" women: they kill 17 characters for every 10 "bad" women killed. Next are middle-aged women who kill 16 for every 10 killed. Thus women who tend to kill, kill much less than men, have relatively more lethal power when they are foreign, evil, or past the romantic-lead age, than when they are "good," American, young, and white, as is the case with men. Their killing is more likely to be shown as unjust, irrational, and "alien" than is killing by men.

At the very bottom of the lethal pecking order are old women who get involved in violence only to get killed and "good" women who get killed 16 times for every 10 killers. Old and "good" women get into violence mostly as sympathetic (or only pathetic) victims, rousing male heroes to righteous (if lethal) indignation. Next in line are lower class men, lower class women, and old men. For every ten killers in each group there are, respectively, 11, 10, and 10 killed. Unlike those of greater ability to

survive conflict or catastrophe, older and lower class characters pay with their lives for every life they take.

Provocation and retribution

In general, then, as can be seen on the Table, the pecking order of both mayhem and killing is dominated by men—American white, middle class, and in the prime of life. At the top of the general order of victimizers are "bad" women, old men, and "bad" men, in that order. The presence of evil at the top of the power hierarchy suggests the dramatic role of villains provoking heroes to violent action. Heading the ranking of killers over killed are "good" and other majority-type males. We can begin to discern not only the provocative role of the "bad" but also the retributive function of the "good" and the strong.

Lowest on the dramatic scale are women, lower class, and old people. Of the 20 most victimized groups (both total violence and killing), all but three are women.

Old women are at the bottom of the heap of both the battered and the killed. "Good" women are among the characters most likely to be both general and fatal victims of violence rather than the perpetrators. "Good" men have power as indicated by their heading up the killer-killed list; "good" women, on the other hand, end up near the bottom of the power hierarchy. When it comes to violence, "good" are the strong men and the weak women of the world of television.

Dying on television is a violent retribution for weakness, sin, or other flaw in character or status. It is part of the social typing and control functions of centralized cultural production. Our research has found that heavy viewers (compared to light

viewers in the same social groups) derive from their television experience a heightened sense of danger, insecurity, and mistrust, or what we call the "mean world" syndrome. It can be conjectured that the symbolic

functions of dying are part of that syndrome, contributing not only to a structure of power but also to the irrational dread of dying and thus to diminished vitality and self-direction in life.