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Book Reviews



FILMING DEATH: END-OF-LIFE DOCUMENTARY CINEMA

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Öz

Outi Hakola'nın *Filming Death: End-of-Life Documentary Cinema* (2024) adlı eseri, belgesel kuramı, tıp beşerî bilimleri, ölüm çalışmaları ve temsil etiğinden beslenen disiplinlerarası bir yaklaşım benimser. Kitap, belgesel film ve kültürel söylem içindeki yaşam sonu temsillerini inceleyerek etik ikilemler, kişisel anlatılar ve özgünlük ile sömürü arasındaki gerilimi ele alır. 5C çerçevesi kullanılarak yapılan bu analiz, belgesel sinemanın çağdaş ölüm algılarını şekillendirmedeki rolünü göstermekte ve ölümlülüğün nasıl görüntülenip yorumlandığına dair anlayışı genişletmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Yaşamın sonu belgeseli, ölüm temsili, etik belgeselcilik, tıp beşerî bilimleri, medyada ölümlülük.

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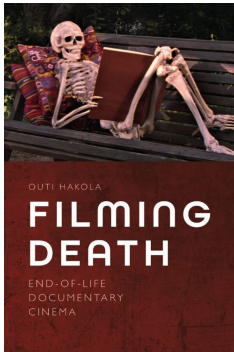
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Abstract

This review employs the 5C framework to analyze *Filming Death: End-of-Life Documentary Cinema* by Outi Hakola (2024). The paper examines the context of the book at the intersections of documentary film and cultural discourse on death, delves into its exploration of end-of-life representations, critically assesses its strengths and weaknesses, compares it with related scholarly works, and concludes with insights into Hakola's contribution to the broader discourse on mortality in cinema. The book's interdisciplinary approach, which draws from documentary theory, medical humanities, death studies, and the ethics of representation, highlights the significant role of documentary filmmaking in shaping contemporary cultural perceptions of death. By focusing on ethical dilemmas, personal narratives, and the balance between authenticity and exploitation, this book presents a comprehensive analysis that expands the boundaries of how death is filmed and interpreted.

Keywords: End-of-life documentary, death representation, ethical filmmaking, medical humanities, mortality in media



Filming Death: End-of-Life Documentary Cinema

Outi Hakola (2024)

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The subject of death, once considered a private and often taboo topic, has increasingly entered the public domain through media and art, especially in documentary filmmaking. The book examines how filmmakers capture death in its natural, often intimate, and emotionally charged moments. As contemporary societies, particularly in the West, face ageing populations and shifting cultural attitudes toward death and dying, documentaries provide a powerful medium for exploring this inevitable part of life. The book engages with this cultural moment by critically analysing how death is represented in documentary cinema, from medicalised portrayals in hospitals to personal reflections of those nearing death. Her work offers a timely contribution to the fields of death studies, film theory, medical ethics, and documentary studies, weaving together these disciplines to present a nuanced understanding of how death is both mediated and experienced. Using the 5C framework—Context, Content, Critical Strengths and Weaknesses, Comparisons with Related Works, and Concluding Insights introduced by Ulum (2024) in his study, this review evaluates the breadth and depth of the book's contribution to academic discussions on mortality and representation. Her work raises important ethical questions about documenting vulnerable individuals and highlights how the cinematic lens both reflects and shapes cultural attitudes toward death.

In terms of the book's context, the book is situated within a growing cultural and intellectual focus on death as a subject for public discourse, shaped by movements like death positivity and evolving attitudes toward mortality. In Western societies, where death is often medicalised and hidden from public view, documentaries offer a space to confront the realities of dying. *Filming Death* aligns with this shift, exp-

loring how documentaries can serve as both educational tools and vehicles for personal reflection. The broader intellectual context of the book draws from documentary theory, medical humanities, and ethics of representation. She engages with foundational theories from Nichols (2001), particularly on the ethical responsibilities of documentary filmmakers, and Grierson's (1966) notion of documentaries as a "creative treatment of actuality." By placing her analysis within these frameworks, the book critiques how filmmakers navigate the ethical terrain of documenting individuals at the end of life, where the line between respectful portrayal and voyeurism can easily blur. The book also resonates with contemporary scholarship on the biopolitics of death, particularly through the lens of Foucault's (1978) theory of biopower and its control over life and death. In addressing how the medicalisation of death in documentaries reflects broader societal controls over dying bodies, the analysis in the book speaks to both cultural and political dimensions of death, making her work relevant for scholars studying how institutions, such as hospitals and hospices, frame and manage the experience of dying. Additionally, her interdisciplinary approach situates her within the expanding field of death studies, where scholars such as Walter (2017) and Rose (2013) have explored how death is socially constructed and represented across cultures and media.

In terms of content, the book is organised into three key thematic areas: *Institutional Voices*, *Personal Reflections*, and *Ethical Dilemmas in End-of-Life Representation*. Each section addresses different aspects of how documentaries portray death, from the institutional settings of hospitals and palliative care facilities to the deeply personal and emotional experiences of dying individuals.

In the *Institutional Voices* section, the book examines how documentaries set in medical and institutional contexts represent the clinical realities of dying. Documentaries such as *Facing Death* (2010) provide a glimpse into the ethical dilemmas faced by medical professionals, as they grapple with the decision to prolong life versus allowing death to take its natural course. The analysis in the book draws heavily on Foucault's (1978) concept of biopower to critique how medical institutions exert control over life and death, shaping the dying process in ways that reflect societal attitudes toward mortality. This section also engages with Nichols' (2001) framework on documentary ethics, particularly in addressing how filmmakers negotiate their role as observers and parti-

cipants in the dying process. The book also discusses how these films can reinforce or challenge the dominant medicalized narrative of death. She argues that while some documentaries, like *The End* (2012), critique the depersonalization of death in hospitals, others, such as *Extremis* (2016), offer more complex portrayals that reflect the emotional and moral challenges faced by healthcare professionals.

The Personal Reflections section focuses on documentaries that centre the personal voices of dying individuals, allowing them to reclaim their narratives and reflect on their mortality. Films like *Before We Go* (2014) and *Seven Songs for a Long Life* (2015) are analysed for how they create a space for dying individuals to express their thoughts, fears, and hopes, offering a counter-narrative to the medicalised depiction of death. The book's analysis emphasises the ethical importance of allowing subjects to have control over their stories, aligning with theories of ethical filmmaking that prioritise the agency of vulnerable subjects. By using Sobchack's (1992) phenomenological approach to film, the book explores how these documentaries create an intimate connection between the viewer and the subject, inviting audiences to confront their mortality in a deeply personal way. Her analysis also touches on the emotional impact of these films, highlighting how the use of cinematic techniques, such as close-ups, music, and silence, serves to evoke empathy and reflection in the audience.

The Ethical Dilemmas in End-of-Life Representation section delves into the ethical concerns surrounding the filming of death and dying. Here, she tackles complex questions about the filmmaker's responsibility to their subject, particularly when documenting such vulnerable moments. Films like *How to Die in Oregon* (2011), which examines assisted dying, serve as case studies for how documentaries can both inform and sensationalise controversial topics. The book engages with Grierson's notion of the documentary as a "creative treatment of actuality" (1966) and critiques how some filmmakers may push ethical boundaries in their pursuit of emotional impact. The book's analysis is particularly strong in addressing the role of consent and dignity in end-of-life documentaries. She raises important questions about whether dying individuals can truly consent to being filmed, given the physical and emotional vulnerabilities they face. This section also reflects on the role of the audience, questioning whether viewers become complicit in the potential exploitation of these subjects. The discussion in the book could have been furt-

her enriched by engaging with Butler's (2004) work on vulnerability and ethics, particularly her concept of "precarious life," which examines the ethical implications of witnessing death.

The interdisciplinary approach in the book is a major strength, blending insights from documentary studies, ethics, medical humanities, and death studies. By engaging with theoretical frameworks from Nichols (2001), Foucault (1978), and Sobchack (1992), the book offers a well-rounded analysis that situates documentary film within broader cultural and political discourses on death. Her ability to critically engage with the ethical challenges of filming death, while also examining the cinematic techniques used to portray these experiences, makes the book a valuable resource for both scholars and practitioners. One of the book's standout features is Hakola's in-depth analysis of the personal voices of dying individuals. By focusing on documentaries that allow subjects to speak directly about their experiences, the book emphasises the ethical importance of giving agency to those who are often marginalised or silenced in discussions of death. This approach aligns with ethical filmmaking practices that prioritise the subject's voice and autonomy. The book's engagement with palliative care documentaries is another strength, as it offers a timely reflection on how these films influence public perceptions of hospice care and the dying process. Her analysis is nuanced, showing how documentaries can both challenge and reinforce societal norms around death, particularly in medicalised settings.

While the analysis in the book is thorough, one potential limitation is the book's focus on predominantly Western documentaries. Although she briefly touches on Australian and New Zealand films, the absence of non-Western perspectives on death and dying limits the scope of her analysis. Expanding the discussion to include documentaries from other cultural contexts, such as African, Asian, or Indigenous representations of death, would provide a more comprehensive view of how death is filmed and understood globally. Additionally, the present book could have engaged more with experimental documentary forms that challenge traditional narrative structures. While her focus on observational and participatory documentary forms is valuable, incorporating an analysis of avant-garde or experimental films, such as those that use abstract or non-linear storytelling, could have added depth to her critique of how death is represented in film.

The book can be situated alongside important texts in both docu-

mentary studies and death studies, such as *Death and the Moving Image* (Aaron, 2014) and *Death in Classical Hollywood Cinema* (Hagin, 2010). While Aaron (2014) and Hagin (2010) focus primarily on fictional portrayals of death, the book's attention to non-fictional, real-life representations of dying individuals sets her work apart in the field. In comparison to *Being Mortal* (Gawande, 2014), the present book provides a complementary perspective. Whereas Gawande (2014) focuses on the medical profession's role in managing death, this book offers a broader cultural critique of how media represents the dying process. Both works, however, share a common interest in the ethical dimensions of end-of-life care and the ways in which death is framed and understood in contemporary society. The present book's engagement with Sobchack's (1992) phenomenology of film adds another layer to her analysis, particularly in how she critiques the emotional and sensory experience of watching end-of-life documentaries. This aligns her work with broader discussions in media studies about how films influence audience perceptions of death and dying.

The current book offers an essential contribution to the study of death in media, providing a nuanced exploration of how documentaries represent the end of life. Her interdisciplinary approach, which draws from documentary theory, medical humanities, and death studies, enriches her analysis, making this book a key resource for scholars, filmmakers, and healthcare professionals interested in the ethical and cultural dimensions of representing death. The present book focuses on personal narratives and ethical dilemmas offers new insights into the responsibilities of documentary filmmakers and the role of media in shaping cultural attitudes toward death. As discussions around death become increasingly visible in public discourse, her work highlights the need for further research into how death is portrayed across different media forms and cultural contexts. Moving forward, scholars and filmmakers should expand on the current book by exploring non-Western representations of death and engaging with experimental documentary forms that challenge conventional narrative structures.

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