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GRIEVABLE LIVES: THE INTERSECTION OF BUTLER AND NECROPOLITICS

Abstract

This article examines the selective functioning of modern power over life and death through Judith Butler's concept of "grievable life" and Achille Mbembe's theory of necropolitics. The primary aim of the study is to discuss why not all lives are considered equally valuable and why some deaths become publicly visible while others are silenced. According to Butler, the grievability of a life depends on its social and political recognition. Mbembe, on the other hand, explains through the concept of necropolitics how sovereign power determines which bodies can be exposed to death. In this context, the study argues that death is not merely a biological event but also a politically distributed process, as demonstrated through examples such as war, migration, femicide, and media representations. When Butler's and Mbembe's approaches are considered together, it becomes evident that modern power establishes a hierarchy of life through visibility, recognizability, and mourning.

Keywords: grievable life, necropolitics, Judith Butler, Achille Mbembe, true crime culture.

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Introduction

Modern political power functions not only as a structure that regulates and protects life but also as a mechanism that determines the visibility and social meaning of death. Contemporary events such as wars, forced migration, femicides, disasters, and border policies clearly reveal that not all lives are regarded as equally valuable. While some deaths generate extensive public mourning, others become normalized within media and political discourse or disappear entirely from public visibility. This demonstrates that death is not simply a biological end but also a politically organized process.

While Michel Foucault's concept of biopolitics explains how modern power manages populations, disciplines bodies, and regulates life, Achille Mbembe's concept of necropolitics draws attention to the sovereign capacity to determine who may be abandoned to death. Judith Butler, particularly in *Precarious Life* and *Frames of War*, questions why certain lives are socially recognizable and

publicly grievable through her concept of "grievable life." According to Butler, the value of a life depends upon its political and social recognition. Therefore, not every death becomes equally visible, important, or mournable.

In this sense, death should be understood not as merely biological but as profoundly political. Why are some deaths and lives considered so disposable? This study aims to examine the selective structure of modern power over life and death by evaluating Judith Butler's theory of grievability together with Achille Mbembe's concept of necropolitics. The central question of the study is which lives become subjects of public mourning and which are rendered invisible. In this context, the article argues that death and mourning are politically distributed and that concepts such as visibility, recognizability, and humanity are shaped through relations of power.

Literature discussion

Studies on true crime culture have primarily focused on media consumption, audience motivations, and the popularity of crime narratives on digital platforms [8,9]. With the expansion of podcasts, documentaries, and streaming services, true crime has become a significant field within media studies. However, existing literature remains limited regarding the political visibility of death, grievability, and the selective representation of lives.

When Judith Butler's concept of "grievable life" is considered together with Achille Mbembe's notion of necropolitics, true crime culture can be understood not merely as the production of crime narratives but also as a political field that determines which lives are recognized as visible and valuable. This study seeks to address this theoretical gap within the existing literature.

Methodology

This article is based on a qualitative theoretical and discursive media analysis. Drawing upon Butler's theory of grievability and Mbembe's concept of necropolitics, the study examines representations of death within true crime culture. As a case study, Netflix's *Monster: The Jeffrey Dahmer Story* was selected, and its representational strategies were analyzed in relation to visibility, mourning, and the politics of death.

This study adopts a qualitative critical discourse analysis approach in order to examine how death and violence are represented within digital media culture. Rather than focusing on audience reception, the study analyzes narrative structures, visual representation, and character hierarchy within true crime productions. In this context, Netflix's *Monster: The Jeffrey Dahmer Story* is evaluated as a case study reflecting the contemporary politics of visibility and mourning. The analysis particularly focuses on whose perspectives are centered within the narrative, which victims remain visible or invisible, and how emotional identification is distributed between perpetrators and victims. This approach enables the study to connect

media representation with broader political theories of grievability and necropolitics.

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework of this study examines the works of Judith Butler and Achille Mbembe alongside the contributions of thinkers such as Giorgio Agamben and Michel Foucault. Michel Foucault constitutes the foundation of modern discussions on biopolitics. According to Foucault, whereas classical sovereignty operated through the "right to kill," modern power increasingly turned toward managing, regulating, and optimizing life. Biopolitics therefore refers to the governance of populations through health, security, productivity, and bodily regulation [4]. Foucault's *Society Must Be Defended* (2003) and *The Birth of Biopolitics* (2008) are fundamental works for understanding the regulatory power of the modern state over life. However, because Foucault's framework remained limited in explaining the direct political organization of death, later theorists expanded his analysis.

Giorgio Agamben further developed debates on sovereignty and biopolitics through his concept of "bare life." In *Homo Sacer* (1998), Agamben argues that sovereign power produces individuals who exist outside legal and political protection while still remaining under the authority of the state. These subjects can be excluded from political recognition and reduced to mere biological existence. Refugees, prisoners, migrants, and marginalized communities often occupy this condition of vulnerability. Agamben's framework is important for understanding how modern states create hierarchical distinctions between lives that deserve protection and lives that can be abandoned. In this sense, his approach forms an important bridge between Butler's concept of grievability and Mbembe's theory of necropolitics [11].

The discussions developed by Butler and Mbembe are directly informed by Foucault's understanding of biopolitics. The idea that the modern state not only protects life but also establishes hierarchies among lives emerges from this intellectual foundation.



Judith Butler, particularly in *Precarious Life* (2004) and *Frames of War* (2009), argues that not all lives are recognized equally [1,2]. According to Butler, a life becomes “grievable” only when it is socially and politically acknowledged as fully human. While some deaths gain visibility in the public sphere, others are reduced to statistics or entirely silenced.

Especially after 2010, Butler’s framework gained renewed importance in relation to wars, migration crises, refugee deaths, and media representations. Recent discussions surrounding Palestine, Mediterranean migration routes, and disaster politics have brought Butler’s understanding of the political distribution of mourning to the center of contemporary debates.

Achille Mbembe first introduced the concept of “Necropolitics” in 2003 and later expanded it in his book *Necropolitics* (2019). According to Mbembe, modern sovereignty is not limited to regulating life but also includes the power to determine who may be exposed to death.

Although Butler and Mbembe emerge from different theoretical traditions, both thinkers demonstrate that modern power establishes hierarchies among lives. Butler questions which lives are recognized as grievable, while Mbembe analyzes which lives are abandoned to death. When considered together, these approaches reveal the selective structure of modern power operating through visibility, humanity, and death.

Contemporary wars, refugee crises, and media discourses demonstrate that some bodies are coded as “protectable” and “grievable,” while others are silently erased. Therefore, reading Butler and Mbembe together provides an important theoretical framework for understanding contemporary politics of violence. Modern power governs not only life itself but also the visibility of mourning.

Analysis: the visibility of death and true crime culture. In the digital media age, death has ceased to be merely an event possessing news value and has increasingly transformed into a consumable narrative form.

Through Netflix documentaries, podcasts, YouTube content, and digital crime platforms, true crime culture reproduces violence and death within an aestheticized narrative structure. This demonstrates that the public visibility of death is not distributed equally and that certain lives become more “narratable” than others.

The representation of victims within true crime narratives constitutes a significant field of discussion in relation to Judith Butler’s concept of “grievable life.” According to Butler, a life can become an object of public mourning only if it is socially recognizable [2]. True crime productions tend to make certain victim profiles highly visible. Young, middle-class, and socially normative bodies are frequently placed at the center of dramatic narratives, whereas migrants, poor individuals, transgender people, or anonymous victims often remain outside the representational frame. In this way, media constructs a selective mechanism of visibility that determines which lives deserve empathy.

This selective representation should be understood not merely as a cultural preference but also as a political arrangement. Achille Mbembe’s concept of necropolitics provides a significant framework for understanding how certain bodies are systematically rendered invisible and exposed to death [3]. Within true crime culture, some deaths circulate endlessly through documentaries and public discussions, while others remain only statistical data.

The circulation of death in this manner transforms violence into an object of everyday consumption. As Garland argues, contemporary societies increasingly normalize crime and violence through media circulation and cultural consumption [7]. As Guy Debord argues in *The Society of the Spectacle*, modern media reconstructs reality through systems of representation [5]. Similarly, Baudrillard suggests that media simulations blur the distinction between reality and representation, transforming violence into a hyperreal spectacle [6].

True crime narratives do not simply report death; they transform it into a dramatic, aestheticized, and consumable experience.

Death thereby becomes detached from ethical loss and integrated into digital circulation. In this sense, true crime culture should not be interpreted merely as the popularization of crime narratives. Rather, it functions as a cultural field of power that determines which lives become visible, which deaths become grievable, and which bodies remain forgettable. When Butler's concept of grievability and Mbembe's notion of necropolitics are considered together, it becomes clear that digital media culture establishes an unequal regime of visibility over death.

Netflix's *Monster: The Jeffrey Dahmer Story* (2022) constitutes a striking example of how true crime culture circulates death and violence. The series not only reconstructs serial murders but also reproduces violence within an aesthetic narrative framework. This raises important questions regarding how death becomes visible through media and which lives are transformed into objects of public empathy.

While the psychological world, loneliness, and past traumas of Jeffrey Dahmer are explored in detail, the majority of the victims receive only limited representation. The narrative thus centers the perpetrator's experience, whereas victims often function merely as devices advancing the story. From Butler's perspective, this reveals how some lives are narratively granted greater visibility than others [2].

Furthermore, the widespread consumption of the series among young audiences demonstrates how death becomes aestheticized within digital culture. The circulation of scenes on social media, the popularization of character aesthetics, and the transformation of the perpetrator into a pop-cultural figure diminish the ethical dimensions of violence. As Debord argues, modern society reconstructs reality through media representations [5]. In *Dahmer*, death circulates not as direct tragedy but as watchable and consumable content.

From Mbembe's perspective, the fact that many victims in the series belong to Black, migrant, or socially vulnerable communities is

particularly significant. This raises questions regarding which lives are considered protectable and visible [3]. The marginalization of victims' social positions within the narrative reproduces their invisibility through cultural representation.

Similarly, the series repeatedly centers Dahmer's psychological perspective, allowing viewers to develop emotional proximity to the perpetrator through extended silent scenes and intimate cinematography. Meanwhile, victims remain fragmented and underdeveloped [10]. This unequal distribution of narrative visibility reflects Butler's argument that public mourning is not equally allocated among all lives [2].

Consequently, *Dahmer* can be understood not merely as a crime narrative but as a cultural mechanism reproducing the selective visibility of death. Through Butler's theory of grievability and Mbembe's concept of necropolitics, true crime culture appears as a hierarchical regime governing the visibility of life and death.

Conclusion

This study has argued that true crime culture is not simply a media practice that makes death and violence visible but also a cultural mechanism that produces hierarchical regimes of visibility among lives. When Judith Butler's concept of "grievable life" is considered alongside Achille Mbembe's theory of necropolitics, it becomes clear that not all lives are represented equally and not all deaths generate the same level of public mourning. Death therefore emerges not merely as an individual loss but as a politically and culturally organized issue of visibility.

The analysis of true crime narratives, particularly *Monster: The Jeffrey Dahmer Story*, demonstrates how violence is aestheticized through digital media and transformed into a consumable narrative form. In this process, the perpetrator frequently occupies the center of the narrative while victims remain partially represented or anonymized. Consequently, some lives generate intense visibility and empathy,



whereas others remain merely background elements within dramatic storytelling.

While Butler reveals that public mourning is distributed unequally and that certain bodies are considered more “grievable,” Mbembe explains how invisible lives are devalued within modern structures of power. In this context, true crime culture should be understood not only as the popularization of crime narratives but also as a regime organizing the circulation and visibility of death.

Ultimately, this study argues that the representational practices of digital media culture are not neutral. By centering certain lives while rendering others invisible, modern media establishes a selective political field surrounding death and mourning. Therefore, true crime narratives should be read not merely as products of popular culture but as political and cultural texts that shape the value of life and the visibility of death.

Furthermore, social media platforms accelerate the circulation of violent imagery and crime narratives, transforming mourning into a rapidly consumable digital experience. Algorithms contribute to the unequal visibility of suffering by promoting certain stories while marginalizing others. Consequently, digital culture does not merely reflect political hierarchies of life and death but actively reproduces them.

Limitations and future research

This study is limited to a theoretical and discursive analysis of a single true crime production. Future studies may comparatively examine different streaming platforms, audience responses, or representations of gender and race within true crime media. Empirical audience-based research could further contribute to understanding how digital

spectatorship shapes perceptions of violence and mourning.

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**YASI TUTULA BİLƏN HƏYATLAR: BATLER VƏ NEKROSIYASƏTİN KƏSİŞMƏ
NÖQTƏSİ****Xülasə**

Bu məqalə Judith Butler-in “yası tutula bilən həyat” anlayışı və Achille Mbembe-nin nekrosiyasət nəzəriyyəsi vasitəsilə müasir hakimiyyətin həyat və ölüm üzərində seçici fəaliyyətini araşdırır. Tədqiqatın əsas məqsədi bütün həyatların niyə eyni dərəcədə dəyərli hesab edilmədiyini və bəzi ölümlərin ictimai şəkildə görünür olduğu halda digərlərinin niyə susdurulduğunu müzakirə etməkdir. Butler-ə görə, bir həyatın yasının tutulması onun sosial və siyasi olaraq tanınmasından asılıdır. Mbembe isə nekrosiyasət anlayışı vasitəsilə suveren hakimiyyətin hansı bədənələrin ölümə məruz qala biləcəyini müəyyən etdiyini izah edir. Bu kontekstdə müharibə, miqrasiya, qadın qətləri və media təmsilləri kimi nümunələr əsasında ölümün yalnız bioloji hadisə deyil, həm də siyasi şəkildə bölüşdürülən bir proses olduğu irəli sürülür. Butler və Mbembe-nin yanaşmaları birlikdə nəzərdən keçirildikdə, müasir hakimiyyətin görünürlük, tanınma bilmə və yas vasitəsilə həyatlar arasında iyerarxiya qurduğu aydın olur.

Açar sözlər: yası tutula bilən həyat, nekrosiyasət, Judith Butler, Achille Mbembe, true crime mədəniyyəti.

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**ЖИЗНИ, ДОСТОЙНЫЕ ОПЛАКИВАНИЯ: ПЕРЕСЕЧЕНИЕ ИДЕЙ БАТЛЕР И
НЕКРОПОЛИТИКИ****Резюме**

В данной статье рассматривается избирательный характер функционирования современной власти над жизнью и смертью через концепцию «жизни, достойной оплакивания» Джудит Батлер и теорию некрополитики Ашиля Мбембе. Основная цель исследования — обсудить, почему не все жизни считаются одинаково ценными и почему одни смерти становятся общественно видимыми, тогда как другие замалчиваются. Согласно Батлер, возможность оплакивания жизни зависит от её социального и политического признания. Мбембе, в свою очередь, посредством концепции некрополитики объясняет, как суверенная власть определяет, какие тела могут быть подвергнуты смерти. В этом контексте в исследовании утверждается, что смерть является не только биологическим событием, но и политически распределяемым процессом, что демонстрируется на примерах войны, миграции, фемицида и медийных репрезентаций. При совместном рассмотрении подходов Батлер и Мбембе становится очевидно, что современная власть выстраивает иерархию жизни через видимость, распознаваемость и возможность оплакивания.

Ключевые слова: достойная оплакивания, некрополитика, Джудит Батлер, Ашиль Мбембе, культура true crime.

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