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Chapter 4: Beyond the page: Visual and digital layers in caitlin doughty's creative nonfiction

Section 1. Digital Death: Expanding The Death-Positive Narrative Online

1. Introduction

Undoubtedly, the ways in which we communicate and receive information are undergoing a significant transformation. With the digital age in full swing, we can expect even more advancements in technology in the future. Content creators of all kinds have adapted to these changes and have learned how to take advantage of them to their benefit. Caitlin Doughty is an author who has embraced the opportunities that multimodality and digitalization offers. Her YouTube channel and podcast are excellent examples of how writers can transition their work into something more interactive and engaging for a younger audience that is accustomed to this mode of communication. By combining various elements such as the written word, illustrations, audio-visual components, and a robust digital community, Doughty has created a web of multimodal elements that are impossible to undo. Her passion for her work and ideas are evident in her death-positive manifestos, which form a crucial part of this community. Without her dedication, this community would not have been as well-defined as it is today.

Multimodality is an unavoidable element that we ought to interact with during our digital age. It encompasses a wide range of modes used to transmit information, no matter the topic chosen by the digital creator. However, writers can also be creators and use their texts as inspiration to build extensions of their work for a more impactful encounter with the reader/viewer. One example is Caitlin Doughty, a mortician, and death positivity activist, who uses creative nonfiction to express her beliefs about the modern individual's increasing death phobia and how we can fight it. She is not only a

writer but also a YouTube creator. Her videos and her written discourse mirror each other perfectly, and readers/viewers take on these two roles interchangeably. This section aims to show in what ways the written text and the YouTube videos resemble, where the two intersect, and how they impact the readership/viewership regarding death positivity. The importance of this study can be seen in the way in which social media and digital modes are now used by activists to grow the popularity of cultural movements and to transmit their manifestos to a large mass of people.

2. Multimodality and Digital Extensions

Multimodality results from the meeting between an element from the physical medium and a digital space. The medium can be seen as a representation of physicality and a channel of communication. Moreover, while the two can coexist, they are still separate parts that form multimodality. We can send messages through physical channels, but we can also enhance and improve on those messages by using a different and more entertaining channel, such as the digital world. As with any other change in the way we perceive new information, there are advantages and disadvantages, but the main idea that we must keep in mind when we talk about multimodality is that its inevitability seeps into all domains, including written texts and the world they encompass.

Because of the technological age we live in, authors have found themselves pressured to join social media to connect with their fans and to express their written ideas in a complementary manner, sometimes adding to them or transforming them into something more visual and easier to digest in a short period. Landow calls creative nonfiction authors who refuse to make this shift "children unwilling to immerse themselves in the new element," who "do not find their texts aided, much less amplified, by the new technology" (439). Therefore, we can say that the written text undergoes an amplification when it is taken over the written border into the extensive land of media modes.

In contemporary death-positive literature, multimodality is strongly tied to the written manifestos put forth by writers such as Sue Black, Carla Valentine, and Caitlin Doughty. In their creative nonfiction books, their most vital point is the following: death is not to be feared but to be investigated. Their curious ways make for such interesting reads that people all over the world joined the international—and digital—death-positive community they willingly created. More than that, their written text is sometimes accompanied by illustrations (another proof of the existence of an older type of multimodality, yet very present and meaningful in its way) which enhance the physical medium and offer new perspectives to what our eyes perceive on the page. In Caitlin Doughty's case, multimodality crosses the physicality border and enters the realm of

digital content creators, mainly in the form of YouTube videos and audio podcasts. In this paper, I will refer to her YouTube presence and how it manifests off the written page while influencing death-fearing people worldwide to embrace their mortality and ask questions about it without feeling any guilt or shame for their naturally morbid curiosity. I will briefly discuss the theme of cyberspaces and audio podcasts concerning the death-positive community.

The death-positive community gathers artists, scientists, writers, and generally curious people willing to share their views and creations about death and dying with each other and the world. In 2018, she also started a podcast called Death in the Afternoon with her colleagues (Sarah et al.), where they talk about various subjects, such as the Civil War, corpses as entertainment, and mortuary scenes in popular TV shows. The podcast reached seventeen episodes in 2019 and has not been renewed since, but it was pretty popular on platforms such as Spotify, Apple, and Audible. All in all, you can notice how rich the medium spectrum is for Doughty and her team; her death-positive manifestos can reach people in written, video, and audio format, creating a multimodal world that houses all her research and ideas.

As this section aims to highlight the covert similarities between text and video in the case of Caitlin Doughty's Will My Cat Eat My Eyeballs? and her YouTube channel Ask a Mortician, similarities which are not immediately recognized but which do not fail at having a palpable impact on the reader and the viewer—who sometimes are the same person, I found that the two types of discourse reveal covert multimodality that has three functions: to build the positive illusion that there is constant and direct communication between the author and the reader/viewer, to create a liaison between the two through the persona of the reader/viewer, and to showcase intertextuality by infusing popular culture in the discourse, to connect with a larger and younger audience, mainly if the author uses social media to create a cyberspace for their fanbase.

In the case of Caitlin Doughty's Will My Cat Eat My Eyeballs?, we already have some expectations when we read the "Before we begin" section (xiii-xv). We expect the book to resemble an interview. And here is the first multimodal element: imagining a filmed or a recorded interview in the form of transcripts. The book begins with: "Oh, hey. It's me, Caitlin. You know, the mortician from the internet." From the very start, there is an instant connection between the written text and the social media world outside of it. She goes on: "Or that death expert from NPR. Or the weird aunt who gave you a box of cereal and a framed photo of Prince for your birthday. I'm many things to many people" (xiii). Here, we find that infusion of popular culture, which I have already mentioned and will also shortly analyze in the third section of this study.

These few pages pressure us into believing that the book will have the characteristics of an interview. We see four questions written in bold, and Doughty's

answers seem to be relatively informal: “Well, again. I’m a mortician,” “It’s not rocket science, my friends!,” “Nope: some of it is, in fact, rocket science,” “I’m obsessed with corpses. Not in a weird way or anything (nervous laughter).” She adds cues to the discourse to create the impression that we are reading a transcript. This could only make us imagine her in a chair or on a sofa, answering an interviewer’s questions who showcases a natural, childlike curiosity about death and dying. The mini-interview sets the tone for the rest of the book. Her introducing herself by mentioning her online presence as a mortician will send many readers to her YouTube channel —and vice-versa because she also discusses her books online, so it is possible that the same people who watch her there also read her books and are aware of this multimodal connection.

Caitlin Doughty explained in her interviews that the idea for this book came after she gathered questions about death and dying from children. At the Chicago Humanities Festival in 2019, she says:

The title of the book comes from an event I did in Australia. And a young boy, probably about eleven or twelve, raises his hand, asks that question, and immediately a light bulb went off in my head, that it’s just such a brilliant way to ask that! Because a lot of people in this room are sort of wondering in a more dark, existential way, what will happen if they die alone and no one finds their body and they have these cats… And what does that mean… And you have this twelve-year-old who’s like “Hey, when I die, will my cats eat my eyeballs?” and even for adults that’s a friendlier, more accessible way to ask that question. (URL in references section).

3. The intersection of storyworlds

Ruth Page (2010) and Marie-Laure Ryan (2014) argue that visual and verbal resources create sensory modality, which in turn gives rise to multiple storyworlds (which can be described as a layer of narrative fabric that is not necessarily frozen in time or space—that is: the author can go back and forth in time, she can use metatextuality or break the fourth wall in order to create a rupture in the “fabric” of the written text). Page also schematizes the multiple and different dimensions of multimodality in the following table (7):

Textual resources	Platform of delivery	Physical environment	Sensory modalities
Words	Digital screen	Private (domestic)	Sight
Image	Printed page	Public	Hearing
Sound	Cinema/TV screen	Inside/Outside rooms of buildings	Touch
Movement	Face-to-face	Light/dark	Smell
Olfactory resources	Telephone	Objects/space	Taste

Fig. 12. Page's multimodality

These five textual resources transmitted through a specific delivery platform via a physical environment, leading to the manifestation of a particular sensory modality, can also be intertwined and made into an open-ended configuration. The intersection between three textual resources such as words, images, and sound transmitted via a digital environment can appeal to multiple sensory modalities at the same time. Page explains: "I might read a novel whilst holding it and turning the pages; watching a film I both see the images on the screen and hear the sound track but I will not touch the screen itself" (8). When it comes to the written narrative, this can be delivered not only via the printed page with the help of written words, but it can also be transformed into an audiobook, an audio-visual narrative on stage, told face-to-face in a certain situation, or experienced both privately and publicly.

We must admit that one cannot experience each of the above modal elements separately but rather in an involuntary synergy that creates the impression of an open-ended configuration. However, I would add another element to Page's table: multimodality emerging from the reader's imagination. For example, words on a page are read using the sensory modality of sight, but they spark an entire storyworld in the reader's imagination. A film-like configuration starts to develop with the use of imagination, the inner eye that creates pictures comprehended by our physical eyes. As we will see in the following section, if there is already a connection established between the written text and some other form of expression used by the author—a form that allows the reader to see her or hear her voice—this multimodality is indirectly portrayed by the already existing knowledge that helps us read the words and, at the same time, hear the author's voice in the background, listen to her intonation, imagine her gestures when she addresses us—this happens especially when the author employs the method of breaking the fourth wall to create a second storyworld, as if she were guiding us through the first one, breaking character from time to time to joke or explain something that has already been established in the first storyworld.

In 2010, Lars Elleström proposed another scheme for categorizing multimodality (36):

Modality	What the modality is	The most important modes of the modality
Material modality	The latent corporeal interface of the medium, where the senses meet the material impact.	- human bodies - other demarcated materiality - not demarcated materiality
Sensory modality	The physical and mental acts of perceiving the interface of the medium through the sense faculties.	- seeing - hearing - feeling - tasting - smelling
Spatiotemporal modality	The structuring of the sensorial perception of the material interface into experiences and conceptions of space and time.	- space manifested in the material interface - cognitive space (always present) - virtual space - time manifested in the material interface - perceptual time (always present) - virtual time
Semiotic modality	Creating meaning in the spatiotemporally conceived medium through different sorts of thinking and sign interpretation.	- convention (symbolic signs) - resemblance (iconic signs) - contiguity (indexical signs)

Fig. 13. Elleström's multimodality

In his view, there are four types of modality: material, sensory, spatiotemporal, and semiotic. Each modality can be observed through various important modes. Here, we are especially interested in the virtual space and time and its intersection in the demarcated materiality of the written text on the page.

In the twenty-first century, the development of the internet and social media facilitates the apparition of the cyberspace (Meek 2011). The traditional concepts of space and time are so complex nowadays that the physical locus rarely exists to transmit information, especially for younger generations. Kluitenberg (2006: 10) writes that "all technological and social trends indicate that these two 'spheres' are becoming more and more closely interwoven", especially on YouTube, which I will discuss in the next section.

Multimodality (whether this means incorporating visual and verbal resources into the text or covertly creating links between the written text and a digital version of it) has the potential to expand the storyworld—and with it, the story and the discourse—and to create more depth as to how the readers experience the text and its extensions as

a whole. In the West, society is clearly dominated by images, fast information, and instant gratification. So, if we want to transmit powerful ideas, we must convey them visually. Also, as Gunther Kress (2003) writes in his book about literacy in the new digital age, we have already begun to move away from what we might call "traditional" writing—not necessarily involving a pen and paper but focusing only on one mode—towards a society which is slowly learning to function multimodally in the twenty-first century.

4. YouTube and metatextuality

Since April 23, 2005, when the first video was uploaded on YouTube by Jawed Karim, one of its co-founders, over 800 million videos have been uploaded by 37 million channels on the platform. More than 2 billion users have a daily active count of 122 million unique visitors (Wise 2022). So, as you can see, YouTube is one of the most visited websites on the internet in 2022, with video commentaries and reaction videos at the top of the "most viewed videos" list. This means it is an excellent platform for already famous authors to promote their work and ideas to billions of people who are already subscribed to their channels or who happen to stumble upon their videos thanks to YouTube's recommended videos page.

A significant and multifaceted advantage inherent in the utilization of YouTube lies in its exceptional capacity to facilitate individual expression and the widespread dissemination of unique perspectives to an expansive and diverse global audience. This dynamic platform serves as a formidable tool for the cultivation of a vibrant and interconnected community, wherein individuals can partake in the open and unimpeded exchange of a myriad of thoughts, concepts, and emotions. It stands in stark contrast to the rigid structures often encountered in traditional educational institutions, which typically mandate stringent qualifications and expertise for their instructors. In contrast, YouTube empowers virtually anyone, including students and individuals without formal training or credentials, to create and share educational videos, offering a democratizing force in the realm of knowledge dissemination.

By transcending the confines of traditional educational hierarchies, YouTube democratizes the process of knowledge sharing and offers a more inclusive educational landscape. It becomes a platform where expertise is not solely tethered to institutional pedigree but is also celebrated when it emerges organically from individuals' genuine passion and commitment to their subjects. As such, YouTube stands as an accessible and democratic medium through which those possessing valuable insights and expertise, regardless of their formal qualifications, can contribute to the collective repository of knowledge. This democratization of education through YouTube ensures that a broader

and more diverse audience can access a wealth of information and perspectives, thereby promoting a richer and more nuanced understanding of the world around us.

It is a "viral marketing wonderland" (Burgess and Green 2009:3). For artists, writers, and singers, it is also a "way to engage and manage their fan communities" (55). A Google study in 2018 showed that 90% of users say that YouTube is the way they discover new brands or products (Think with Google 2018), including creative nonfiction books promoted by authors using their platform. Martin Cavannagh (2019) writes in an article that, by using the video format to promote their books, authors "have the benefit of having penetrated your reader's mind", which makes further marketing strategies even easier to apply. Every YouTube video is a story—no matter how it is being told and to whom—and this brings us to the transmedia storytelling aspect of multimodality. About this, Henry Jenkins (2007) writes in an online article that it "represents a process where integral elements of a fiction get dispersed automatically across multiple delivery channels to create a unified and coordinated entertainment experience"—and, I may add, after reading Caitlin Doughty's books and watching almost all her YouTube videos, it is easy to notice that some sections of her books correspond to a video that she posted on the same topic, using the same elements (such as breaking the fourth wall and humor)—by also being "the ideal aesthetic form for an era of collective intelligence". Louisa Ellen Stein addresses this in her book Millenial Fandom, stating that "professional and amateur authors alike invoke particular sets of cultural meanings to foster shared authorship and to acknowledge shared community", helping fans escape "the hidden realm of fan conventions" and become "visible in highly publicized, buzz-feeding online spaces" (136). So, this transformation of the written discourse into a multimodal one helps authors and readers consume the former's content differently and respond to it in a manner that allows the creator to communicate with them and reply to comments and feedback directly on the platform.

Social movements have been utilizing communication technologies that are specific to their needs for a long time. Pickerill (2004) reminds us that historically, social movements have used the communication technologies of their time, such as printing presses, radios, televisions, citizen-band radios, mobile phones, photography, and video, to change cultural norms. While activism is typically associated with a particular location, social media use suggests that movements are changing the spatial structure of communication (O'Lear 1997). In this regard, YouTube, with its various applications, acts as a magnifier that increases the scale of an issue or event, generating awareness and solidarity across various social scales.

The written speech of Caitlin Doughty bears a striking resemblance to her communication style in the digital realm. Her videos primarily fall under the categories of commentary and reaction videos, and the manner in which she communicates in these videos is in sync with the tone of her written works. This seamless integration between

the two modes of communication creates a subtle but powerful connection in the reader's mind. The tonality, types of humor, breaking the fourth wall, addressing the reader directly, and orality are the common threads that unite the two environments. As far as marketing and publicity are concerned, this convergence between the two modes of communication provides an excellent opportunity to advertise the other half of the "multimodal couple" in a subtle yet effective manner.

5. Digital communities and the cyberspace

About the digital revolution we have all experienced, Roberta Pearson writes in an article that it "has had a profound impact upon fandom, empowering and disempowering, blurring the lines between producers and consumers"—we can say that authors are producers of text; so they easily fall into this category in the marketing equation—"creating symbiotic relationships between powerful corporations and individual fans and giving rise to new forms of cultural production" (2010: 84). The key words here are "new forms of cultural production", which have been plentiful in the past decades, from ASMR videos (which first appeared in 2009, when WhisperingLife ASMR updated a black screen video and a whispered sound recording called "Whisper 1 – hello") to absurd DIY compilations uploaded by content farms and consumed massively by younger audiences, or gaming videos. This shows the wide range of content one can find on YouTube, and each type has a particular fandom, not to mention that each creator has their fanbase (that sometimes also has a name, which strengthens the identity of the digital community—some examples: Caitlin Doughty calls her community "deathlings", comedy creator Danny Gonzalez calls his fans "Greg", and Taylor Swift's fans are "swifties"). If sometimes YouTubers start by being video content creators and then migrate towards the domain of nonfiction, some authors become well-known for their books first, and then they build a social platform to promote them. Some examples: Joey Graceffa wrote In Real Life: My Journey to a Pixelated World (2015), and Keith Habersberger, Zach Kornfeld, Eugene Lee Yang, and Ned Fulmer, also called "The Try Guys" on social media, wrote The Hidden Power of F*cking Up (2019). Either way, the two realms are interconnected, and their users tend to notice and accept this fact by supporting their favorite creators in both cases because they sense the presence of the same ethos in the content they watch or read. In an article online, Nancy Baym (2007) writes that "[t]hese groups also develop a sense of shared identity" because they share the same ethos.

Frank Serafini explains why multimodality enormously influences us. The visual images and multimodal texts that permeate our daily existence play an integral role in shaping our comprehension of the world and the evolution of our identities. These visual representations are not passive bystanders but active participants in the manner in

which we construct meaning. They facilitate the communication of emotions and concepts across temporal and spatial boundaries, fostering the development of interpersonal connections and serving as archives for the minutiae of our quotidian lives (412). Beyond all the theoretical and tangled explanations, this is the one that appeals to me the most. The keywords are identity, feelings, and ideas. The latter two contribute to the consistency of the former; multimodality keeps ideas and feelings circulating among individuals and within us. Now, depending on the content of the idea, it can have a positive or a negative impact on those who come into contact with it. In our case, death acceptance (or death positivity) is a movement that has brought together a community of people who find their identities have something in common. This community is not built only around the written text but also around Caitlin Doughty's presence online. Looking at the comments section for any of her videos, we notice a strong feeling of belonging, acceptance, and humor, even when the topic is quite sensitive.

For instance, she posts educational videos such as "We Recreated a Victorian Funeral" or "A Brief History of the Dead in Art" to inform curious viewers on general subjects in an easygoing manner. However, she also posts videos such as "Overcoming death denial in your family" and "Helping a friend through grief," where the viewers find a rather solemn mortician offering honest advice without crossing the fine line between humor and mockery. The comments section of the video "Body Worlds (&other forever corpses)" is generally characterized by respectful remarks (e.g., "My issue with Body Worlds is the way the corpses were obtained. There are heavy rumors that the bodies were once POWs, which is something to think about. Thanks for making a video about this! Good to start a conversation!"), suggestions for future videos (e.g., "Could you do a video on the anti-grave robbing devices of the nineteenth century, please? I heard of one case where a gang of grave robbers was killed by one of these devices"), shared experiences (e.g., "I seem to be four years late to the party here but just wanted to add... I loved the body exhibit and went multiple times when it was in Atl. I was a child, probably 10 or 11, but my dad walked me through, and we discussed everything, he made sure I understood what everything was. I didn't think about death at all because they looked so plastic. I knew that it was actual bodies, but looking at them from a totally clinical perspective, even as a child, really helped my understanding of the body and anatomy. I think that if there is a way to do this ethically, it should not only be permissible, but encouraged"), and people sharing information that is connected to the topic of the video (e.g., "A couple of years ago, the BBC's History Cold Case series did an episode on the body of a child that was mummified in the nineteenth century as an anatomical specimen. In the end, they could not countenance returning the child's body to display but advocated a respectful burial because it is highly unlikely that the child could have possibly consented to the procedure"). And, naturally, just like all her videos, this comments section is sprinkled with humor, too: "Party on, future corpses! I'll be using that in parties if you don't mind."

What Doughty creates (perhaps unwillingly) is something Marc Augé (2008) calls a non-place. In his work, he talks about super-modernity (characterized by spatial and temporal excess; man goes back to individuality, and time and space are compressed because we cannot communicate across the world in a matter of seconds). Unlike modernity, when past and present co-existed and places had to define particularities, super-modernity replaces this spatial specificity with the lack thereof. We can also say that super-modernity is characterized by cyberspaces, where multimodality enhances the connection between people. As we noticed in the comments section of Doughty's Body Worlds video, the death positive (or at least death-curious) community has a cyber-space of its own, outside of time and space as we know them. They can go back to the video any time they want, they have the power to move freely within the multimodal discourse, pause, resume, and interact with the cyberspace and the content creator. This type of freedom allows for greater viewing pleasure, which in turn triggers a cognitive response from the viewer: the message will be clearly received. It will constitute "food for thought" long after the cyber-member has left the digital space. And for the death-positive community, this is one of the most important outcomes of their work: stirring up conversation about death and dying by turning uncomfortable into a professional—yet friendly—reply to the natural curiosity we all exhibit.

Kress (2010: 22) lists several characteristics of the contemporary media landscape, these four being the more important for this paper: (a) the differences between the global and the local disappear because of the "reach" of media; (b) the content in the media is not created only by professionals, but by users; (c) persons and information are more accessible, even giving them a sense of ubiquity; and (d) multimodality (representing something in many modes, chosen for their potential to reach out to as many people as possible in a communicationally effective way). According to Fiona Doloughan, the writer is a "careful and responsive reader of the text with a capacity to translate the potential of one text into another 'new' text" (2011: 4). The writer's creativity frames this newness in ways that we have already noticed in literature: collaborations with illustrators, with filmmakers and directors, creating illustrations themselves for their books, using language as a source of creativity by turning the text into an audiobook or an adaptation for specific age groups. Kress writes that, because of the new media, we can combine different modes and allow for more interactivity than readers had before with "the older media of book and page" (2003: 49).

Today, because the screen is dominating the landscape of mediums (not the TV as much as the phone, laptop, or tablet), writers have to adapt and offer digital representations of their work, or at least refer to it whenever they decide to be present online so that they can keep up with the growing passion for gaming as a form of death acceptance and grief management. In a recent article in The Guardian, we understand better that the stereotypical belief that games are a form of avoidance is only that: a

stereotype. Emma Flint (2023) explains that "the nature of video games demands active participation, which can help players process their feelings, free from real-world expectations about correct ways to grieve". Some such games are: Spiritfarer, Lost Words: Beyond the Page, and The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask. Another strong community arises through gameplay, and another space is built for the players to exist and act. In our case, Doughty's metatextuality does not extend to the gaming realm; it stops in the audio-visual one, ensuring its influence is sizeable.

To exemplify this, let us look at a few of the comments received by Doughty on her YouTube video, answering whether our cats and dogs would eat us when we die. In total, there are almost 3,000 comments, more than half a million views, 19,000 likes and 159 dislikes, which is an impressive ratio for a video that discusses sensitive subjects such as death—proof that we are dealing with a niche subject.

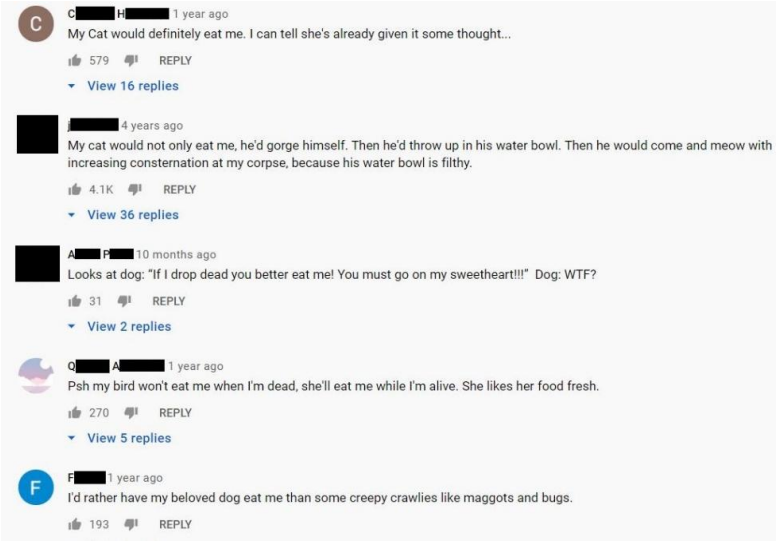

Fig. 14. Screenshot of five comments received by Caitlin Doughty for her YouTube Video,

"Would your cat or dog eat your corpse?"

What is impressive is that the illusion of direct, one-to-one communication leads to a clear and palpable result (the result is palpable because its existence can be proved). If we look at the comments above, they can be labelled as death-positive, which is precisely what Doughty's purpose is in her work, and humorous, another trait of Doughty's discourse picked up by her viewers. Pickerill (2004) reminds us that, in seeking to change social and cultural norms, these movements usually employ communication modes and technologies that are contemporary to those specific movements. Moreover, the cyberspace created by the author through her multimodal configurations has real organization identities—See The Order of the Good Death, an

association of scholars and artists created by Caitlin Doughty, which gathers death-positive individuals from all spheres of activity (Adams 2009). It symbolizes a network of people—more than 1.5 million, to be precise, and only on YouTube—who are also familiar with her books and who share the same attitude towards death as her.

This is why I can confirm that those who have seen and enjoyed her videos will undoubtedly hear her voice in the written text, see her facial grimaces, her hand movements, imagine her pausing and changing her tone of voice, and all these from written clues and previous knowledge.

6. The Infusion of Popular Culture

The term "popular culture" is a concept that holds various meanings, depending on the person defining it and the context in which it is used. It is generally recognized as the vernacular or people's culture that predominates in a society at a given point in time. As Brummett (1991) explains in Rhetorical Dimensions of Popular Culture, pop culture contains the aspects of social life the public is most involved in. Essentially, popular culture is determined by the interactions between people in their everyday activities: styles of dress, the use of slang, greeting rituals, and the foods that people eat are all examples of popular culture.

Moreover, popular culture is informed by the mass media. There are a number of generally agreed elements comprising popular culture. For example, popular culture encompasses the most immediate and contemporary aspects of our lives. These aspects are often subject to rapid change, especially in a highly technological world in which people are brought closer and closer by omnipresent media. Specific standards and commonly held beliefs are reflected in pop culture. Because of its commonality, pop culture both reflects and influences people's everyday life. It is worth mentioning that brands can attain iconic pop status, such as McDonald's golden arches, which have become universally recognizable. However, iconic brands, like other aspects of popular culture, may rise and fall. Therefore, it is imperative to keep track of pop culture trends to stay relevant in the ever-changing landscape of contemporary society.

Popular culture can be defined as the culture that is created by subcultures, specifically in the process of resolving a problem. Subcultures often use popular culture materials as a means to identify members of the subculture. This indicates that subculture members are actively involved in the appropriation, creation, and utilization of popular culture materials, both as audience members and as artists. Henry Jenkins' Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture (1992) delves deeper into this active aspect of cultural product use and production, particularly in relation to television fiction. The title of his work is intended to foreshadow his thesis, which argues that subculture-

organized television viewers use television media for their own purposes and are not merely passive consumers. Overall, this highlights the significance of subcultures and their active participation in the creation and consumption of popular cultural materials.

Duff (2003) writes that "pop culture talk is of course pervasive in modern (or postmodern) society and in discourse across a variety of social settings" (233). I would say that pop-culture talk is quite essential nowadays, especially if the author's or artist's goal is to attract young audiences. Such examples are easily interpretable by most readers and viewers. Moreover, they also have the element of relatability, which is one of the basic rules for interacting with and attracting an audience on social media platforms (such as YouTube). On a written level, these references cannot acquire visual elements naturally. However, the latter is still considered intertextuality or inter-modality (if the text references films, series, art, music, and so on). Landow (2009) calls this "electronic nonfiction" (439), whose configuration uses "images, particularly moving images", which "permit new forms of explanation, argumentation, and proof" (443). Indeed, if we look at excerpt 2c, we notice that image and sound play a significant role in expressing what can be expressed in a single phrase. The photoshopped image, the edited cats, the black-and-white visual choice, and the chewing sound in the background could stir disgust and uncomfortableness in viewers. However, the fact that it is pretty evident that the image has been poorly edited is a voluntary choice. Most of Doughty's videos contain this poorly photoshopped visual example, especially when she breaks the fourth wall and seems to address the viewer directly—even more directly than looking straight at the camera as if reading a script—and be aware of the effect that this "crack" has on them, which is a humorous one.

In Doughty's YouTube video about the possibility of your pet eating you after you die, we meet with an infusion of popular culture, specifically with the poster of the 1983 horror film Cujo (based on Stephen King's novel). The reference seems appropriate, as the film follows the struggle of a mother and her son to avoid being torn to shreds by a rabid Saint Bernard by locking themselves in their car. While Doughty discusses the possibility of your dog eating your corpse after you die, the poster's image adds extra suspense. It underlines the question, "What if that is the case?" by raising the anxiety levels in the viewers. Those who watched the film can enjoy the reference; others can guess what the film is about just by looking at the devilishly angry dog on the poster. The effect this has on the viewers is the one I mentioned in this chapter: the incredible illusion of interaction between the creator and the one who receives and watches the creation.

7. Audio extensions and podcasts

Podcasting is a powerful medium that has the ability to convey complex arguments in a digestible format and transform them into relatable stories. Unlike traditional methods of presenting statistics, podcasts can provide a human perspective by highlighting the experiences of individuals impacted by those statistics. This unique ability of audio to connect listeners to scholarship can enhance the academic discourse by allowing scholars to infuse themselves into their arguments and establish a personal connection with their audience. In this way, podcasts can bridge the gap between academia and the general public, making scholarly research more accessible and engaging. A podcast is a symphony of sound, a carefully crafted collection of audio recordings that transport listeners to another world. While video podcasts exist, they are a rare breed compared to the audio form. Like a blog, podcasts require captivating content to keep audiences engaged. Enter the podcast host, a master of their craft who designs and creates shows on topics of their choosing. With unique titles, introductions, and catchphrases, they lure listeners into their world. Practical communication skills are a must for podcasters, who use monologues, interviews, education, and storytelling to create a listening experience that is both informative and entertaining.

In a world that never stops moving, podcasts have become a beacon of light for those seeking a moment of respite. They offer a unique opportunity to indulge in topics of interest while performing mundane tasks, like folding laundry or commuting to work. With the ability to download or stream effortlessly and at a low cost, it's no wonder that podcasts have become a staple in our daily lives. The vast array of topics available ensures that there is something for everyone, from informative content to fictional tales. It's no surprise that podcast hosts and advertisers alike have taken advantage of this platform to increase their revenue. The possibilities are endless, and the world of podcasts continues to grow. For those with an interest in the art of audio storytelling or a passion for podcasts, a suitable platform exists that allows for connection with like-minded individuals worldwide. The platform offers an extensive range of discussion topics, sure to generate interest, and interactive meetings often lead to the discovery of new and intriguing content. Participants are encouraged to share their preferences for favorite podcasts and may even contribute financially to show their appreciation for the hosts. With the advent of social media and live broadcasting, enthusiasts may take part in these meetings from the comfort of their own homes, regardless of location, as long as an internet connection is available.

"Image has been a part of human culture longer than script." (Kress 2010: 5) but transmitting information by word of mouth (perceiving it through the sense of hearing) is even older than that. On September 5, 2019, Caitlin Doughty used her podcast "Death in the Afternoon" to preview her latest book, Will My Cat Eat My Eyeballs?. The podcast episode starts with the same short jingle, and we hear Doughty's voice: "Hello,

deathlings! I'm just popping in today to say I have a new book, Will My Cat Eat My Eyeballs?, and to read some of it to you."

Jennifer L. Bowie (2012) writes that a typical podcast has a particular arrangement; it contains a pre-intro (where listeners find information about the date and the episode title, usually in written format), the intro (a short introduction to the episode that is meant to hook the listeners), the main body, and the outro (a closing remark containing contact information, acknowledgements, and so forth). In the 2020s, however, podcasts have a new segment where prominent creators talk about the sponsor(s) of the episode, presenting their products or services.

The episode ends with a self-promotion segment in the background which we start to hear the same jingle from the beginning again. Podcasts are considered to be "one of the most exciting and wonderfully disruptive technologies to emerge in recent history" (Geoghegan and Klass 1), born from audio blogs in the 2000s and developing into audio-visual (or just audio) podcasts posted on both YouTube and music sharing platforms like Spotify. The differences between podcasts and other audio information sources are that "podcasting puts the listener in control" (Geoghegan and Klass 6), and anybody can start their podcast about anything they like, even for a minute. All people need is a microphone and an internet connection, and they can upload a one-minute episode about their favorite indoor plants during winter. As it happens, some people doing podcasts are already well-known in other domains. Before starting her podcast in 2018, Doughty had already published two books, Smoke Gets in Your Eyes and From Here to Eternity, and had already grown a large audience on her YouTube channel, Ask A Mortician. So, it would be only natural for her to advertise her artistic endeavors on all her communication channels.

Also, some of the topics discussed during her podcasts are tackled in her latest book, creating again a connection between the two modes (even three, if we take YouTube into account). For instance, one episode posted in June 2019 talks about corpses as entertainment, an idea we also find in the chapter and video discussed above. This is no surprise since "it is important for creators to think about audience, purpose, and context" (Blevins 141). As we have seen, Doughty uses her platform to promote death positivity by stirring curiosity and laughter in readers/viewers/listeners. This way, multimodality combines audio and visual elements in both written (physical) and digital mediums.

8. Conclusions

There is no doubt that communication channels are changing and that how we receive information has never been this digitalized before (making room for even more

technological advances in the future—consider the debates about what the metaverse might bring in terms of digitalization and technological barriers). With them, content creators of all kinds have learnt to deal with these changes and capitalize on them to their advantage. Caitlin Doughty is one of the authors who extended her creative arm into the realm of multimodality and digitalization. Her YouTube channel and her podcast are notable examples of how and why an author of written literature can "translate" their work into something more interactive and appealing for the younger generation—who is more accustomed to this mode than any other. By combining the written word, illustrations, audio-visual elements, and a solid digital community that ensures that information circulates continuously, Doughty generated a web of multimodal elements that cannot be undone. Naturally, her death-positive manifestos are a massive part of this: if not for her passion for her job and her ideas, this community would have never been this well-defined.

How we (the readers) perceive authors has drastically changed in the past decades. We can see that just by typing in the YouTube search bar the name of a contemporary book, and there is the author, in a thumbnail, looking back at us, waiting for us to click on the video and start interacting with her and her fanbase. When it comes to how we perceive a written text, the page itself is not the only responsible anymore. Many more factors come into play—which have everything to do with our previous encounters with the author or her work, whether the encounter is physical or online. Some questions suddenly pop into our minds when we look at a book and recognize the cover's name: Do they have a social media presence? Do they have a YouTube channel? Can I find them on Twitter? Moreover, this is to prove that technology interferes with how we believe the author tries to reach us. Right now, the written book does not seem to be enough. We want more: to know what they look like, what their voice sounds like, how they move their hands when they talk, and whether they have a sense of humor. All this helps us picture them talking while we travel to the depths of their written words.

The emergence of social media has undoubtedly revolutionized the way in which we perceive and engage with visual content. This transformation not only impacts our devices but also immerses us in the stories we love, fostering a deeper connection between us and the creator. This interaction feels wholly authentic and genuine, providing a sense of satisfaction and fulfilment that cannot be replicated through other mediums.

In 2022, after a pandemic that forced us to reconsider our physical relationships (and what exactly physicality means for every one of us), the digital space seems to be a safe haven for those who wish to find people alike with similar interests and hobbies. Death positivity (not being in any way a hobby, but a way of living and dying) is such a space. This movement's resources come from all corners of the digital and physical world: from YouTube videos to reinterpretations of Ars Moriendi. Caitlin Doughty and

more authors like her show us the way to successful use of multimodality, not just for their own sake, but for the sake of those who find shelter in the online communities they created, making changes every day towards accepting (or at least encouraging curiosity about) death and mortality.

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Section 2. Death In Images: Illustrating Mortality

1. Introduction

In the twenty-first century, the written text is insufficient to keep the reader engaged. In a time when social media (with its instant gratification) and multimodality are two of the most used techniques to send and receive information, plain text does not make for an appealing medium for telling stories. This is why creative nonfiction—the genre that combines the artfulness of storytelling with reality and facts—and illustration is a pair which becomes increasingly captivating, especially in the context of death-acceptance literature. This section aims to present how illustrations are used in Caitlin Doughty's books *From Here to Eternity* (2017) and *Will My Cat Eat My Eyeballs?* (2019) from two points of view: (a) the multimodal direction that the written text takes when we add illustrations; (b) the difference between literal and conceptual illustrations and what effects they have on readers.

First of all, visual culture is a contemporary post-modern trait that we can notice as part of screen culture (Rarot 2014) and as part of what has become the golden age of illustrated nonfiction (Brechner 2021). When it comes to death-acceptance literature—one of whose representatives is Caitlin Doughty—death and death-related imagery is a sensitive topic, so illustrations become a type of filtered photographs "created as reminders and celebrators of life" (Pantelić 2017). While there are many subjects that photographers shy away from, such as the dead body (this includes: human remains, crime scene photography, and post-mortem photography) or the aftermath of natural disasters or war crimes, illustrators have the possibility of deliberate censorship and visual control over their work. This enables the use of illustrations even about the most sensitive topics, such as death and dying. Even if, when referring to contemporary illustration, "there are few boundaries and more friction" (Federico 2008), since illustrators draw inspiration from other visual arts, such as fashion, graffiti, and animation, as you will see in this paper, the two illustrators of the two books, Dianné Ruz and Landis Blair, are inspired by two very different styles. However, the essence of their illustrations converges on one single point: death acceptance and the reality of being mortal.

Second of all, illustrations "expand, explain, interpret, or decorate a written text" (Bodmer 1992: 72). They act as explanatory addendums or as creative interpretations. In the case of children's books—one of the many examples—illustrations provide "mental scaffolds" (Fang 1996: 138) for the young reader, but the same thing may be said for any readership. In Doughty's books, illustrations are checkpoints that help the readers update their initial feeling about the author's style, discourse, and content. While it is possible to get lost in the written text or to stray from the main focal point (here:

death phobia and death acceptance), the illustration will always bring you back. It will act as an anchor that the readers can use whether they want to re-read a part of the book, remember what a chapter is about, or relive a feeling.

In this section, I will briefly talk about the importance of illustrations in creative nonfiction and analyze the role and the effect of the visual elements in Caitlin Doughty's *From Here to Eternity* and *Will My Cat Eat My Eyeballs?*, illustrated by Dianné Ruz and Landis Blair. More than that, I will also add two short interviews with the illustrators that might help us grasp the complexity of this process and the meaning behind some elements in their illustrations.

2. Illustrations in (Creative) Nonfiction

In nonfiction, illustration is "pragmatically necessary," and there must be a "tight" and "indissoluble melding of text and image to clarify or explain accurately the facts presented" (Thomas 25). In the center of illustrations, there exists a remarkable interplay between the written text and the accompanying image. This relationship is a harmonious blend of what is spoken and what is visual, or what we articulate versus what we depict. Interestingly, sometimes these two halves might not be identical but complement each other seamlessly. For instance, illustrations can be employed to convey a part of the story that might not be entirely revealed in the written text or add details and elements that could be missing from it. As a result, the readers become aware of this addition and skillfully piece together the information in their minds—much like a puzzle—to create a more intricate and elaborate picture that enables them to immerse themselves in the information exchange with greater depth and insight.

The visual language that is our eyesight has also been the subject of neurological studies such as Oliver Sacks' *Hallucinations* (2013) and *The Man Who Mistook His Wife For a Hat* (2011) which confirmed the complexity of seeing as a cognitive technique: involving conscious intellectual activities such as reasoning or remembering to gain cognitive development. In "Word and Image," Mitchell writes: "The domains of word and image are like two countries that speak different languages but that have a long history of mutual migration, cultural exchange and other forms of intercourse" (2003: 53). Moreover, since creative nonfiction is built around the idea of truth and reality (Hart 2011; Gutkind 2012), the word and the image must also comply with the same norm—or rather, their relationship must do so—and strive to express the same meaning and to have the same purpose: to attract, to inform, and to keep the readers engaged by exposing them to reality in a visual way.

In a well-written and thought-provoking article published in *ShelfTalker* in 2016, Brechner sheds light on the emergence of a new era of nonfiction picture books.

This trend has paved the way for authors like Caitlin Doughty, who seek to cater to a broader audience beyond children, to incorporate illustrations into their books. The subject of death is often regarded as a sensitive and complex topic, and the use of illustrations can play a vital role in softening the impact of this difficult subject matter. In fact, illustrations can also aid in enhancing the reader's imaginative experience beyond what the written text alone can achieve.

However, illustrations are not a characteristic of the modern and post-modern era alone. This may have very well begun in the prehistoric era. Once the printing press brought a massive shift in the distribution of information, illustration allowed ideas to be communicated to a larger mass of readers (Barnes 2020). Over the last couple of centuries, illustration has emerged as a powerful tool for individuals to express their social and political beliefs. From the suffragettes to the Women's March and the Black Lives Matter Movement, illustrations have played a significant role in shaping public opinion and challenging the established norms. In this regard, it can be argued that illustration has become a form of resistance to the status quo.

Interestingly, this same resistance has been harnessed by the death-positivity movement (Booth 2019), which has gained momentum in recent years. Spearheaded by death industry workers, scholars, and artists, the movement seeks to promote open conversations about death and encourage individuals to accept mortality. Using social media, a platform known for its instant visual gratification, death positivity has spread like wildfire, inspiring people to embrace cultural and personal differences regarding rituals, grief, and beliefs. The death-positivity movement has revolutionized the way we approach death. It encourages us to embrace our mortality, to celebrate our lives, and to find beauty in the process of dying. By fostering a culture of openness and acceptance, the movement has transformed the way we think about death and has empowered us to see it as an integral part of the human experience. Indeed, the death-positivity movement has emerged as a beacon of hope, inspiring us to live life to the fullest and to cherish every moment we have on this earth. Photography and illustration greatly help this process: Paul Koudounaris's *Memento Mori* and *Death, a Graveside Companion*, a collection of one thousand macabre photos and illustrations, are wonderful examples of such endeavors.

Throughout history, various representations of death have emerged in art, each with its unique allegorical meanings. One such depiction of death is the vanitas paintings, which were a common sight in medieval art. These paintings featured symbols such as skulls, hourglasses, watches, and decaying flowers, all of which were used to convey the idea of the inevitability of death. Another representation of death can be found in *The Egyptian Book of the Dead*, which is an elaborate guidebook to the afterlife. This book features intricate illustrations that accompany spells designed to help the dead pass to the other side. The essence of Egyptian culture is embodied in this book, which is a

testament to their belief in the afterlife. In the twentieth century, avant-garde experimentation changed the way we represent death in art. No longer were we confined to the traditional symbols of skulls and hourglasses. Instead, artists had the freedom to encompass the idea of death into a landscape with crows, similar to Vincent van Gogh's *Wheatfield with Crows*. This innovative approach to representing death allowed for a wider range of interpretations and opened up many new avenues for artists to explore. Overall, the various representations of death in art reflect our society's complex relationship with mortality and the afterlife. In more abstract paintings, colors carried death via black and blue pigments, and contemporary art added to that a literal representation of death, such as Andy Warhol's *Car Crash* (Pantelić). In the twenty-first century, we are witnessing a culture-oriented rebirth of death representation in illustration, as we will see in Caitlin Doughty's *From Here to Eternity* and *Will My Cat Eat My Eyeballs?*.

3. The Multimodal Dimension

The multimodal novel "makes it possible for the reader to look at and study artifacts from the fictional world and thus share the cultural code and experiences of the textual world and its agents" (Hallet 2009: 149). Since creative nonfiction involves a certain sense of fictionality, a novel-like use of language and décor, we can extend this definition given by Hallet to what is called fictional or creative narratology (i.e., the use of illustrations in novels such as *From Here to Eternity* and *Will My Cat Eat My Eyeballs?*). Besides the fact that the illustrator is mentioned on the title page, which gives the readers a clue that what they are about to see in the book has particular importance to the overall message of the author, the illustrations are perhaps the milder versions of real-life photographs, whose presentation would have proven to be quite tricky for the readership of memoirs, travel journals, and journalistic-type books.

In *Will My Cat Eat My Eyeballs?*, every chapter is accompanied by an illustration (see Figure 15) made by Dianné Ruz that encompasses the topic of the question answered by the author. For instance, in the chapter "Can I keep my parents' skulls after they die?," the illustration covers the whole page and shows us a young woman watering a plant whose pot is a skull. We infer that the answer to the question is positive, and we see the result of the girl acting upon her wish to keep the skull of her parents after they have died. Thus, an invisible link appears between the written text, the illustration, and our own power of interpretation. This second illustrated world, parallel to—and yet converging with—the written text, enhances our reading experience and does so with the certainty that we can see more than what is shown to us.

Fig. 15. "Can I keep my parents' skulls after they die?," in Will My Cat Eat My Eyeballs?;

illustration by Dianné Ruz

One crucial aspect of illustrations in this book is that the central personage in every illustration resembles the author herself, known for her statement black hair and curtain fringe (as the interview will show, this choice was intentional). The illustrator portrays Death in a similar fashion: it has the same almond-shaped eyes and arched smile as the other illustrated characters. On page 4, for instance, we see Death and the body of an astronaut as the illustration for the chapter "What would happen to an astronaut body in space?". Death sits on a satellite, holding a scythe and pulling towards her an astronaut whose oxygen cord has been cut off. The difference between the two is only in the clothes they are wearing. Had we not seen them dressed like this, Death and the dead body would have looked the same. Supposing this similarity was planned, it brings even more meaning to the book, which aims to bring us closer to a creative conversation about death based on curiosity and rapprochement. Because the dead character in all illustrations has the same physical traits as Death, we immediately tell ourselves that She is closer than we think. Does this create some uncomfortableness by tackling the modern man's death phobia? Yes, it does, but it also holds space for introspection and meditation. When we look away, the image does not melt or dim out; it becomes part of our attitude towards death and dying.

Whilst the illustrations in *Will My Cat Eat My Eyeballs?* seem to be designed for younger generations—such as the book itself, even if it became clear that adults prefer it as well, perhaps even more than children or teenagers—one of Doughty's other books, *From Here to Eternity*, uses illustrations that are more like photographs. In an interview, Caitlin Doughty confesses that, after a live event in Australia, a little boy came up to her and asked her whether his cat would eat his eyeballs when he died. She tells us: "Immediately, a light bulb just went off in my head. I thought: 'It's such a brilliant way to ask that'" (Chicago Humanities Festival). The book is made up of children's questions and their answers are both for children and adults.

For instance, on pages 88 and 89, Doughty describes a collection of mummies (see Figure 16) from Guanajuato, and Landis Blair, the illustrator, draws two mummies, one on each of the two pages, mouths wide open, dark gaps instead of eyes, shriveled skin, and facial expressions that make those bodies look like they are screaming in horror. Should the reader not create a realistic picture in their mind—due to Doughty's raw description: "many of them have gaping mouths and twisted arms and necks", with "all of the muscles in the body relax, dropping jaws open, loosening tension in the eyelids, and affording the joints extreme flexibility" (Doughty 2017: 89)—the illustrations will undoubtedly fill that imagination gap. Here, they are less threatening than photographs because the readers know they are not looking at a direct representation of reality. However, this can be called "a second-hand representation," as it is not as close to what the human eye perceives as real and palpable, and yet it stays close enough to make some of us flinch or want to look away. I do not mean "second-hand" as an insult. But the closest representation of reality (other than our very own eyes) is unedited and unretouched photography. Naturally, the representation that comes next on the realness scale is illustration based on reality or on photography. If the author had chosen to use unretouched photographs of the mummies, she might have had to add a trigger warning at the beginning of the book or before each such visual element.

Fig. 16. A mummy from Guanajuato, in From Here to Eternity; illustration by Landis Blair

Fig. 17. Torajan family with the mummified and disinterred body of a family member, in From Here to Eternity; illustration by Landis Blair

Other illustrations used to complement the written text are found on pages 69, 71, and 75. They depict mummified bodies during the Festival of the Dead (see Figure 17), when the Torajan people disinter their family members, change their clothes, wrap them in blankets and interact with them during organized picnics in the cemetery. The purpose of the illustrations is to shed light on a cultural practice that may be difficult for some readers to comprehend. Specifically, there are certain societies where it is customary to interact with the deceased body through touching, kissing, talking, and other forms of engagement. These rituals may seem unconventional to some, but they serve as a means of confronting mortality and accepting the inevitability of death. By depicting these practices through vivid and realistic illustrations, the reader is able to gain a deeper understanding of the cultural significance and symbolism involved. Furthermore, the illustrations serve as a visual extension of the written word, allowing the reader to immerse themselves in the subject matter and reflect on the various cultural practices around the world. Overall, these illustrations offer a unique and thought-provoking perspective on death and the human experience.

Upon reading the book, it becomes quite apparent that the illustrations have been intelligently placed right after the written text they correspond to. This placement adds another layer of depth to the reading experience by immersing the reader further into the story. The world depicted in the book is not limited to the words on the page, but rather extends beyond the text and invites the reader to engage with it. As a result, the multimodal element of the book becomes even more prominent. This is because the agents in the textual world are not fictional characters, but real people who experience everything in real life. Therefore, the illustrations serve as a bridge between the textual

world and reality, allowing readers to visualize and better understand the characters' experiences.

It is essential to acknowledge that readers possess a heightened awareness and understanding that they are engaging with real-life events and occurrences rather than fictionalized ones. This recognition serves to amplify the impact of the illustrations within the book. By coming as close as possible to photographic depictions of reality, the illustrations offer readers the opportunity to visualize the world presented in the book through the unique lens of the author and illustrator. Ultimately, it is the responsibility of Ruz and Blair to determine which aspects of reality to highlight and bring to life through their artistic creations. The end result is an exquisitely crafted book that seamlessly blends the written word with visually stunning imagery, resulting in a truly immersive and captivating reading experience.

Also, the multimodal novel "equips its characters and narrators with a wide range of signifying and cultural abilities so that they appear as fully capable human beings sharing the cultural practices of their textual world" (Hallet 2009: 149). Yet again, Hallet's characterization of the multimodal novel also applies to creative nonfiction. By extension—and by association—creative nonfiction connects the nonfictional part of reality to a presentation that resembles fiction and all its elements, from metaphors and comparisons to imagery and poetic descriptions, which can all be found in Doughty's novels. In the case of illustrations in her two books mentioned above, the characters and the narrator are real. For instance, Doughty mentions meeting Paul Koudounaris and receiving his help and guidance during her visit to Bolivia to gather data about the skulls called *ñatitas* in the context of a festival that inspired Koudounaris to write *Memento Mori*. Doughty tells us details about all the people she meets, people who revolutionized the death industry, from Cheryl Johnston running The Forensic Osteology Research Institute in Cullowhee, North Carolina, to villagers and taxi drivers who occasionally give Doughty valuable information about local death practices. The illustrations help us observe the entire death landscape through their eyes, and because the reader is aware of the reality behind the illustrations, the impact is even more striking. Perhaps some might get curious and research further on their own. For those who do not, imagination does the rest of the work.

4. Literal and Conceptual Illustrations

According to Alan Male, we can split imagery into two categories. The first one is "literal illustrations," which "tend to represent pictorial truths" (2007: 50), meaning they depict pure and raw reality without any metaphorical nuance. These illustrations create a credible scene for the reader, who usually relies on these images to strengthen the existing information gathered from the written text. The second category is

conceptual illustrations, and here we might have "metaphorical applications to the subject or visual depictions of ideas or theories" (51), so the illustration might be built upon elements taken from reality. However, the final visual product is different from the initial realistic impulse. Male also talks about "extreme characters" (154) in illustrations: what can be allowed on the page, depending on the readership. In Doughty's books, what Male calls "extreme characters" range from dead bodies to Death herself. But, in *Will My Cat Eat My Eyeballs?*, Death and dead bodies are portrayed similarly, perhaps not to create a considerable representation gap between man and mortality. They are the conceptual illustrations that Male writes about. And in *From Here to Eternity*, the illustrations are closer to reality when it comes to depicting a dead body, a mummy, or a skull; these are the literal illustrations. Here, Death is not one of the characters, even though she lingers behind the illustrations that Landis Blair draws, like a second layer of meaning, like the cause of—and, paradoxically, the reason for—everything.

Also, facial expressions should convey more about the characters portrayed in the illustrations. In *Will My Cat Eat My Eyeballs?* we have a more typical character style than in *From Here to Eternity*. In the latter, we meet with the cultural aspect of the book:

Fig. 18. "What would happen if you died on a plane?," in Will My Cat Eat My Eyeballs?;

rituals, objects, and scenes that the author sees but the reader is sometimes incapable of fully picturing in his or her mind, so then we need a helping hand from the illustrator, who sees everything through the author's eyes. In the former, we do have characters, but they are not the essence of the illustration, so they do not have to convey any extreme expression: their eyes are closed or open, their mouths are usually in a V-shape, and they are surprised, frowning, or casually smiling, whether it is Death or some other character, dead or alive, skeletonized or "fleshy", male or female, or even animal, which shows us

that the character in itself is not the essential focal point of the illustration, but rather the global image: what they are doing, what objects we see in the background, and how everything comes together to express a possible answer to a question.

Whether to fill that blank slate that comes before each chapter or ease the reader into the different death-related themes that Doughty discusses, these illustrations created by Ruz have a magical and mysterious feeling; they stir curiosity and interest. They show real situations with a twist. For instance, the illustration on page 97 (see Figure 18), before the chapter "What would happen if you died on a plane?", shows a flight attendant pushing a food cart along the aisle with a dead body surrounded by ice and drinks, while a surprised woman places her hand on to her open mouth, glass in her hand—showing us that the flight attendant served her a drink from the cart where the body is preserved in ice. That is not the protocol (hopefully), but an exaggeration of the said situation, a striking answer to a "what if…" question.

Fig. 19. "What would happen if you swallowed a bag of popcorn before you died and were cremated?,"in Will My Cat Eat My Eyeballs?; illustrated by Dianné Ruz

Another similar example is on page 77 (see Figure 19), before the chapter "What would happen if you swallowed a bag of popcorn before you died and were cremated?". The illustration shows a dead body half into the cremation machine, surrounded by popcorn that has already popped. A skeleton is under the table, holding a bag of popcorn filled to the brim, similar to those bought at the cinema. Another person, perhaps the cremation machine operator, stands next to the corpse and protects her face from the popcorn still popping. Again, we have another portrayal at the threshold of reality and absurdity or exaggeration. In an absurd world, this illustration could suffice as an answer to the question, and the written text would not be necessary. However, the image shows us the possibility of an answer, an absurd and exaggerated one, and yet it shocks the reader with its possibility.

Fig. 20. "Can you describe the smell of a dead body?," in Will My Cat Eat My Eyeballs?; illustrated by Dianné Ruz

Moreover, "visual communication relies on semiotics. This is where the audience interprets and translates signs and symbols, often by association, and the deciphering of these meanings can be subconscious" (Male 2007: 19). Let us take, for example, the illustration (see Figure 20) that accompanies the chapter called "Can you describe the smell of a dead body?" (161-164). The character—one of the few that show the slightest facial expression—holds a perfume bottle shaped like a skull in her hand, which gives off a smell portrayed as a black cloud turning into a skull at the bottom of which we can see two long bones crisscrossing. The character is pinching her nose, slightly frowning. In this chapter, Doughty calls the smell of a dead body by its scientific name, *odor mortis* (162), but to match the illustration, she also calls it "*eau de decomp*" (163). She uses the same name in *Smoke Gets in Your Eyes*: "*eau de decomposition*" (158), which has no illustrations, so it is expected that she keeps the same humorous lane while also adding the visuals missing in her memoir. The name "*eau de…*" reminds the reader of perfumes. It instantly triggers the image of a receptacle, so the illustrator connects Doughty's phrase to the combined symbols of a skull and a bottle of perfume.

"Great illustration should have a balance—a reduction to the essence, as well as visual interest and a seductive charm" (Cobb 2017), and this is precisely what Ruz's conceptual illustration does: it charms readers because it looks mysterious, it creates a second world, parallel to what the text offers us, and yet it intersects with it through

symbols. Blair's literal illustration enhances what the text already presents, and it does so gracefully without bothering the flow of the discourse. Looking at the illustrations in the section discussing the multimodal dimension (as the following interview will show), we see that Blair wishes to stay as close as possible to reality. With only a few exceptions, his illustrations obey the rules of realistic and literal illustration: they do not contain exaggerations or symbols, and they do not expect the reader to make connections or understand some hidden layers of meaning. But they are enough to stir curiosity and introspection.

Moving forward, I would like to draw your attention to the subsequent segment which comprises two interviews with the two illustrators. These interviews have been included with the aim of providing comprehensive insights into their individual processes of illustrating nonfiction. I am hopeful that these interviews will address any queries that may have been left unanswered and facilitate a deeper understanding of their craft.

5. Interviews with the Illustrators

5.1 Interview with Dianné Ruz

Cristina Botîlcă: How would you describe your illustrations' style in Caitlin Doughty's *Will My Cat Eat My Eyeballs*?

Dianné Ruz: I would describe the drawing style as clean and minimalistic, as I tried to use the minimum essential elements to communicate each idea. I think what I make can be described as dark humor because humans, in general, are very afraid of death, as it comes naturally to us, but as I come from a culture where we don't see death as a taboo subject and address it even with a certain sense of humor, our relationship with death as a subject is less traumatic.

C.B.: What was the process of illustrating the book? Did you receive the whole manuscript and do the illustrations especially for it, or did you use some of your previous work?

D.R.: I received Caitlin's manuscript and after carefully reading it, I made sketches and from there I started making the final illustrations from scratch, taking elements from her text.

C.B.: How did you and the author communicate when it came to illustrations? Were you always on the same page with the style, the ideas, the design?

D.R.: Caitlin gave me all the artistic freedom to make the illustrations. Her text was amazing, so a lot of artistic ideas came to me when I read it. I think both of us were on the same page because I have read all of Caitlin's previous books, watched her YouTube videos and my project Muertos is in the same universe—so to speak—and in this regard very related to that kind of topics.

C.B.: I noticed that all your work is consistent. The characters in your illustrations look alike, they all have almond-shaped eyes and a V-shaped mouth. What or who was the inspiration for them?

D.R.: Having Maya heritage myself, I study ancient Maya art as hobby and I really like that the ancient Maya artists use a lot of rhetoric figures in their language and their art, so I feel very connected those symbols of our art. I started to use that eye shape when I went to the museum and looked closely to a group of the oldest, pre-classic Maya figurines, and as all of them have those almond-shaped eyes, I use them because I feel that it represents a gaze between open eyes (living) and closed eyes (dying). The closed mouth theme comes from someone who is listening, not talking, because we can only learn when we listen.

C.B.: There is a character in the book that has Caitlin Doughty's signature curtain fringe. Is that a portrayal of the author? Has she ever asked you to be a part of the illustrations, to see herself in them?

D.R.: She never asked me to be part of the illustrations, but I used her signature bangs as a homage to her. Besides, she is very cool, and I love her aesthetics.

C.B.: From all the illustrations in the book, what was the most challenging one for you to create and why?

D.R.: The very first one I made was the hardest. It was challenging because I made a lot of sketches before I sent the first one. I admire Caitlyn so much that I was afraid to make something not good enough! Of course, that fear was only in my mind because Caitlin was a sweetheart and liked everything very much since the very beginning.

C.B.: The fact that Death looks so much like all the other characters, is that on purpose?

D.R.: Yes! My characters in Muertos are the same person, even if I use more than one human figure. I made that project as the very personal experience of mine and I think that each human can play a lot of roles, even when we live or decay.

C.B.: Do you find it more difficult to illustrate for nonfiction than for fiction?

D.R.: Sometimes, illustrating nonfiction is more difficult, especially if I don't know or feel that I am not an expert on that topic. For this project, I tried to study all the material available, so I could be very respectful and reflect an educated view on it. As a side note, sometimes fiction is funnier, but I think it is easy in both cases as long as I have a complete briefing from the author.

C.B.: Overall, how was the whole experience illustrating *Will My Cat Eat My Eyeballs*?

D.R.: It was a pleasure! The communication was very fluid. Caitlin always listened to my ideas, and she gave me total creative freedom from the very beginning. Since the text was wonderful, it was very easy to imagine the graphics for her, and she seemed very pleased, so it was amazing!

5.2 Interview with Landis Blair

Cristina Botîlcă: How would you describe your illustrations' style in Caitlin Doughty's *From Here to Eternity*?

Landis Blair: Technically speaking, I would describe them as ink washes layered over with intensive crosshatching.

C.B.: What was the process of illustrating the book? Did you receive the whole manuscript and do the illustrations especially for it, or did you use some of your previous work?

L.B.: All of the illustrations were created specifically for the book. I saw the manuscript in sections and so was able to work on batches of illustrations over the course of approximately eight months.

C.B.: How did you and the author communicate when it came to illustrations? Were you always on the same page with the style, the ideas, the design?

L.B.: At the start, Caitlin and I decided upon a rough number of illustrations we wanted to include inside the book. After we had that number, we then could make decisions about how many illustrations to include per chapter in order to disperse them roughly equally. For most of the book, Caitlin sent me a couple of chapters of the text along with a list of things she thought could potentially be illustrated. I would then read the chapters and Caitlin and I would discuss and decide which of the potential illustrations we thought were most crucial. In general, we were on the same page regarding the style and design, but there were a few instances where I had to modify or redo the illustration since they didn't quite convey what Caitlin was wanting to emphasize.

C.B.: The author did the travelling, and you did the illustrations. How did this process go? Did she show you photos she took or tell you stories about what she saw, and then you had to re-imagine that element and illustrate it?

L.B.: For a couple of the locations in the book I was lucky enough to be able to visit them alongside Caitlin, which definitely helped in my visualization of what needed to be illustrated. For the rest of the book, though, Caitlin shared other source material with me, whether it be her own photos or other imagery so I could see what she was describing in the text. I then took that material and did a number of sketches, interpreting them in the way that I thought would visually work best.

C.B.: From all the illustrations in the book, what was the most challenging one for you to create and why?

L.B.: The most challenging illustration was the first image in the book opposite the title page. It shows the silhouette of a monk sitting, and within that silhouette, you see a dead body moving through the stages of decay. This illustration was particularly difficult in that it was a much more complicated and abstract concept that Caitlin was wanting conveyed compared to most of the other illustrations in the book. I actually did an entire first version of the monk illustration which I ended up discarding because it just wasn't working right. After I scrapped it, I went and did a page of about 15-20 thumbnail drawings of new ideas to rethink the illustration. Oddly enough, the final thumbnail—which I only did because I wanted to fill out the entire page and not leave a blank space at the bottom–was the one I ended up using. It is rewarding to me to see how by far this image has come to represent the entire book to people more than any of the other 40+ illustrations. I have received more requests from people asking to use that one image for various things than any other drawing I have ever done. Which is a bit amusing to me, given that the image shows a dead human body decomposing.

C.B.: You are an active member of The Order of the Good Death, and I am certain you are familiar with the imagery of death, but how did you make sure that the illustrations would be well received by the public? Some people fear talking about death, let alone see a photo or an illustration of a realistic dead body.

L.B.: This was definitely a challenge, and I confess that when Caitlin asked me to do these kinds of illustrations, I didn't think it would really work. Initially we had talked about collaborating on a different book, but Caitlin ended up writing this one first and still wanted me to illustrate it. I remember having conversations with her and expressing my concern and confusion in how my illustration style would help the book rather than becoming a distraction or sideshow from the text. In retrospect, it ended up working quite well with the text, and that credit and vision all goes to Caitlin. I think the illustrations made her text just real enough for people to understand it better, but not as gruesome and off-putting as if they were photos.

C.B.: Do you find it more difficult to illustrate for nonfiction than for fiction?

L.B.: There are unique difficulties to illustrating both nonfiction and fiction. The advantage of nonfiction illustration is that you can in general find some sort of reference material from which to sketch and base the illustrations. However, the difficulty comes with the added pressure of knowing you have to represent something accurately that actually existed or exists out in the real world. Conversely, with illustrating for fiction there are no boundaries or rules to what you can create but at the same time you are required to exert a different kind of mental energy in imagining something completely into existence.

C.B.: In your opinion, what do you think is the difference between a photograph and an illustration in a nonfiction book that talks about death and dying?

L.B.: I think the primary difference is that an illustration about death will be slightly more accessible than a photograph. This is all the more emphasized with my illustrations since they are in black and white which further distances a viewer from reality. I suppose this is a bit ironic given the manifesto of The Order of the Good Death with trying to combat the hiding of death in modern society. This being said, death has been and is currently being hidden in society and thus if illustrations provide some sort of bridge to the Good Death where photographs would cause someone to shut down, I think using the illustrations are justified. Additionally, I feel as though the illustrations provide a timelessness that would be absent with modern photography. Whenever I flip through an older nonfiction book with photographs in it, I feel the distance of time from when the book was written far more than when I see illustrations. All art is a form of abstraction, and it is this abstraction itself that makes it continually accessible to viewers over the course of history.

C.B.: Overall, how was the whole experience illustrating *From Here to Eternity*?

L.B.: It was a wonderful experience and one that I really hope to be able to do again some time.

6. Conclusions

As we entered the twenty-first century, it became increasingly clear that written text alone is not enough to engage readers. In a world where social media dominates and people crave instant gratification, plain text can seem dull and uninteresting. This is why creative nonfiction, a genre that blends the art of storytelling with factual information, has become so popular. When combined with illustrations, this pairing becomes even more captivating, particularly in the context of literature that deals with death and acceptance. By using both words and images, authors can create a powerful and moving

narrative that speaks to readers on multiple levels. Whether it is exploring the intricacies of grief or celebrating the life of a loved one, the combination of creative nonfiction and illustration can help us better understand the world around us.

According to the findings presented in the section and the interviews conducted, it has been demonstrated that incorporating illustrations in creative nonfiction can provide an added dimension to the written material. In particular, the collaborative efforts of Dianné Ruz and Landis Blair with Doughty's discourse have been successful in capturing various aspects related to death and mortality. Their approach has been successful in provoking interest, providing comfort, and stimulating meaningful dialogue among readers, both internally and externally. Overall, it is evident that using illustrations in creative nonfiction can be a powerful tool in facilitating engagement with complex and sensitive topics.

In the modern era, writers are utilizing the power of multimodal text to tackle complex and often sensitive topics such as death and mortality. Employing a combination of both literal and conceptual illustrations, these authors are producing content that is both captivating and instructive. Notwithstanding society's inherent apprehension surrounding the subject of death, books such as *From Here to Eternity* and *Will My Cat Eat My Eyeballs?* are generating open dialogue and discourse, encouraging individuals to engage in an honest and reflective conversation regarding this inevitable topic.

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