

# From Becoming-Woman to Becoming- Imperceptible:

## Self-Styled Death and Virtual Female Corpse in Digital Portraits of Cancer

BY KATJA HERGES

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### ABSTRACT

Contemporary textual and visual representations of cancer engage self-reflectively with death and dying, yet they often rely on normative notion of death as the end of an individual life. This article focuses on stylised cancer portraits of the young German Nana Stäcker which she took in collaboration with her mother and professional photographers during her chemotherapy and until her death. Intervening in the field of Queer Death Studies this article explores if and how these images allow us to rethink normative Western notions of death. Drawing on Rosi Braidotti's posthuman theory of death and of female subjectivity, I argue that the photo shoots recast Nana's illness and dying as a gendered and creative process of subject formation beyond individual death. Through creating aestheticised and eroticised camp images, Nana playfully performs and subverts a range of iconic Western femininities and styles both life and death as a constant becoming. Portraits of Nana as virtual female corpse further highlight this continuity of life and death by reinserting death into life. While these images resist a necropolitical engagement with cancer and dying, they suggest an impersonal and affirmative understanding of death that opens up bioethical questions about contemporary cultures of longevity and health.

### KEYWORDS

*Cancer Photography, Cancer Aesthetics, Rosi Braidotti, Posthuman Death, Becoming-Imperceptible, Becoming-Woman*

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Death Studies engages with the religious and moral aspects of mortality and with social practices of dying and mourning. Recently, Queer Death Studies has been developed as a field that critically investigates and challenges conventional normativities, assumptions and expectations in relation to death, dying, and mourning. The term 'queer' here is not limited to the way subjects and their relations are recognised but also refers to the processes of going beyond given norms, normativities, and constraining conventions relating to death. Western narratives of death conceive of death mostly as the end of an individual life. In the last decades, textual and visual representations of cancer and dying have gained public visibility in the West. Often such representations engage self-reflectively and critically with questions of death and dying. For instance, autothanatographies, the writing of one's death in form of cancer memoirs, blogs and diaries, document the process of dying and discuss issues of life, autonomy and care (Herrndorf 2015; Kalanithi 2016; Ogien 2017). Familial caregivers have also written accounts of the dying of a parent (Diez 2009; Bidwell Smith 2010), a spouse (Didion 2005; Bosshard 2010; Maynard 2018), a sibling (Link 2014), a friend (Kaiser 2006) or a child (Didion 2011), often emphasising the gendered and emotional labour of care work and the mourning process. In addition to written memoirs, several women, including fashion models, have published cancer portrait photographs (Kohlman 2005; McDermott 2015) to subvert normative notions of femininity and beauty.

When the 19-year old German student Nana Stäcker was diagnosed with Ewing sarcoma in October 2010,<sup>1</sup> Nana and her mother Barbara Stäcker created a collaborative project that is situated at the intersection of social media portraits, fashion pho-

tography, caregiver cancer memoir and medical self-help books. The project consists of photoshoots involving mother, daughter and professional photographers, Nana's Facebook page with these portraits and Stäcker's memoir, written together with the journalist Dorothea Seitz after Nana's death, entitled *Nana... der Tod trägt Pink: Der selbstbestimmte Umgang einer jungen Frau mit dem Sterben* (Nana... Death Wears Pink: The Self-Determined Handling of Death by a Young Woman).<sup>2</sup> The memoir includes Nana's portraits in addition to a narrative of Nana's illness through quotes by Nana, family members, friends and health care professionals. While she was undergoing chemotherapy, Nana participated in photo shoots with highly stylised costumes and wigs, first with her mother, an amateur photographer, and then with several professional photographers. She designed her outfits, reworked the pictures, uploaded them on her artistic Facebook page *Nana Sixx* and received feedback from family members, friends and photographers.<sup>3</sup> In June 2011, the non-profit organisation *Lebensmut* (Courage to Live) that supports cancer patients published an article with images of Nana. In addition, Nana started to collaborate with Sandra Kader, the founder of a cosmetic school in Munich, to develop her vision of a project that provides cancer patients with make-up sessions and photo shoots free of charge. Despite chemotherapy, radiation therapy and surgery, Nana's tumour and pain increased and in December 2011, she decided that she would not start another cycle of chemotherapy. Nana left the hospital and returned home, supported by her family and a palliative care team and died on January 10, 2012. In the aftermath of Nana's death, her mother founded the non-profit organisation *Recover your smile* and wrote a collaborative memoir-eulogy based on the photographs. Both the pho-

tography project and the memoir received positive reviews in local newspapers and national boulevard media (Glas 2013; Nazareska 2013; Schneider 2013; Wassermann 2013). Intervening in the field of Queer Death Studies, this article focuses on Nana's portraits and asks if and how they allow us to rethink normative Western notions of death and femininity that foreground individual death. In the following, I argue that the photo shoots recast Nana's illness and dying as a relational and creative process of becoming beyond the individual. Drawing on Braidotti's posthuman theory of death and her notion of 'becoming-imperceptible' and 'becoming-woman', Nana's and her mother's artistic expression and self-styling become a process of reconceptualising individual death into an impersonal life-death continuum.

First, I situate the project within studies of death and dying and relate it to Braidotti's posthuman framework of life and death. Drawing on Braidotti, the article conceptualises and illustrates a new gendered and relational posthuman subject-formation beyond death. I show how Nana's performances open up a creative process of becoming-woman that includes what Braidotti calls "self-styling of one's death" (2013, 135). The visual and textual representations of her dying document how Nana becomes a virtual corpse and thereby reinsert death into life, creating a life-death continuum.

#### QUEER POSTHUMAN DEATH: BECOMING-WOMAN, BECOMING-IMPERCEPTIBLE IN CANCER PHOTOGRAPHY

Studies of death and dying have proliferated in the 20<sup>th</sup> century in different and often problematic ways. Anthropologist Geoffrey Gorer claims that in contemporary Western society "natural death" is "smothered in prudery" (1965, 173), much like sexuality was considered shame-

ful in the nineteenth century. Conversely, while the repression of sexuality gave rise to pornographic literature and images, the suppression of death has resulted in a graphic and violent "pornography of death" in the mass media which produce unrealistic representations of death (Gorer 1965, 174). In contrast, Gorer argues that "we must give back to death – natural death – its parade and publicity, readmit grief and mourning" (*ibid.*, 175). While Gorer attempts to destigmatise discourses of death, he naturalises death and sets normative expectations of how it should be represented. Drawing on Gorer, historian Philippe Ariès analyses how concepts of death have changed over time by creating conventional linear categories. By the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Ariès (1974, 58) argues, death was seen as a break from ordinary life, similar to sex. Rather than simply witnessing death socially and ritualistically, the survivors mourned it and were consoled by preserving the memory of the deceased (*ibid.*, 67-68). Beginning in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a "brutal revolution" occurred in Western attitudes toward death, in which death became both shameful and forbidden (*ibid.*, 85). In the era of "forbidden death," Ariès suggests, death is considered a failure of medicine rather than a normal or meaningful occurrence (*ibid.*), and people are more likely to die alone in a hospital bed.

As a critical response to hegemonic regimes of medicalised death, in the seventies and eighties, cancer photography emerged as a documentary and political practice accessible to amateurs. It was designed to increase visibility mostly of breast cancer patients and to urge the viewer to witness and to rethink conventions of beauty, femininity, disease and dying.<sup>4</sup> In addition to self-portraiture, beginning in the late 1990s collaborative (fashion) photography by a photographer and multiple subjects or photo-documentaries of one woman's experience by a chosen photogra-



Figure 1. "Suspiria Snow White", by Barbara Stäcker

pher and caretaker became more prevalent (Bell 2012).<sup>5</sup> These postmodern photo-narratives opened opportunities for reader-viewers to become agents of witnessing and commemoration which, in turn, lead to "transformational encounters" (DeShazer 2012; 2014). More recently, digital cancer narratives in the form of selfies, blogs and social media websites forge connectivity by inspiring affective bonds (McCosker and Darcy 2013; Mahato 2011).

Much like these collaborative and digital photo projects, Nana's photographic performances emerge in interrelation with her mother and other photographers and, in addition, open opportunities to rethink death beyond normative categories of individual, natural or shameful death. In *The Posthuman* (2013), feminist philosopher Rosi Braidotti proposes a theory of posthuman subjectivity that links life and death and considers both materialist and genera-

tive processes. Through this theory, Braidotti attempts to develop a relational ethics of sustainability that counteracts the destructive or necropolitical aspects of the posthuman political economy, including the effects of inhumane technology, digitalisation, globalisation, militarisation, and socially enforced ideologies of fitness and health. In conversation with Giorgio Agamben's 'bare life' and Achille Mbembe's contemporary 'necro-politics',<sup>6</sup> Braidotti takes the vulnerability of human (and non-human) subjects into account but focuses on an affirmative approach to life and death. To be clear, Braidotti does not want to deny horror and suffering, but to rework them in order to "assert the vital powers of healing and compassion" (2013, 132). To do so, she suggests a distinction between personal and impersonal death: While personal death relates to the teleological destination of a single human life which we all



*Figure 2. "Garden of Serenity", by Barbara Stricker*

fear, impersonal death connects us “trans-individually, trans-generationally and eco-philosophically” (2013, 135). Death in the latter understanding is the constitutive event that “structures our becoming-subjects, our capacity and powers of relations and the process of acquiring ethical awareness. Being mortal, we all are ‘have-beens’” (Braidotti 2013, 132). In other words, the immediacy of death does not open up a transcendental realm but a radical immanence of “just a life, here and now” (ibid.) that connects life and death on a continuum: *Zoe* as life beyond the ego-bound human aims at self-perpetuation and then, after it has achieved its aim, at dissolution. Braidotti calls this process in which the individual self dissolves into a productive and creative flow beyond representation, a ‘becoming-imperceptible’: it

marks the point of evacuation or evanescence of the bounded selves and their merger into the milieu, the middle grounds, the radical immanence of the earth itself and its cosmic resonance. Becoming-imperceptible is the event for which there is no representation, because it rests on the disappearance of the individuated self. Writing as if already gone, or thinking beyond the bounded self, is the ultimate gesture of defamiliarization. This process actualizes virtual possibilities in the present, in a time sequence that is somewhere between the no longer and the not yet, mixing past, present and future into the critical mass of an event. The vital energy that propels the transmutation of values into affirmation is the potential of life as perpetual becoming that expresses itself through the chaotic and generative void of positivity. (Braidotti 2013, 137)

Like Braidotti’s earlier concept of becoming-woman this theory of becoming-imperceptible is based on Gilles Deleuze’s and Félix Guattari’s (1980) theory of radical immanence and becoming. In becoming-woman, Braidotti theorises subject forma-

tion and feminist politics based on a philosophy of sexual difference (2002): Unlike the unified and rational subject of classical humanism or liberal individualism, the female subject as it is defined in becoming-woman, is non-unitary, material, sexualised, and embedded in relations of power and care. Like becoming-imperceptible, becoming-woman is defined as an affirmative process, of “creating, legitimating and representing a multi-centred, internally differentiated female feminist subjectivity, without falling into relativism or fragmentation” (Braidotti 2002, 26). For Braidotti, the goal of becoming-woman is to transform joyfully towards a feminist subjectivity that destabilises the asymmetrical power relations sustaining the socio-symbolic system (ibid.). Just as the subject of becoming-woman is embodied and embedded in relations of power and desire, the posthuman subject in becoming-imperceptible overflows with desire and is styled in and through “the immanence of his/her expressions, acts and interactions with others and by the powers of remembrance, or continuity in time” (Braidotti 2013, 137).

Reading Nana’s collaborative project from an affirmative and posthuman perspective allows us to conceptualise and illustrate a new gendered and relational posthuman subject-formation beyond death. Specifically, I connect Braidotti’s concepts of becoming-imperceptible and becoming-woman to show how photography projects such as Nana’s allow a becoming in a life-death continuum.

#### BECOMING-WOMAN: STYLISTED DEATH, CAMP, AND FEMININITY IN COLLABORATIVE PORTRAIT CANCER PHOTOGRAPHY

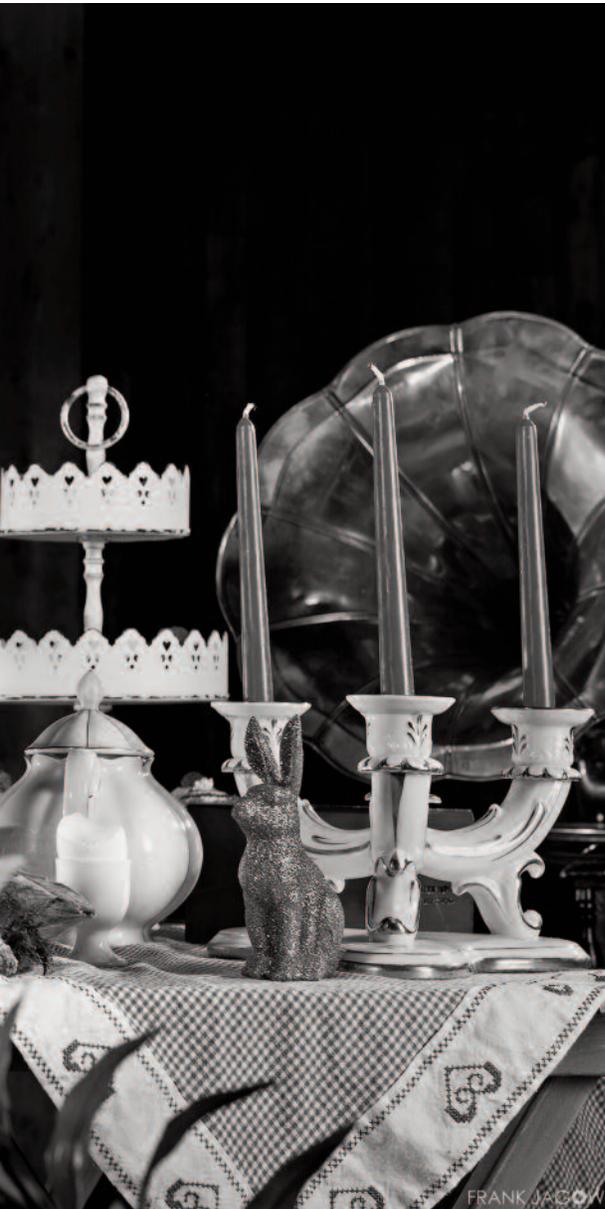
Several of Nana’s portraits draw on traditional performances of femininity and aestheticise the tragedy of a beautiful woman who is dying, yet at the same time the practice of the photo shoots and the resulting



Figure 3. "Welcome to the Tea Party," by Frank Jagow

portraits express a creative process of becoming-woman and a desire to self-style one's death. Nana's initial response to her diagnosis is not fear of dying, but concern that she will lose her hair. In the next months, following the painful loss of all body hair, Nana has no interest in dressing

up and refuses to take family photographs even though taking photos has a long tradition in the Stäcker family (Stäcker and Seitz 2013). This changes after her mother takes a picture on Christmas Eve: "On Christmas Eve 2010, Nana and I took the first step into our creative future. After three months



of Nana conceiving of herself as sick and unattractive, she now saw a slim, but pretty young woman in the picture” (Stäcker and Seitz 2013, 24). After she switches to a less aggressive chemotherapy, Nana is able to explore her interest in photography and modelling and to schedule photo shoots in

between chemotherapy sessions. Since Nana rarely wears wigs in daily life (mostly she covers her head with a wool cap or a scarf) and does not use them to hide her bald head, colourful wigs become requisites specifically for her photo shoots. Nana, who is interested in fashion and gothic culture, draws different motifs, takes notes, assembles jewellery, accessories, shoes, and tries wigs and clothes for the photo shoots. The resulting visual performances playfully map and ironically subvert different pop culture femininities and sexualities ranging from the innocent virginal elf and the sexy seductive Snow White to the rape victim and the androgynous tomboy.

In two photography series, *Suspiria Snow White* and *Garden of Serenity*, both shot by her mother, Nana performs seductive variations of virginal fairy-tale femininity (see figs. 1 and 2). As Snow White, she wears bright red lipstick and nails, a black and red velvet dress with cleavage, and a wig of straight black hair, and touches her body, hair, lips and neck voluptuously in a reclining pose. As elf, Nana wears traditionally feminine colours and accessories, including a pinkish orchid in her blond curly hair with pink curls, pink lipstick and makeup and a childish colourful paper dress, and displays an innocent childish look with a seductive smile.

These representations confirm traditional feminine performances of virginity, eroticism and death to some degree: They largely hide her sickness by restoring her hairless and sick body and turn her into an idealised and beautiful object of the viewer’s gaze. In *Over Her Dead Body* (1992), Elisabeth Bronfen engages in a psychoanalytic reading of the female dead body in Western culture. She argues that both death and female sexuality mark instability and ambivalence and their eradication in representations produces a return to stability. For instance, *Snow White* by the Brothers Grimm offers an image of a beautiful dead woman that elicits an “aesthetic viewing” since her dead



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*Figure 4. Nana Stärcker, by Michael Erik*

body resembles an art object displayed in the labelled frame of the glass coffin (Bronfen 1992, 100). As such, the representation represses death by fetishising it into an idealised figure, and by localising it away from the self at the body of a beautiful woman. Medical anthropologist Lochlain Jain offers a similar critique of contemporary cancer culture: Drawing on Gorer's claim that modern representations of death are pornographic, Jain claims that medical and popular images of young women with breast cancer in sexualised poses constitute a sort of "pornography of death" that sentimentalises tragic personal stories, in particular "in the case of the very beautiful" (Jain 2007, 525). Consequently, Jain rejects comforting cancer aesthetics and the sentimental politics of the Pink Ribbon campaign that invoke a playful, calming and seemingly healthful tone in marketing pink (but often carcinogenic) cosmetic products and restore a lost normative femininity. Specifically, she critiques the hyper-designed quality of the mastectomy photographs by commercial model Lynn Kohlman that showcase her beautiful body with aestheticised scars but do not invoke cancer (Jain 2007, 524). By recognising cancer as a gift, Jain argues, Kohlman attempts to conform to a feminised norm of redemption, leading to an "aesthetic of the beautiful death" (ibid.). Interestingly, Nana's eroticised costumes, the title (*Nana... der Tod trägt Pink*) and the pink design of the memoir reference the Pink Ribbon campaign: they focus on encouragement, make-up, and the colour pink, and aestheticise and sexualise her sick body in staged images while giving little space for grief and mourning of her illness and looming death. At the same time, Nana's female figurations exaggerate and comment ironically on stereotyped features of virginal femininity, such as fragility, seductiveness, and open emotionality, seemingly in an attempt to undermine the credibility of those preconceptions.

The series *Welcome to the Tea Party* engages even more with the excessive and ironic elements of camp aesthetics: Shot by photographer Frank Jagow in a garage setting, the images are inspired by Carroll Lewis' *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) (see fig. 3). In the mad tea party scene in Carroll's work, Alice joins March Hare and Hatter to have tea. However, in Nana's version, Nana plays the Cheshire Cat: She wears a large eccentric pink and white wig with white feathers and flowers that look like fur and sits at a table together with a pink chocolate Easter bunny as March Hare. The table is dressed with objects reminiscent of the novel, a cake, a teapot, a three-armed candle holder with red candles, a gramophone and a mirror. In some of the pictures Nana is screaming and laughing excessively, imitating the iconic grin of the Cheshire Cat, but here too seemingly making fun of cancer. Nana's gigantic head with the wig costume and the scream is disproportionate to her small body, much like the Cat whose body disappears from time to time while her grin remains visible. In her essay *Notes on Camp* (1964), Susan Sontag emphasises artifice, frivolity, playfulness, middle-class affluence and shocking excess and extravagance as key elements of camp aesthetics. For Sontag camp is not about beauty, content or politics but about the "degree of artifice, of stylization" (1964, 2) and the exaggeration of "sexual characteristics and personality mannerisms" (ibid., 4). In a photoshoot of Nana by photographer Michael Brik, the playfulness and exaggeration of camp is linked to sexual roleplaying in an imagined BDSM scene which foregrounds issues of power and desire (see fig. 4). The idea for the performance came from Nana and her mother and it was her mother who applied black tape around Nana's chest. Her mother and Brik then take the pictures outside in an underpass: Nana leans against a white wall, seemingly naked (the pictures render her upper body visible but cut off her lower



Figure 5. "Damaged," by Barbara Stäcker

half at the belly bottom). Her breasts are completely flattened with layers of tape (like a mini bra), her hair is very short and her hands are up in the air as though she was hand-cuffed, alluding to a bondage scene in which she performs the submissive role. The interaction with the photographer and her mother opens a double reading of her androgynous and eroticised breastless body: it turns Nana into a child that her mother can protect again, while at the same time the flattened breast and eroticised hand gesture queer her female body as androgynous and open her heterosexuality to the often-stigmatised practice of bondage and submission. While she submits to a dominant partner like her mother, the photographer, a lover or even cancer, her strong look also foregrounds how the

relationship leads to an exchange of power from the dominant to the submissive.

These photo shoots allow Nana to explore new femininities beyond traditional performances as daughter, girlfriend-fiancée or docile cancer patient, including camp queen, virginal elf or androgynous sub. Nana expresses the potential for experimentation, provocation and creativity inherent in such shoots and notes that she enjoyed the "playful transformation" (Stäcker and Seitz 2013, 49): "I thought it looked cool because I was suddenly such a different person! Not like before with hair, but also not as sick anymore" (ibid., 24). For instance, rather than imitating her former self with a wig that resembles her old hair, Nana wanted to look different from before: "flashier... more extreme, attract

attention” in order to highlight that “she is a completely different type now” (ibid., 50). In Nana’s photo shoots and in camp, life becomes theatre; “Being as playing a role” (Sontag 1964, 4). Nana’s mother describes how Nana concentrates on her creative work; “to a large extent, her environment experienced a motivated, happy and inspired Nana, whose thoughts focused on the next photo shoot rather than the next hospital stay” (Stäcker and Seitz 2013, 61). Drawing on Braidotti’s concept of becoming-woman, Nana’s performances illustrate the “internally differentiated feminine” (2002, 26) that women must think and represent in their own terms in an active process of becoming. Through the performances, Nana expresses her desire to playfully self-style her looming death in life: “What humans most deeply aspire to is not so much to disappear, but rather to do so in the space of our own life and in our own way. It is as if each of us wishes to die in our own fashion. Our innermost desire is for a self-fashioned, a self-styled death” (Braidotti 2013, 135). As a result, Braidotti considers life a creative becoming or a virtual suicide:

Self-styling one’s death is an act of affirmation because it means cultivating an approach, a ‘style’ of life that progressively and continuously fixes the modalities and the stage for the final act, leaving nothing unattended. Pursuing a sort of seduction into immortality, the ethical life is life as virtual suicide. Life as virtual suicide is life as constant creation. Life lived so as to break the cycles of inert repetition that usher in banality. (Braidotti 2013, 135)

Through the practice of creating aestheticised and eroticised camp images, Nana playfully performs different femininities and expresses her desire to style her life and death in a process of becoming-woman.

#### BECOMING-IMPERCEPTIBLE: THE (VIRTUAL) FEMALE CORPSE IN VISUAL AND TEXTUAL REPRESENTATIONS OF DEATH AND DYING

In addition to these playful and ironic images, Nana published some photographs either bald or with costumes or gestures that allude to illness and death. While she wanted to avoid being stereotyped as “the cancer-stricken model” (Stäcker and Seitz 2013, 31), she does not hide her illness and looming death in her images completely. Even though she attempts to connect herself to traditional notions of heterosexuality, at times, the images subvert normative femininity and sexuality, and insert death in life. By representing what Braidotti calls a “virtual corpse” (2013, 136), the images create a life-death continuum.

In one photo series, entitled “Damaged,” Nana and her mother engage with questions of motherhood, sexuality, medical power and death. Shot with her mother in a forest, Nana carries her “damaged” childhood doll in her arms (see fig. 5 and 6). Her own clothes are destroyed and partially cut off, she has bruised eyes and lips (through the obvious effect of red and grey make-up), wears a red wig with two braided ponytails on the sides which give her a girlish look. Her eyes are wide open staring into the camera, expressive of fear. The photo evokes a staged rape or child abuse scene, perhaps an allusion to the fact that medical treatment impacted Nana’s ability to have a baby. Her mother comments in the memoir that having a husband, family and children was an elementary part of Nana’s vision for life. While Nana does not comment extensively on her photos, according to her mother, the announcement of her potential infertility due to chemotherapy and later her unavoidable death confronted Nana “with a broken image of her femininity: without hair – and probably soon infertile” (Stäcker and Seitz 2013, 32). In *No Future* (2004), Lee Edel-

man theorises the heteronormative concept of “reproductive futurism”: It implies that we can make a better future with “unquestioned value and purpose” which is emblematised by the Child (2004, 4). We are, in Edelman’s words, always “fighting for our children” (2004, 4). The sterilising treatment of chemo and radiation therapy thus queers Nana’s body as a virtual corpse, as always already closer to death than life through the lost ability to reproduce and hence a lost connection to the future. While destabilising the genetic link to reproduction, Nana adopts a God-child during chemotherapy and later asks her mother “to inherit” him after her death in an attempt to reinstall her proximity to The Child, its futurism and to life (Stäcker and Seitz 2013, 119). The Christian tradition of the God-child further reinforces a reproductive logic based on creating a future for our children beyond the parents’ death. In addition, Nana’s intention to give a gift to her boyfriend’s future wife and children as a sign that she approves of such relationships constitutes another way to reconnect herself with the future.

In addition to her dream of motherhood, Nana’s plan for a traditional heterosexual marriage does not come through. Yet, just when she decides to discontinue medical treatment and to die, her boyfriend proposes to her and they exchange rings. While there is no image of this engagement, her mother previously takes a ‘wedding image’ that references female virginity but also reinserts death. Nana is dressed like a traditional heterosexual bride with veil, white dress and wig with long hair (see fig. 7). At the same time, the wedding image is virtual, and its conventions are subverted: the bridal veil is an old curtain (from Stäcker’s tissue collection and previously her grandmother’s table runner); there is no groom in the picture and her pale face is directed strangely upward rather than beaming with the expected bridal smile. This ghostly figure with an upward

orientation and veil connects the figure of a bride with a virginal female corpse. Bronfen discusses the interchangeability of bridal and death rituals in relation to a painting by Gustave Courbet: studies have shown that the depicted dead female body in the painting was “resurrected” by “redressing” the nude corpse with a corset and a skirt, thus turning her into a bride (the image has been entitled either *La toilette de la mariée* or *La toilette de la morte*) (1992, 259). For Bronfen “the bride is only uncannily animate, with the dead body shining through its beautified disguise to disclose not only once again that beauty hides death but also that inanimation is inherent to all representation. (...) The deanimated corpse implicitly shines through the clothed body as its double” (1992, 260). As in this palimpsest, in Nana’s wedding image her pale and mortal body ‘shines through’ and shows her as a (virtual) cadaver. Yet, in both images, femininity is stabilised by dressing the bride and putting a protecting bridal dress over the sexual female body. Interestingly, the memoir juxtaposes Nana’s last bridal image with an image of her boyfriend Chris as tattooed and melancholic gothic groom, taken after Nana’s death, and creates a virtual wedding image that transgresses her death (see fig. 8).

In another shoot that casts Nana as a virtual corpse, Nana is shown with nose piercing and black leather jacket but without wig and positioned next to a bald mannequin (see fig. 8). Her facial expression is direct and confident but she has a slightly weary look in her eyes. Nana links the image to moments of suffering and pain but also expresses acceptance of the queering of her body without hair: “Of course I like the photograph because it is a striking image! But the photograph looks hard. You recognize that I have a disease. The image is linked to many negative memories of this time” (Stäcker and Seitz 2013, 52). Her mother reflects on the juxtaposition of

*Figure 6. Wedding images, by Barbara Stäcker*



mannequin and Nana's dying body: "Nana and the mannequin are fragile, pale, as though made of marble. Like antique sculptures. Will Nana soon be cold and stiff as well? Only present as representation? Nana's portrait, kept for eternity. Living – and yet moribund" (Stäcker and Seitz 2013, 52). The representational, stiff nature of the mannequin reinserts death into life and thus foreshadows Nana's dead body, turning her into an aestheticised virtual corpse.

The last shoot with photographer Ron Maass offers a more vulnerable, fearful, and "authentic" Nana, in her own clothes and with short, regrown hair (see fig. 9). Here, death is present during the photo shoots to the point that it no longer seems possible to continue the shoot as a practice of becoming.<sup>7</sup> Nana herself acknowledges that she wanted these images to show that there are moments of fear when she does not want to be looked at. Maass explains that, during these shoots, he witnessed Nana's death through the camera and recognised her as a virtual corpse:

I looked through the objective and saw her fear, the suffering that she had to bear. And the approaching death. That gave me the creeps, my hair stood on end. I felt coldness around my heart, as if somebody were grabbing me with an icy grip. (Stäcker and Seitz 2013, 58)

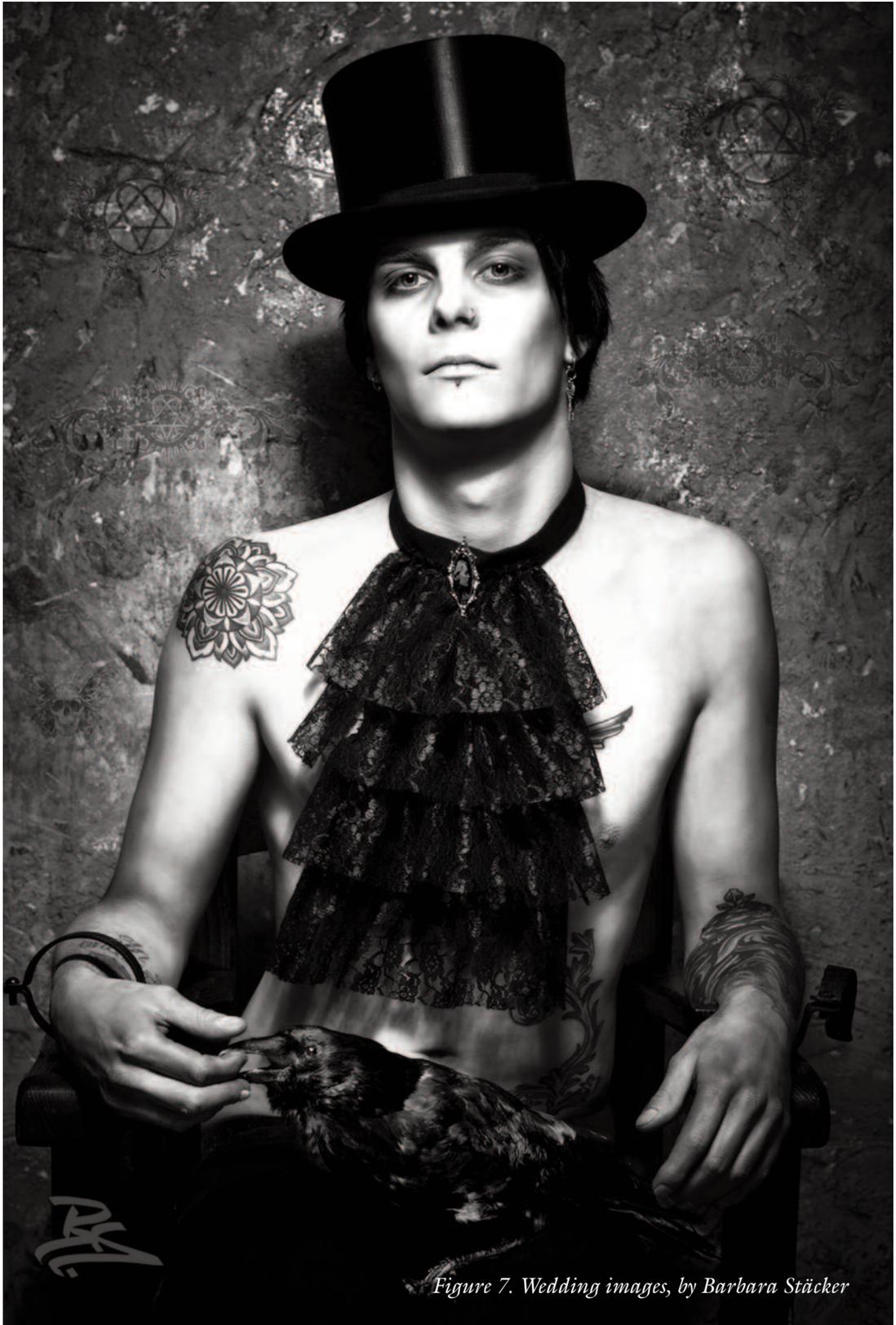
Interestingly, although Maass attempted to represent and memorialise Nana's death, he acknowledged that such representations cannot fully grasp death. When he recognised Nana's imminent death during their photo shoot, he wanted to stop: "Then I didn't want to take Nana's pictures any longer, but rather take her in my arms" (Stäcker and Seitz 2013, 58). In Braidotti's view this is the moment of becoming-imperceptible for which there is no representation because it rests on the disappearance of the individuated self. This scene also

marks the transgression of gendered norms of care: rather than positioning and objectifying her female body by taking pictures the male photographer desires to provide care and comfort. By emphasising affect and death, the image counteracts the contemporary medicalisation of death and returns to a death culture that Ariès calls "thy death" (1974, 67). By the 18th century, Ariès argues, survivors mourned and were consoled by preserving the memory of the deceased.

In addition to the portraits that allude to Nana as a virtual corpse, the memoir describes touchingly Nana's actual death in a palliative setting at home. After Nana is put under palliative sedation because of her excruciating pain, her mother narrates in detail her perception of Nana's immediate process of dying in which her daughter's dead body transforms into an impersonal corpse:

It was good for everybody that Nana could stay with us for such a long time after her death. It was a decisive phase of farewell. Just to literally grasp death with your own hands: How Nana gradually became cold, lost all her softness, until she looked and felt like marble. I liked to hold her hands intermittently, as long as there was some warmth in her. And when she was cold and therefore completely a corpse and no longer Nana, we could let go of her shell. For all of us, it was enriching and important that Nana could stay with us up to this point. (Stäcker and Seitz 2013, 69)

Barbara's description of Nana as "completely a corpse and no longer Nana" expresses the transition between personal body and impersonal corpse and relates to Braidotti's concept of becoming-imperceptible. Braidotti describes the moment of death as the "moment of ascetic dissolution of the subject; the moment of its merging with the web of non-human forces that frame him/her, the cosmos as a whole" (2013, 136). In other words, in the mo-



*Figure 7. Wedding images, by Barbara Stücker*



*Figure 8. Wedding images, by Barbara Stäcker*

ment of individual death we completely merge with our body in becoming and transform into the virtual corpse that we have always been (2013, 136). Like the corpse in Courbet's painting, Nana as corpse is caringly prepared, dressed and adorned with make-up and jewellery based on her wishes; this last step of styling her death creates connections between life and death through material objects. The last photographs of 'Nana' in the memoir thus show her adorned black and pink coffin and grave.<sup>8</sup>

For her mother, the images constitute Nana's "life's work" (Stäcker and Seitz 2013, 33) and "heritage" (*ibid.*, 61) that she passes on to other patients and her family beyond her death. Barbara describes how Nana conveys her story affectively through images, also by touching hearts and inserting herself in other's lives and futures: "She found her language through images. Some wild and frisky, others infinitely sad and profound. Nana managed to tell her story without words in a universal language that touches the heart. And which you won't forget" (Stäcker and Seitz 2013, 33). For Barbara, the writing of the memoir seems an opportunity not only to mourn the loss of her own reproductive futurism through the death of her child but also to reinsert and materialise memories of Nana into her life.

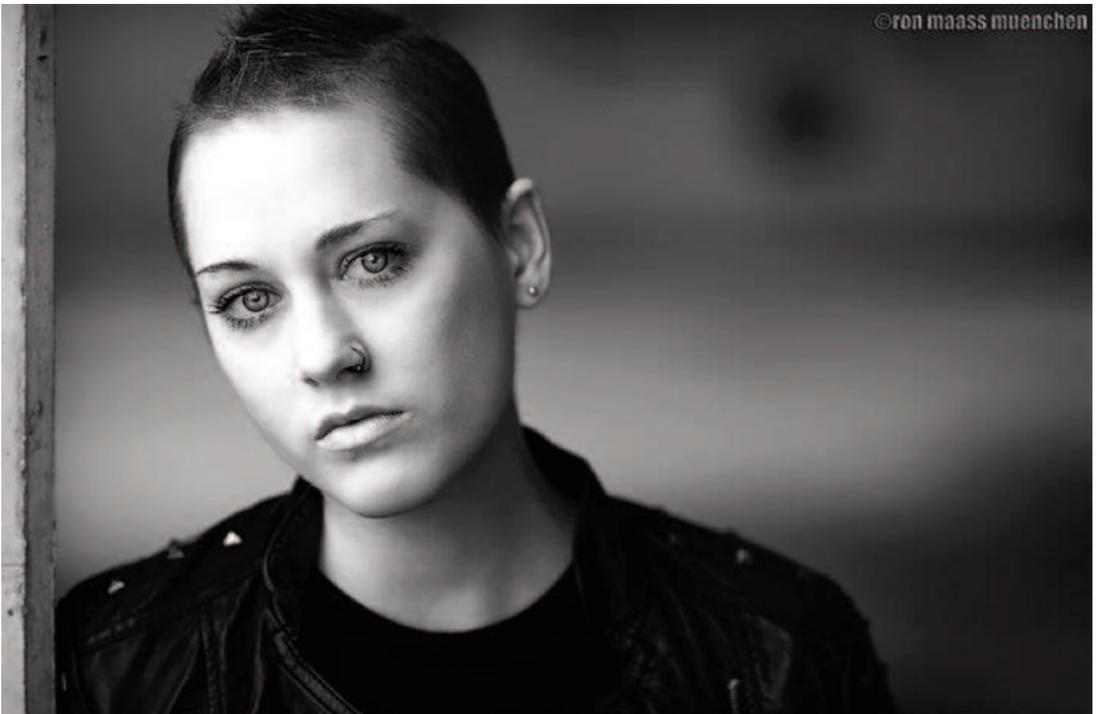
As another marker of material continuity beyond death, Nana chooses a butterfly motive for her artistic project and her dying. Just like the larva dies and metamorphoses into a new material existence, life is matter in a continual process of becoming and death another transition of life. The butterfly motive becomes the model for the tattoos that Chris not only draws on her corpse, but that he and the family members get after Nana's death. This "Nanagram" becomes the label for the make-up project that she initiated and that decorates every page of the memoir (Stäcker and Seitz 2013, 142). In the last hours of her dying,

Barbara uses a butterfly mantra to say goodbye and to encourage her daughter to let go of life: "Fly my butterfly, fly. Fly into the light!" (Stäcker and Seitz 2013, 148). While this metaphor also alludes to transcendence, it leaves space for the concept of becoming-imperceptible, of merging with air, light and other cosmic forces.

## CONCLUSION

Nana's performative images oscillate between aestheticising camp, sentimental pink ribbon cancer narratives, postmodern fashion photography, gothic representations of female corpses and social media self-styling. By creating portraits in collaboration with different photographers Nana engages primarily aesthetically with cancer, femininity and death: In doing so, she reasserts agency and styles her death by exploring different femininities that subvert a range of iconic Western female performances. The photo shoots illustrate a process that draws on Braidotti's concepts of becoming-women and becoming-imperceptible: The nuanced images convey a posthuman understanding of female subject formation that includes the process of dying. Like the formation of a female subjectivity in life, death becomes an embodied transition embedded in relations of power and desire with others.

Like Braidotti's philosophy, Nana's images do not focus on biopolitics or necropolitics of cancer and medicine (for instance questions of access and privilege). Rather, they aestheticise and memorialise the female body and corpse and only allude to the uncontrollable and ugly materiality of cancer. In this way, Nana's images stand in contrast to earlier documentary and political cancer photography that focuses on the daily materiality of cancer, suffering and medical power relations. Unlike Nana's images, the memoir reintroduces materiality and biology into the narrative to some degree; for instance, medical information on the type of cancer, palliative care, and pal-



*Figure 9-10. Nana Stacker, by Conny Stein Photodesign (above) and Ron Maass (below)*

liative sedation is presented, even if in separate boxes as ‘expert’ knowledge. Her mother’s detailed narrative of Nana’s last days indeed describes her intense pain, suffering and steps of the dying itself. Yet, while the different quotes and perspectives of family members, friends and health care staff give a multi-faceted perspective, the third person narrator of the memoir creates a somewhat impersonal perspective of this experience.

Even though the engagement with the materiality and biopolitics of suffering remains limited through the construction of an aestheticised and redemptive narrative, the images engage affirmatively with death and foreground its vitality beyond Nana’s individual life and death. This suggested impersonal understanding of death challenges us to rethink the bioethics of contemporary neoliberal cultures of longevity, fitness and health, including the medicalisation at the end of life, individual autonomy in dying, or the pathologising of experiences of melancholia and mourning. As such, the project might be a practice of Braidotti’s relational ethics and care that aims to counteract the destructive aspects of our posthuman political economy.

## NOTES

1. Ewing sarcoma is a very rare but aggressive cancer mostly of the bones in young adults. Upon Nana’s diagnosis, medical exams revealed a primary tumour in the right femur and metastasis in her pelvis and spine (with a broken vertebra).
2. Based on the experience with this project and interviews with cancer patients and health care professionals, Barbara Stäcker co-published two other ‘self-help’ books: One about issues of beauty, relationships and sexuality for young women with cancer, and the other together with the physician Bernd Feddersen about palliative care, depression and other topics related to dying (see Stäcker, Seitz and Kader 2014; Feddersen, Seitz and Stäcker 2015).
3. The name *Nana Sixx* is based on the name of

founder and bassplayer of the metal band *Mötley Crüe*, “Nikki Sixx”.

4. In the 1980s, British photographer Jo Spence depicts her breasts during mammography and expresses rage and feelings of powerlessness in a sexist patriarchal society and medical culture that takes bodies as objects (Bell 2002, 24). Similarly, the German photographers Renate Zeun and Natalie Kriwy document their daily life with breast cancer as a counter-discourse to medical imagery of cancer (Zeun 1985; Kriwy 2016).
5. Collaborative book projects feature images of women of varied ages, races, ethnicities, and body types, identified by name and accompanied by commentary, often the women’s own words (see Myers 2009; Brodsky and Byram 2003; Jay 2011). In *Caring for Cynthia*, the photographer and nurse Amy Blackburn offers a visual and verbal narrative of the illness of her best friend, Cynthia Ogden (see Blackburn 2008).
6. Drawing on Foucauldian biopolitics Mbembe extends the focus on technologies of control and discipline to the administration of death in orchestrated massacres: He defines necro-politics as “the generalized instrumentalization of human existence and the material destruction of human bodies and populations” (Mbembe 2003, 19). This relies on the logic of opportunistic exploitation of life beyond the individual and includes, for instance, new forms of posthuman warfare with industrial weapons and humiliated human bodies.
7. Nana chooses Maass’ image as a ‘Sterbebild’ (memorial card photo) for her funeral and another of Maass’ photographs becomes the cover of Barbara’s memoir. ‘Sterbebild’ stands in a predominantly Catholic tradition and includes a picture of the deceased, brief biographical dates and a biblical or spiritual quote, distributed during the funeral ceremony.
8. The memoir relates to the *Ars Moriendi*, two popular and related Medieval Latin texts that constitute the first in the Western literary tradition of guides about how ‘to die well’ and that contain pictures with staged scenes. While the *Ars Moriendi* shows woodcut images of skeletons or corpses, the memoir includes an image of Nana’s decorated coffin and grave.

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