

Evidence through imaging. Socio-anthropological analysis of medico-legal expert evaluations at the time of forensic imaging.

Even though surgical autopsy is still central to the forensic investigative device, for the past fifteen years several medical imaging technologies (CT-scan, MRI, angiography) have been added to the different scientific tools used to identify the causes of death. Switzerland is at the forefront in developing forensic radiography. The different research teams working on virtual autopsy describe it as a revolutionary technology because it limits human interventions on the corpse and increases scientific inquiry neutrality. While legal medicine is historically founded on the dissection of corpses, these new visualisation techniques break the conventional way of investigating death. Neither this virtual turning point, nor its professional and social issues have ever been studied from a socio-anthropological perspective – our research intends to fill this gap through an ethnography of a Swiss forensic medicine center, the University Center of Legal Medicine (CURML) in Lausanne and Geneva, an expert pole in forensic radiology.

Inspired by a pragmatic sociology of expertise that considers the role of technical objects in the demonstration device, this research project analyses the innovation that forms forensic imaging, in regards to the implications of investigative practices and the demonstration of causes of death. It questions the revolutionary nature of virtual autopsy and seeks to evaluate the transformations produced by those technical innovations concerning the production of evidence as well as their specificities compared to other investigation techniques.

Our study differs from the current state of knowledge suggesting an original articulation between expertise activity, forensic radiology techniques and dead body ontology. It combines a reflexion on

the technological innovation process, the place of this innovation in the investigative device, and the status of the corpse in this device. In opposition to many analyses stating that investigative and medical imaging techniques reduce body to an object, we hypothesize a form of agency of the dead body. Making the body “talk”, the investigative device places the body in a liminality position: the forensic imaging techniques play a special role as they simulate biological life and, in the case of post-mortem CT-angiography, are able to “revive” the body, artificially restoring blood stream.

Research team

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