
NECROTAINMENT AND NECRO-MARKETING AS TOOLS FOR DE-SACRALISATION OF DEATH IN CURRENT CONSUMERIST SOCIETY

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Abstract

The philosophical and religious consideration of the so-called last things is being sidelined by the pragmatic approach of the current man – he simply puts off and taboos any thoughts of his own death, with the orientation of current society on hedonism, narcissistic self-love and never-ending entertainment serving as a reinforcement of this attitude. Self-transcendence is being replaced by self-realisation. The current society features display both tabooing and de-tabooing of death. The tabooing takes place at the individual level, while the de-tabooing manifests itself in the pathology of a growing demand for necro-cultural artefacts (for example ‘dark tourism’). This piece analyses the phenomenon of death through the prism of its visualisation in the media, more specifically through the optics of necrotainment and necro-marketing.

Keywords: de-sacralisation, necrotainment, necro-marketing, consumer society, mass media

1. Introduction

Death represents an extraordinarily serious problem in the broad spectrum of man’s consideration. From the point of Human sciences, death should always represent a relevant and inexhaustible topic, but it has become put off and tabooed in Euro-American culture in the course of the past century. A certain change has appeared in recent decades, involving the gradual process of presenting doubts about the tabooing of the phenomenon, which is being received with interest by both experts and the general public, and which cannot go unnoticed in the media on a daily basis. We can go as far as to identify a certain degree of pathological behaviour in certain cases, which can be noticed in growing demand for necro-cultural artefacts. The take-off hypothesis of our examination is the assumption of a considerable degree of individualisation, commercialisation, de-sacralisation and consumerisation of both death and surrounding culture. In the context of consumerist culture, penetrated with ideas

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of post-modern philosophy, reflection of death is determined by the uniqueness of an individual, without regard to traditional religious models and fixed patterns. Death becomes more and more flexible vis-à-vis various reincarnations of necro-marketing and necrotainment in the way of life mainly due to the mass media. In the current way of life as a whole, we observe an alarming lack of religiosity vis-à-vis the demise of human person, and the taking up of attitudes involving consumerist preferences towards death, indicating a lack of relevance attributed to trans-personal values in Western culture.

2. What does death mean for man?

This question has been posed by the humankind since the beginning of its very existence. Birth, life and death are three phenomena that represent a universal and inescapable experience of both humanity and every individual [1]. In a sense, we can state that man is dying since his birth. The genesis of death is conditioned by life, and life is made possible by death. Most people have certain restraints of debating death. Among others, there are mental and cultural reasons: the issue of death is a taboo for us. At least subconsciously, we might feel that when encountering death in any way, may it be even indirectly, we become confronted with the prospect of our own death – this makes death appear closer and more realistic. Efforts of putting off any thoughts of our own demise have resulted in replacing death from the centre of our attention with its fascinating destructive effects. Pavol Strauss puts it: “Death has been relegated to a banal and routine event. Despite the fact that it is the most important moment of one’s life. Every aging person should live with this awareness. After all, everybody dies in everybody.” [2] Jan Assman has similar considerations, when stating that “death is the most sacred secret of the world. (...) [Death] is an embodiment of the sacred, a primordial form of the divine. [Death] is the origin and goal of everything alive, alpha and omega, ultimate reality.” [3]

In any way, death is always in the centre of our attention and we are continuously confronted with it. We learn how many people and how they died in this or that place from the media on a daily basis. These constant encounters with death result in a desire of our own immortality, and we frequently also feel immortal. Norbert Elias’s words confirm this: “A frequent way of making the depressing, ill-managed infantile dread of death more bearable is the imagination of own immortality” [4]. In this context, it is worth mentioning the phenomenon of cryonics, which represents a method of low-temperature preservation of humans with the hope that resuscitation will be possible in the future with the use of new biotechnologies. This phenomenon may be viewed as a new form of belief in human immortality, based on the faith in limitless (mainly biotechnological) progress, especially in the sphere of nanotechnologies. This modern phenomenon is not that exceptional, as according to Norbert Elias, “there’s no notion, however absurd, that people wouldn’t be willing to believe, if it relieved them of the awareness that they would cease to exist one day, and gave them hope of any form of eternity of their existence” [4]. Any spiritual

principles are lacking in cryonics. Cryonics, which is based solely on the notion of physical immortality, has less validity and credibility compared to religious approaches that are based on a spiritual immortality. The very notion of permanent physical existence is also wrong from a metaphysical point of view, as the physical human body is subject to change and eventual demise [5].

Cryonics reflects the principles of thought harboured by the current man and secularised society. Man promotes himself to the level of the highest moral authority, having the right to decide on life and death. On one hand, he believes in a technological progress, which should allow him to live forever (or at least prolong its existence as far as possible), while on the other hand, he does not hesitate to take life in the name of the right to decide on one's life and in the name of individual freedom. We have in mind especially the secular bioethics, which is in a stark contrast to the Christian bioethics in the issues of artificial termination of pregnancy (induced abortion) and euthanasia. These two extreme approaches towards death – cryonics versus euthanasia and abortion – while standing on opposite sides of the barricades, connect two aspects of consideration. Apart from representing a serious, extremely controversial and disputable moral and ethical problem of the current world, they promote the right of man to decide on (his) life and death according to individual preferences of his own knowledge and conscience. Mark J. Cherry confirms this: “Where Christianity brings a content-full appreciation of the demands of God to communicative the why and wherefore of existence, appropriately to evaluate and guide technological, social, and moral choice, secular bioethics emphasizes healthcare welfare entitlements and individual liberty conceptualized as personal autonomy, to the detriment and marginalization of traditional forms of moral and spiritual authority. The established secular bioethics seeks ever further to secularize society, medicine, and permissible moral judgment.” [6]

Death, in the sense of Christian religious dogmas, opens the way to a permanent condition of the immortal human soul. The doctrine of the Faith stabilises the human being during its earthly life, inciting its reason to hope for an eternal happiness, which consists in enjoying the immediate presence of the Triune God. This is why many historiographical passages of the Sacred Scripture present scenes related to death as an inseparable part of life, which inevitably leads into it. Christ, in order to fulfil Father's will, comes to dwell among the men to reveal the truth on being. He sacrifices himself at the same time, saying: “...so that those who believe in him may not perish but have eternal life” (John 3.16). Death is mirrored as an excellent symbol of knowledge of man in his way to perfection. The profanation of death by the current way of living leads to a complete apathy towards any faith and any notion of being after death. The biblical point of view reveals here a double death in the hierarchical model of the human finality. The primary death is the death of the body, which is so symptomatic for the current man, who looks back for memories of a material substance. The secondary death represents a condition of the spirit, with man discarding a higher principle, which is God. Conversely, an opposite principle of death taking part in the paradox of human life is being represented

by the ‘dying to self’. This term involves a higher principle of sacrifice and the meaning of earthly life consisting in a service rendered to neighbour, frequently at the expense of one’s own comfort. It may even be said that it is a testimony of the communication with the transcendent, to which our lives are directed, except that this takes place at the level of helping others. A number of figures representing no less than an iconic humaneness give a testimony to this way of service in modern history, among them martyrs for the Faith and those who sacrificed their lives in order to save others (Saint Maximilian Kolbe), servants to the ill and feeble (Saint Mother Theresa), etc. The current trend of the human model of living hardly corresponds to the aforementioned principle, as it concentrates all its energy on a superficial sliding on information about death, instead of attempting to get to the heart of its mystery. “Ad lucem per crucem” (to the light through the cross, auth. note) has been replaced by pathos and ostentatious mourning as a systematic mechanism of concluding individual chapters of serial lives.

3. Reflection of death through the prism of necrotainment and necro-marketing

Death can be reflected from various points of view. This will vary depending on whether approached as an individual experience and as inspiration for philosophers and theologians, from cultural-anthropological, sociological, psychological, historical and medical points of view. If we consider that business does not fear death, quite the contrary, vast opportunities for reflection of modern phenomena such as necro-marketing and necrotainment will emerge. Death is becoming a sector of business like any other spheres. This does not only involve a broad portfolio of funeral services, including such strange ideas as cremation of one’s body into a diamond, setting-up of virtual cemeteries and producing of cinerary urns with images of the deceased. We also mean the ‘entertaining’ point of death in form of images and video recordings of suicides, murders, torture, maltreatment, public executions of dictators and media death of celebrities – providing the basis for a newly-emerged phenomenon – necrotainment (entertainment with death) – which has been forming up since the death of Princess Diana and the public mourning that. Any effort of grasping the phenomenon of death with sufficient exhaustiveness in all its aspects would be condemned to failure in this piece. Instead, we will attempt to aim our focus at two aspects of the commercial use of death through the prism of the so-called necrotainment and necro-marketing. We view the latter, along with media theorist Lukasz Wojciechowski, as a reaction to the infinite complexities and dichotomy between eros and thanatos in the world of advertisement and marketing [7]. We will attempt to define both necrotainment and necro-marketing, and demonstrate their status and effects in the socio-cultural sphere with the help of specific examples.

Any considerations and notions of death (may they be however diverse) have one common denominator – the fact that death is an inevitable certainty of our lives. Death is an inevitability that is immanent to the life. The secret of death and fear of death concern everybody, as nobody can avoid his own demise. Death is undesired, unwanted, painful, traumatising, dreadful and enigmatic in most cases. The issue of death, as one of the most outstanding determinants of human life, is being tabooed and de-tabooed at the same time. Necrotainment and necro-marketing strategies of the funeral industry want to see death de-tabooed. Some of the aforementioned strategies may appear pretty cynical: such as leaflets designated for pensioners advertising for gravestones with the opportunity of winning a car, and the advertising campaign of retail chain Lidl in the Czech Republic that condoled with the nation on the occasion of President Václav Havel's death with the use of black-and-white ads [8].

However may society be directed at a hedonist and consumerist way of life, attempting to put off the reality of ever-present death from our consciousness, this will not change anything in the caducity of individual lives and social processes. The fear of death is being put off from people's communication, while the reality of death itself is being accepted in a passive way. There is no knowledge formulated by society on how an individual should come to terms with death, how he should transcend it; the passivity of individual is being replaced by compensatory activities leading to avoiding and disguising the reality of death. By way of example, we may present the celebrations of Halloween and the All Saints Day. The European and Christian 'all-souls' day has received a major competitor due to Americanisation of our cultural environment. According to Zuzana Beňušková, ethnologist from the Slovak Academy of Sciences, "All Souls' Day and Halloween have a completely opposite character, and given the fact that the mournful nature of the All Souls' Day is unfeasible as an opportunity for celebration in society, it is the moment of jolliness and entertainment related to Halloween that is making it into the public space" [9].

There is no need to overemphasise that the speed of our times is several times higher than in the past. We have gratefully left it up to the life behind the walls of monasteries to make any thoughtful considerations concerning spirituality and any meditations upon the sense of the human path. There is no time to deal with anything that would only hinder us in the existential struggle here and now. Any contemplation of the loss and unique value of a human life has been exchanged for sensation and the related analytical character of approaching the reality of death.

- In the first place, we react to death with regard to our personal engagement (relatives or friends, widely-known/popular figures – celebrities).
- Further, we react according to the time and space distance (immediate neighbourhood, Slovakia, remote corners of the world; in recent or distant past).
- An emotional filter follows, depending on the number of casualties (hypertrophy or hypotrophy of emotion).

- Desensitisation – hypertrophy of death and violence in the media inevitably results in a diminished emotional responsiveness of the recipient: “death has been made banal, part of the crime and accident columns, and it is becoming ‘anaesthetised’ due to its frequency” [10].

The psychological moment is also important. According to Lubomír Plesník, phenomena that we perceive as terrifying and dreadful tend to attract us at the same time – for example, a customer of a snack bar in a big city feels sick upon seeing a hygienically devastated person who eats the leftovers, but his eyes unconsciously always look for him [11]. In this sense we can also talk of latent sadomasochism related to infinite complexities of the instincts of life and death (Eros and Thanatos) as reflected by Sigmund Freud: becoming fascinated by a tragedy and death of others can be viewed as a display of the destruction instinct. One of these displays is the so-called dark tourism. (For example, trips to Chernobyl, Irak, concentration camps, etc.) This involves making trips to places where a tragedy, disaster or mass killing and deaths took place in the past. The term was introduced in 1996 by John Lennon, professor of the University of Glasgow and co-author of ‘Dark Tourism’ [12]. He states that it is difficult to unveil the human motivation behind the phenomenon, as it involves a mixture of voyeurism, probably also some excitement of getting so close to death. „The permanent boost of stimuli and fascination represents the only way for an individual to cope with boredom and the threat that his life may become banal.” [13] Necro-tourism includes the visits of gravesides, famous cemeteries and sites of eternal rest of famous persons. It is also worth mentioning the so-called thanato-tourism – interest in places related to violent death, and most recently also necro-cycle-tourism. When it comes to necro-tourism and thanato-tourism, visiting these places is devoid of any attitude of reverence and tribute. Places that are somehow connected to death and suffering become a source of entertainment and distraction, as observed by Zuzana Slušná: “And so man roams in the web of carnevalised meanings, he gapes eagerly and stares at the exhibited events, stealing from them, being driven by the logic of prestige and the pressure that he may miss something” [14].

As of recently, commercial use (or misuse) of death in form of necro-marketing has been coming to the fore ever more. This term appeared only recently, being established in 2009. Media theorist Lukasz Wojciechowski views it as a “form of marketing that uses generally-known marketing rules and methods, with the aim of provoking an exchange that would satisfy the needs of individuals and organisations, and deals with situations and subjects that are either explicitly or implicitly related to death, or directly parasitize on death and tragedy” [7, p. 86]. The most fitting example here is the sphere of funeral services, “which are directly related to death in the plain form of demand and supply” [7, p. 86]. This category includes virtual cemeteries, virtual funerals – online funerals on the internet, and animal cemeteries that are becoming increasingly popular; in short, a vast spectrum of funeral services. Other typical examples of necro-marketing – apart from the broad spectrum of services provided by the funeral industry – include the so-called pornification of death

(self-promotion of politicians by engaging in aiding people affected by disasters), innumerable images of the dead in the media, halloweenisation of the memorial day of the deceased (with necrotainment also involved), media voyeurism displayed in showing public executions, images of car accidents, etc. [7].

On one hand, necro-marketing suppresses the fear of death by emphasising the well-known motto *Carpe Diem*, with an accent on enjoying life here and now, on the background of endless consumerism and hedonism, thereby denying another wisdom, *Memento Mori*, by giving preference to the model of *homo consumericus*. On the other hand, it fosters the fear of death – through the prevalent cult of the young body it rejects aging and dying as natural parts of human existence, thereby acting along the same lines as the cosmetic and pharmaceutical industries. The myth of beauty concerns both those alive and dead, as it has already made it into the sphere of funeral marketing: certain companies have begun offering make-ups for the deceased to allow them to look beautiful even after death.

4. Death, consumerism and media

The media are presenting exciting, even cathartic shows: birth and end of life, dangerous and funny situations, diseases of lifestyle – with victories and defeats, natural and human disasters, suffering, wars and famine, as well as love, friendship, solidarity, sights in the Universe and in the interior of our civilisation. They represent a sight of civilisation floundering in both an economic and spiritual crisis. Using the words of Juraj Skačan, “man with his nature, twisted thinking, shallow desires and uncontrolled materialism without any counterpoise puts in motion processes that give birth to crises of any kind, while deforming his own perception of fatal values, and subsequently he feels deeply affected by this recessive development” [15].

Apathy and indifference to others are deepening, while the mass media do not provide opportunities for change in an individual and his attitudes. Television images showing victims of plane crashes and countries destroyed by war provide a sufficient testimony to this. Are television news reports and newspaper and internet articles still able to make recipients feel compassion; is man still able to grasp the suffering of others? We assume that this holds true only to a certain extent, as thanks to the media we witness suffering and tragedies virtually on a daily basis, 24 hours a day, and with the aim of preserving our own mental balance, we have to process such information only superficially, without any attempt of internalisation. After all, there is no time for such processes. It is mainly due to the media that we have begun thinking fast, consuming fast, and living fast. The mass media prevent us from feeling solidarity and compassion with the suffering. We watch the most horrific images on television that would cause us feeling nauseated under normal circumstances – yet we are able to enjoy our dinner at the same time. Atrocities and violence, which we are able to watch every day without batting an eyelash, have become

trivial and banal to us to such an extent that we are becoming indifferent and apathetic – ‘after all, it doesn’t concern us’.

With reference to Neil Postman [16] we can observe that any sphere of the life of society is being determined by television, thereby carrying significant features of entertainment. The word ‘entertainment’ has become the basis for numerous neologisms, such as edutainment, infotainment, technotainment, advertainment, militainment, etc. Now, we have also arrived to the answer to the question: ‘What is necrotainment?’

The phenomenon of entertainment has shifted to a new level of meaning due to the activity of film and television, and increasing commodification of entire society. Television entertainment serves for recipients (not only) as a means of satisfying their hedonist desires. By watching television, recipients built defence mental mechanisms against frustrating situations that are part of everyday life. Entertainment is becoming a mark of cultural environment, and is approaching an increasingly broader spectrum of audience.

We have accepted the media eye as an infiltrated sense, an extension of our substantial ‘self’ in the direction of attitude process of perceiving reality. Summa summarum, the global media politics capitalises on entertainment, parasitizes on the ability of man to get shocked. The sphere of necrotainment most probably involves entertainment philosophy of the blackest dye, but due to the incessant massage of our consciousness through producing investigative reports at any cost, we do not view this trend as crude and disrespectful. It is necessary to realise that we are living the present only with respect to the most proximate future. That is why values of the media world have become reduced to the latest issues with the aim of harvesting as much success as possible.

A simple formula for the consumerist approach of the media centrism might look like as follows:

COMPASSION/PRAGMATISM = **PROFIT**

The watching of images of dying innocent civilians in the Middle East, starving children in Africa, captives being tortured on the hands of an enemy dictatorial regime, members of the Moon sect manipulated to the point of fanaticism and dozens of casualties of a plane crash has become *the* evaluation process of our cultural perception. The problem becomes more obvious when realising the impact of the media when a loss of lives is involved. The media world honestly deserves credit for one thing. It has been able to show tragic events from all corners of the world in newspapers and electronic media over the past decade, while the attractiveness of individual stories has always been determined by the notorious criterion of number of casualties. Necrotainment and presentation of death in the media have become a routine for man.

Based on the aforementioned findings, we can define necrotainment as making death a subject of entertainment, along with commercialisation, de-tabooing, domestication, humanising and mainly misuse of death. If profit maximisation is the primary goal of all commercial media, which it is without any doubt, then anything that bears the potential of yielding profit is being presented – including death in all its variations and metamorphoses.

Necrotainment makes an inseparable part of necro-marketing. The borders between them are fluid.

5. Conclusions

Commercialism and consumerism do not only have effects on life, but its end, too. They dishonour the dignity of man through necrotainment and necro-marketing, and not only this. We observe a lack of respect for both life and death. The limits of normality have been shifted; we can see baleful effects of liberalisation, freedom that has ceased to be lived, and has begun to be misused instead. We believe that this behaviour is psychologically unsound, and may contribute towards the emergence of mental disorders. In our opinion, these phenomena have critical influence on the life of society, so it is necessary to reflect upon them and subject them to constant critical evaluation. It is man who has replaced God as the highest moral authority. It is man who defines right and good. As Mark J. Cherry argue: „...cardinal moral value is assigned to individual liberty conceptualized as autonomous self determination“ [6, p. 31].

The consumerist culture stimulates fear of death and aging, refusing to accept both of them. Life here and now is being dominated by a significant departure from the faith in immortality and transcendence. Life is directed solely at celebration of earthly existence and satisfaction of egoist needs stemming from narcissistic self-love. “The present, with its priorities, has broken itself free from the influence of the past, so it stands on wobbly foundations of transience and instability. This phenomenon is usually described as a crisis of culture, degradation of values and a source of the existential crisis. These shaky foundations provide an ideal ground for new priorities, needs and desires.” [17] And so is postmodern man living in the globalised world is prone to believe, “that quantity is more important than quality, as the entire consumerist environment is determined by economic laws of the generalised market, which is becoming a fetish and place for satisfying pleasures” [18].

The culminating speed of life decisions is building up a head of steam in everyday situation struggle against time, and it receives its form in the process of making serious events entertaining. This trend appears to serve as a defence against attacks made by our consciousness, a defence against making in-depth intellectual probes into the substance of our own existence, which calls us to take up a responsible attitude towards the values of human life, tolerance and active expressions of doing good.

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