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FORBIDDEN DEATH: A BAUDRILLARDIAN ANALYSIS OF DEATH IN ENGLISH CULTURE

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Abstract

The present research analyzes the mentality of the English society towards death from a Baudrillardian perspective. Jean Baudrillard considers the binary opposition of life/death to be the original split upon which other dichotomies such as reality/imagination, good/bad ... were based. In symbolic societies, life and death were not separated and the dead were not excluded from social exchanges. The dead had an active role in society. There was a circular view of time in those societies. Baudrillard views death not simply as a biological event; rather he considers it as a form and as a form, death entails the principle of reversibility and as it will be demonstrated, that is the reason behind the interdiction of death in Capitalist English culture. Death used to be a collective event, but gradually it was moved to the individual and then it was projected onto others, until finally, during the twentieth century it was altogether banned and interdicted.

Keywords: Baudrillard, Death, English Culture, Interdiction, Capitalism

1. INTRODUCTION

Death is central and indispensable to understanding Baudrillard's theory, and it is closely connected to symbolic exchange. According to Baudrillard, the most important ability which we have lost above all in the shift to a capitalist society is to engage in with death.

Death should not be seen here in purely biological terms. Baudrillard specifies early on in *Symbolic Exchange and Death* that he does not mean an event affecting a body, but rather, a form which destroys the determinacy of the system and of subject – which returns things to a state of indeterminacy (Baudrillard, 1993:5). Baudrillard definitely addresses actual deaths, risk-taking, and suicide and so on; but he also views death figuratively, in relation to the decay of present relations, the “death” of the self-image or ego, the interchangeability of processes of life across different categories (Baudrillard, 1993:138-143). For example, sexuality is related to death, because it leads to a fusion between bodies. Sexual reproduction bears traces of death because one generation substitutes another. Baudrillard's conception of death is fairly similar to Bakhtin's theory of the grotesque and the carnivalesque (Robinson, 2014). Death here refers above all to reversibility, and then to unexpected alterations, social change, as well as physical death.

According to Baudrillard, indigenous people see death as social, not natural or biological. They see it as an effect of an antagonistic force, which they must soak up through symbolic exchanges in forms of initiation rites and rituals. This is a method of preventing death from becoming an event which does not signify and is outside the cycle of exchanges. Since, such a non-signifying phenomenon is absolute chaos from the viewpoint of the symbolic order. For Baudrillard, the western idea of a biological death is in fact an illusion, which ignores the social nature of death. (Baudrillard, 1993:131-132)

One way of exploring this problem is to study the practice of initiation. One stage of initiation includes ritual death so that a rebirth may happen. In symbolic societies there exists a constant symbolic exchange between ancestors and the descendants, a direct connection between the dead and the living. Thus, instead of the absolute line of demarcation which is present in (post)modern society between life and death, there is an apparent and powerful social relationship: a mutual exchange, a type of the series of gift and counter-gift. It is fairly far-off in principle from any conception of life or death as aleatory events. In symbolic cultures, exchange is therefore considered as reversible, in modern societies, it is believed to be irreversible (Baudrillard, 1993: 203). Hence, there is no recognized antagonism or hostility between life and death in the symbolic order. And if the idea of revolution preserves any meaning at all, he insists it “can only consist in the abolition of the separation of death, not of equality in survival” (Baudrillard, 1993:200).

Poststructuralists generally maintain that the problems of the present are rooted in binary oppositions. For Baudrillard, the division between life and death is the original, starting opposition upon which the others were instituted. After this first split, a whole series of others have been created, confining particular groups to special isolated positions for instance the “mad”, prisoners, children, the old, sexual minorities, women and so on and so forth. The meaning of the ‘normal’ has been narrowed down over and over; as Baudrillard states “*it is not normal to be dead, and this is new*” (Baudrillard, 1993:126, original emphasis). Today, nearly everyone fits in to one or another ‘abnormal’ category.

The first split happened between the living and the dead. This first split and exclusion forms the basis, or prototype, for all the other splits and segregations of gender, race, class, and etc:

“The separation and opposition of life and death, Baudrillard contends, creates power: the hierarchical structures of authority that are the fundamental mechanisms of social control. When life and death are separated time becomes linear rather than cyclical, religion becomes repressive rather than expressive and death becomes the final, irreversible event in the life of the individual. The separating of life and death, then, is the founding condition of binary thinking.”(Pawlet, 2007:56)

Baudrillard proposes that death as we recognize it does not subsist outside of this separation between living and dead. The modern view of death is based on the model of the machine and the function. The human body is treated as a machine which in the same way, either functions or does not. For Baudrillard, this is a misinterpretation of the nature of life and death (Baudrillard, 1993:53).

The modern view of death is also required by the rise of subjectivity. The subject needs a beginning and an end, so as to be reducible and controllable (Baudrillard, 1993:125). The internalizing the concept of the subject or the soul separate us from our bodies, voices and so on. It generates the binary opposition of man/un-man and of course the real self is irreducible to such categories. It also individualizes people by annihilating their genuine relations with others.

The mortal body is actually an effect of the original split. The split never actually stops exchanging across the bar of binary opposition. In the case of death, we still ‘exchange’ with the dead through our own deaths and our angst about death. We no longer have live relationships with objects as well. They are reduced to the status of mere instruments. It is as if we have a see-through shroud between us (Baudrillard, 1993:101-104).

Symbolic exchange is based on a game, with game-like rules. When this disappeared, laws and the state were invented to replace them. It is the process of segregating, or barring which brings concentrated power into existence. Through splits, people turn the other into their ‘imaginary’ (Baudrillard, 1993:144-148). For instance, westerners invest the “Third World” with bigoted preconceptions and radical aims; the “Third World” invests the west with inspiring dreams of development. When considered separately, each of them exists only as an imaginary object to the other. Yet the resulting purity is an illusion. For Baudrillard, any barring of the other brings the other to the heart of the culture. “...censured everywhere, death springs up everywhere” (Baudrillard, 1993:183); or in other words, we all turn into dead, or mad, or prisoners, and so on, through their barring; because the symbolic haunts the code as its own death. The society of the code works relentlessly to prevent the risk of irruptions of the symbolic (Baudrillard, 1993:185-187).

Rupturing of the symbolic exchange is essential to the rise of capitalism. Baudrillard maps out a transformation occurring through time. Societies based on symbolic exchange, in which differences can be exchanged, are replaced by societies which are based on equivalence and in which everything is/means the same.

Baudrillard’s view of capitalism is based on Karl Marx’s analysis of value. Baudrillard acknowledges Karl Marx’s idea of capitalism being based on a general equivalent. Money or the exchange-value is the general equivalent because it can be exchanged for any commodity. Capitalism is derived from the autonomization or separation of economics from the rest of life. It turns economics into the ‘reality-principle’. It slyly replaces the social world based on exchange of differences with an eternal return of the same (Robinson, 2014).

The theme of ‘survival’ in the narrative of life is also essential to the rise of power. Social control comes into sight when the union of life and death is shattered, and the dead are banned. “Power is possible only if death is no longer free” (Baudrillard, 1993:130) as Baudrillard reminds us. The social exclusion of death is the foundation for the tyrannical systems of control. As he states “exclusion of the dead is at core of the rationality our culture” (Baudrillard, 1993:126), so people are forced to stay alive in order to become productive. For Baudrillard, capitalism’s original

connection to death has always been masked by the system of production, and its ends. It only becomes totally evident now that the system is imploding (or rather is on the road to implosion), and production is reduced to mere operation (Baudrillard, 1993:9-31).

In modern societies, death is placed out of sight and outside society. For example, elderly people are pushed out from society. People no longer anticipate their own death. Thus, it becomes incomprehensible. It keeps returning as a force of nature which will not obey objective laws. It can no longer be symbolically exchanged through rituals. Western society is prearranged so death is never done by a 'person', but always attributed to 'nature' (Baudrillard, 1993:125-131).

This creates a bureaucratic, judicial regime of death, of which the concentration camp is the ultimate symbol. The system now orders that we must not die – at least not in any old fashion way. We may only die if law and medical sciences allow it. Therefore, we observe, for example, the increase of health and safety policies (Baudrillard, 1993:163). On the other hand, violence is legally recognized, if it can be re-converted into economic value. Baudrillard sees this as a retrogressive relocation of death. It is taken out of the circle of symbolic exchanges and given over to centralized integrated social agencies (ibid).

For Baudrillard, this is not an improvement. People are in fact being killed, or left to die, by a system which never considers them as having any value. On the other hand, even when capitalism becomes lenient, all-encompassing and tolerant, it still creates an underlying anxiety about being reduced to the status of an object. This emerges as a continuous fear of being manipulated. In terms of the Hegelian master/slave dialectic, the slave stays within the master's dialectic for as long as 'his' life or death serves the perpetuation of the relations of domination (Baudrillard, 1993:39-40).

The conception of death in English culture remained almost static for a thousand years; as it will be demonstrated, since middle ages up to nineteenth century there was little change in the attitude towards death, but in nineteenth century and especially in twentieth century the conception of death changed so rapidly that it makes the millennium before that to seem almost static (Aries, 1974:2).

2. SOCIETY'S MENTALITY TOWARDS DEATH IN THE MIDDLE AGES

Death in the Middle Ages was a familiar, universal, and collective event. People accepted it with almost no fear. There was a sense of closeness to it. However, it was a highly ritualized event. Sensing that the end was approaching, the dying person would get ready for death. The dying man or woman presided over the whole procedure, for he/she knew the appropriate protocol and it had to be followed. If the dying person was unable to take control of the ritual or simply forgot it, it was the duty of those present such as the priest or doctor to take responsibility and carry out the ritual which was traditional and Christian (Aries, 1974:11-12).

Also, Death was considered to be a public event. The dying person's room was a public place and anyone could enter it. Parents, friends, and neighbors had to be in the room. Also present were children who had to become familiar with death from an early age; until the eighteenth century every description or painting of a deathbed included children (Fulton, 1995:398). One cannot help comparing it with how today people keep children away from death at all cost.

The final crucial point is the plainness and simplicity of the customs and rituals concerning death. It goes without saying that these rituals were conducted in the manner of a ceremony but there was no excessive drama and theatrics and no burst of emotions (Huber, 2015). The old worldview in which death was considered familiar, without inducing any great horror or trepidation is in complete contrast with the modern view of death in which death is so appalling and terrible that most of the times we do not even utter its name.

3. SOCIETY'S MENTALITY TOWARDS DEATH DURING AND AFTER RENAISSANCE

With the advent of Renaissance, the growing sense of individualism added a personal dimension to human's long-established familiarity with death. To better understand this change or modification of the prevalent worldview, it must be noted that this familiarity with death was closely related to a collective idea of destiny. During that period people were introduced to society at an early age in order to induce a strong and rapid socialization. The families did not hinder or interfere with the socialization process of the children. Furthermore, being socialized did not connote a separation between man and nature. The sense of closeness with death socialization did not separate man from nature; rather it was a kind of recognition and acknowledging the order of nature (Bradbury, 1999:141-148).

Dying meant facing one of the eternal laws of the nature, and there was no plan to evade or glorify it. Death was simply acknowledged and accepted with just the appropriate degree of seriousness, worthy of one of the most significant stages of existence (ibid). This brings us to a review of three changes which added the personal dimension to the long-established concept of collective destiny of human race. These changes are (1) the depiction of the Last Judgment at doomsday; (2) the relocating this judgment to the exact moment of each individual's death; (3) and a growing fascination with the macabre and depiction of physical decay and juxtaposition of love and death (Aries, 1974:28).

3.1. Portrayal of last judgment

In most of the depictions of the Last Judgment, Jesus Christ is sitting upon a throne and his apostles stand around him in circle. In these scenes, two actions gained more and more importance: the judging of the souls by weighing them on a scale and the prayers of the Virgin Madonna and St. John who are both kneeling on either side of Jesus Christ and pray to God on behalf of the deceased person. Each person is judged based on his/her deeds which are inscribed in a book. Good and bad deeds are carefully divided and put on either sides of the scale (Aries, 1974:28-30).

3.2. in the Bedchamber of the Dying

As it was mentioned before, friends, families, a priest, and sometimes a doctor were present in the bedroom of the dying person; and he/she would be supervising the final rites and procedures. But, an interesting changed occurred in this era and that was the portrayal of the last judgment on exact moment of death. In the final moments, two groups would enter the room that only the dying person could see. One group consists of the Holy Trinity, the Virgin Mary, and the celestial court the other group consists of Satan and an army of his minions (Humphries, 1970: 22).

Here we can observe the effects of the notion of individuality on a person's death. Death in bed used to be a soothing, peaceful ritual which honored the required passing to the other world, and even out the differences between individuals.

"No one worried about the fate of one particular dying man. Death would come to him as it did to all men, or rather to all Christians at peace with the Church. It was an essentially collective rite." (Aries, 1974:37)

Thus, the replacement of last judgment to each person's moment of death brought together the sanctuary of a collective ritual and the fretfulness of a personal judgment. From that point on it was believed that each person's life would flash out before his/her eyes at the exact moment of death. It was also thought that the manner in which one handled oneself at that precise moment would sum up one's life. Whether the dying man was nervous and fearful or calm and peaceful would determine whether his life was spent in vain or not (Humphries, 1970:26).

The Renaissance period also experienced the connection and association of dying and death with sexual love. The love/death connection, which was perhaps a remainder of religious guilt, plays a major part in the literature of the period. This association is manifest in romantic tragedies such as *Romeo and Juliet*, in which Death acts as Romeo's rival and in the love poems of metaphysical poets, especially in the poems of John Donne (Quinn, 2006:108).

4. SOCIETY'S MENTALITY TOWARDS DEATH IN 18TH AND 19TH CENTURIES

Beginning with the eighteenth century, death gained a new meaning in western tradition. It was exalted and glorified; it was dramatized and was regarded disturbing, greedy and insatiable. Another new development was the locus of death. Thus far, due to the impact of the renaissance notion of individuality, death was personal. But, now people were less worried about their own death than the death of the other, usually a loved one, whose passing and loss instigated the romantic notions of death and the cult of the dead (Hotz, 2009:2).

As it was mentioned before, in the sixteenth century there was an association of love and death in literature and arts for instance in the works of John Donne. From then on, death was viewed as a transgression which shattered the monotony of man's daily existence and threw him into a violent and stunningly beautiful world, in the same manner as that of the sexual act. Like the sexual act this conception of death was a rupture (Aries, 1974:57-59).

This notion of a rupture was conceived and developed in the realm of sexual fantasies. Next, it entered the real world. It goes without saying that at that moment it the erotic aspects of it were suppressed or elevated to the idea of beauty. Death was not attractive anymore, as it had once been in the macabre novels, rather it arose admiration in its beauty. This is the romantic notion of death that can be found in the works of Bronte sisters (Hotz, 2009: 102).

Although death in bed used to be a solemn and serious event in the past, but people were used to it and to them it was as banal as a holiday. They anticipated death and when it happened, they simply followed the tradition and carried out the necessary rituals. In the nineteenth century, a new sentimentality appeared. Those present at the bedside of the dying person were engulfed by emotion. They would cry and even throw themselves on the ground in a flight of passion. They did follow the tradition and performed the necessary rituals, but while doing them, they showed such sentiments that the ceremony was no longer a banal event. Also important to note is that people were distressed not only at the bedroom of the dead or by the loss they felt after the loved one had passed; rather, the very notion of death stirred their emotions (Bradbury, 1999:165-167).

Therefore, compliance toward the idea of death is the important change which emerged at the end of eighteenth century and developed in the nineteenth century and has since become one of the defining features of Romanticism. Another point to mention is the simplicity of the graves which persists even to this very day, of course for different reasons, one was in compliance with the idea of romantic death and the other is suggestive of the twentieth century's abjection of the dead. This simplicity did not connote an infidelity or lack of loyalty to the loved one. It suited the melancholic mood of the romantic notion of the dead (ibid).

5. SOCIETY'S MENTALITY TOWARDS DEATH IN 20TH CENTURY

During the periods which were reviewed so far, from the Middle Ages until the end of the nineteenth century, the general attitude toward death underwent a gradual change. But in twentieth century there was a revolution in the long-established ideas and mentalities concerning death. Death used to be omnipresent and universal and thus, it was familiar. But in twentieth century, it was wiped out. It became disgraceful and prohibited.

This revolution began with a lie. During the second half of the nineteenth century, the relatives of the dying person had an inclination to hide the seriousness of the situation from him/her and tried to have mercy. At first it was done so as to show mercy on the sick person, but soon, a new feeling which is characteristic of modern societies appeared. One had to steer clear of the disturbance and the excessively powerful sentiments caused by someone's passing and by the very existence of death in the middle of a "happy" life; not for the benefit of the dying man/woman, but for the sake of society. The "modern" idea behind it was that life should always be happy or at least seem so (Aries, 1974:87).

Between 1930 and 1950 this revolution gained pace noticeably. This acceleration was due to the dislocation of the place of death. No one died at the sanctuary of one's home and in the presence of families and loved ones, but rather alone in the hospital. Death was no longer a ritual supervised by the dying person and surrounded by friends and relatives (ibid). Death became a scientific event brought about when the doctors decided to terminate the care or "pull the plug". Death has been divided into a series of steps that makes determining which stage was the real death unattainable; was it the stage at which the consciousness faded away or was it the moment the heart stopped the one in which consciousness was lost, or the one in which breathing stopped (Fulton, 1995:3).

The funeral ceremonies have also undergone change. In England, there is a constant emphasis on decreasing the number of unavoidable, necessary steps for the disposal of a corpse. It is of utmost importance that the society does not notice the passing of one of its members or in other words as few people as possible should be aware of the event that has occurred. And if a ceremony is to be held or a few formal rituals to be carried out, it must be done in hushed up manner and with little or no great display of emotions (Davies, 2005:31-32).

Overt display of grief does not inspire sympathy but revulsion; it is the symptomatic of psychological instability or of undesirable manners. Dreading that it might disturb the children, one is also doubtful of showing sorrow within the family. Crying is permissible only when no one is watching (ibid).

Geoffrey Gorer has analyzed the process in which death became a taboo in twentieth century and also substituted sex as the main forbidden subject matter. In the past, parents would tell their children that a bird brought them, but they were not sheltered from observing death firsthand. Now children learn reproduction and sex from an early age, instead they are sheltered from death at all cost. There has been an inverse relation between sex and death since the Victorian age. The more sex was liberated, the more death was excluded (Gorer, 1965). It goes

without saying that any interdict invites transgression. The intertwining of death and sexual imageries, which was popular from sixteenth to eighteenth century, was resurrected in the sadistic literature of the twentieth century and the fascination of violent death (Aries, 1974:93).

This gradual formation of the interdict on death has a very important significance. It is already challenging to acquire the meaning of the interdict on sex which was effectuated by the Christian misunderstanding between sin and sex. But, the interdict on the dead emerges out of nowhere. It emerges after centuries of public acceptance of death, as an event that no one wished to exclude or hide. Yet, the reason for this interdict is quite clear. It is the craving for happiness and also the social and moral requirement to help the public happiness by avoiding any phenomenon or event which is upsetting and saddening and also by keeping up the façade of an always happy life even if you are utterly desperate. By demonstrating grief and sadness, one is actively threatening happiness and putting society in the danger of losing its excuse for existence (Gorer, 1965).

6. ANALYSIS

Baudrillard's main mission was analyzing and finding the weak points of Capitalism. According to him, Capitalism is an 'almost' perfect system of control, and it achieves its goal through several methods: first, by bringing everything under a general equivalent, i.e. by making everything exchangeable and interchangeable; second, by unilaterally giving gifts (for instance, the gifts of labor, identity, insurance, security...) and refusing to be provided with a counter-gift; and finally, by excluding any phenomenon or entity that might introduce and re-establish the principle of reversibility, or in our case death.

At the heart of all of the methods mentioned above there is the same factor: disrupting and eliminating the cycle of symbolic exchanges. As it was discussed, symbolic exchange emphasizes and welcomes difference, which is why capitalism tries to obliterate differences and establish a general law of equivalence. Also symbolic exchanges keep power in constant circulation, thus capitalism tries to disrupt the circle and make it unilateral.

In a section in *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, titled *Three Orders of Simulacra*, Baudrillard traces the history of the process of the elimination of the symbolic exchange, from Middle Ages to present day. The focus in Baudrillard's work is on the history of how signs, gradually replaced everything (Baudrillard, 1993:11-14). These three orders of simulacra roughly correspond with our history of death in English culture.

Baudrillard's history begins with the first order of simulacra which lasts from around late fifteenth century and up to 1750. The second order is concurrent with the era of industrialization. And the third order, according to Baudrillard, is the present age. (ibid). Every order models the world through a general law of equivalence, which enables categorization and monitored exchanges between members of the system. Baudrillard calls the first order as the order of "Counterfeit". Its general law of equivalence is the natural law of value or use-value. The second order is named the order of "Production", and its principle law of value is the market law of value or exchange-value. And finally, the third order of simulacra is the era of the "Code" and its general law of equivalence is the structural law of value or sign-value (Baudrillard, 1993:12)

Baudrillard vividly states that 'simulacra do not consist only of the play of signs, they involve social relations and social power' (Baudrillard, 1993:52). Class power is maintained through signs, through the logic of discrimination and exclusion that signs reproduce at all levels of society (Baudrillard, 1981:29-62). The primal goal of each of these orders is to tighten the grasp of Capitalism over the entire society.

Earlier, we discussed the original binary opposition of life/death. This binary opposition is the original split upon which all the other splits were based and representation in general became possible and came into being. Thus, we can conclude that there is a sort of inverse relation between representation and the split of life and death. In other words, the farther these two terms are from each other, the stronger and more prevalent representation becomes. That is why in the history of death that we reviewed, death was a collective event at first, then during renaissance or the first order of simulacra, it became personal and one step away from social life, then in 18th and 19th century or the second era of simulacra, it was projected onto the other, one more step away from people and their daily lives, and finally in 20th century or the third order of simulacra, it became an exile. The split of life and death was finalized and as a result, representation took over completely.

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