

**The Necrophile Self: Contemporary Attitudes
Towards Death and Its New Visibility**

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**Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of
Philosophy**

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November 2017

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Abstract

Critical voices have long pointed out that contemporary Western civilization has a twisted relationship with death. Many scholars seem to agree on one point: we are living in a culture of death denial, death phobia and death illiteracy. Death has the gravity to break the cultural hypnosis of living a life without limits; thus it plays a central cultural role in the meaning-making and identity-forming processes.

However, the argument that a death-phobic culture has removed death from everyday life is not wholly accurate. At the same time that physical death has been removed from everyday life, representations of death have become pervasive in contemporary cultural representation, with seemingly endless depictions of graphic violence and death. This cultural phenomenon of death in the media brings into question the consensus that death denial is a central cultural attitude. Our relationship with death and violence and their interplay points to a schism between the private and public handling of death. Psychoanalytic theories of the death drive — or Thanatos — first introduced by Sigmund Freud and then further developed by scholars such as Herbert Marcuse and Jacques Lacan, offer an explanatory framework for understanding the ambivalent role of death and violence in our culture and how this cultural framework shapes identity.

Building on the psychoanalytic theory of the death drive, I argue that this schism in our relationship with death produces a trait within the individual that is constituted by the inability to think about death, coupled with an obsessional relationship with violent death and an excessive materialism. The constant reciprocity of the anxious individual and a death-phobic society creates a status quo in which the absence of mortality contemplation accelerates selves that yearn to generate meaning through materialism and yet are unable to meet the existential limits of life and environment. I argue that consumerism is the prevalent death drive in contemporary culture and that it entails marginalizing authentic awareness of mortality for the sake of symbolic immortality. For Erich Fromm, the death drive is a character trait of malignant aggression, or what he calls necrophilia. In this thesis I put forward the idea of the necrophile self — the cultural trait of death phobia within the individual. I argue that the sense of self in late capitalist society is constituted by the very thing we deny and most fear; death (deadness) becomes us.

Thesis declaration

I certify that this work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in my name, in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. In addition, I certify that no part of this work will, in the future, be used in a submission in my name, for any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution without the prior approval of the University of Adelaide and where applicable, any partner institution responsible for the joint-award of this degree.

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I acknowledge the support I have received for my research through the provision of an Australian Government Research Training Program Scholarship.

Signed:

(Tamara T Waraschinski)

November 2017,
University of Adelaide

Acknowledgements

My deepest appreciation goes to my supervisor Prof Jennifer Rutherford. Not only have we navigated the stormy seas of a few academic institutions in the course of writing this thesis, but her support, knowledge, advice, kindness, friendship, discussions and hours spent at her and Brian's tranquil property in the hills have taught me many things that go beyond the scope of this thesis.

Not many people understand the importance and peculiarities of writing about death. My love and thanks goes to Prof Charles Lemert, who with his unconditional love, friendship and mentorship has been an anchor for my family and myself. I also want to thank Margaret Brown for all the hours of discussion, her expertise and encouragement.

I want to express my gratitude and love to Dr Daniel Chaffee, my loving husband, and a wonderful father and teacher, who has always been an amazing inspiration and support to me. Thanks to my children Elias and Imogen who ultimately taught me that a thesis on death is all about living, love and prioritizing both. Thank you for being awesome. I love you all so much.

A thesis on death does not make for a popular discussion topic. Therefore the support and curiosity provided by friends and family were especially appreciated and valued. A big thank you for the moral, child and editing support goes to my parents-in-law Katy Chaffee and Dr Jon Chaffee. I would not have known what to do without you. Thank you Sam Tammita, Katrina Lazaroff and Jane Felicity Nunn for your stories, ears, friendship and laughter. I miss you heaps.

Thank you also Katrina Jaworski for helping me get to the core of things. Finally I would like to thank Kate Leeson for her sleuth-like abilities to give my thesis the last polish with her impeccable editorial work.

Introduction

Death anxiety

Critical voices have long pointed out that contemporary Western civilization has a twisted relationship with death. As Zygmunt Bauman observes, death interrupts the meaning-making process of a person, because it has the gravity to break the cultural hypnosis in which we live our lives as if death does not exist. Death evokes the biggest riddles of existence and, as such, demands coping mechanisms that allow the order of daily life to continue uninterrupted. Many scholars seem to agree on one point: we are living in a culture of death denial. People in the West no longer live in a state in which bare survival and meeting essential needs are the first priorities. Too busy to negotiate between the miscellaneous layers of our daily life — career, family, self-development, and so on — and keen on avoiding unpleasurable feelings and experiences, people tend to avoid the essential challenges posed by the threat of death and loss. Death connotes vastness, violent nothingness, and the cold absence of meaning. Death feels like an abyss, because it involves losing the grip one has on the ground, on the earth, on life.

Modernity has not only made most Western countries wealthier and extended the lifespan of their populations; it has also succeeded in removing death and dying from our private everyday experience (Kübler-Ross 1976; Ariès 1974; Kellehear 2007; Becker 1973; Bauman 1992; Elias 1985). The death of a person no longer interrupts the experienced continuity of everyday matters. Ariès observed that in the twentieth century, it is as if no one dies anymore. 1.1 million people were murdered in Auschwitz in a period of less than five years (Memorial and Museum Auschwitz-Birkenau 2017), while the wider social environment remained oblivious to this unspeakable mass-scale atrocity. Just as death camps, such as Auschwitz, were lethal spaces located outside the centres of the cities or rural towns, modern places that deal with end-of-life issues such as slaughterhouses, hospitals, and hospices are often located at the periphery of our cities, as if the grey continuity of everyday life cannot sustain an interface with anything outside the modern creed of speed, materialism, progress, and security.

Once, if you wanted to die a good death, you hoped that you would have time to wrap up your earthly matters and say your goodbyes. Studies now indicate that modern people understand a good death to be sudden, painless, and unconscious

(Zirden 2007). When death comes, we do not want to know or feel it. We also try to prevent death occurring. There are prevention strategies, exercise, immunizations, screenings, diets, and supplements to be taken. There are toxins which can smooth out wrinkles and plastic fillings that put curves in the right corners. Insurance is our new guardian angel; plastic surgeons our new exorcists; doctors are our gods to help us, if we believe enough that their science can miraculously ward off death.

Changes in agriculture, manufacturing, mining, transportation, and technology have had a profound effect on the social, economic, and cultural conditions, not only in the West, but also worldwide. Two hundred years ago, life expectancy at birth was forty years. It has now risen to almost ninety years for the citizens of Monaco who, according to the CIA World Factbook (2011), live the longest. Nowadays, around 85 per cent of deaths occur after the age of fifty-five whereas, around 1900 in Europe, one third of deaths occurred before age five, another third happened before fifty-five and the remaining deaths were in “old age”. Thus, death now is viewed as the climax of old age (Hunt 2005: 205).

Life expectancy has dramatically improved in the last two hundred years, but with this development chronic diseases have become more common. Despite medical progress, new diseases are cropping up, such as obesity, allergies and diabetes, which counteract increased life expectancy. Before the introduction of modern hygienic regimes, people died from extrinsic causes, diseases like the plague, diarrhea, and infections. Now over 70 per cent of people in the Western world die from new endemic problems, like heart disease, cancers, and stroke. These ailments are understood as failures of the body, but they are also endemic in contemporary society.

Death and violence

There is also a remarkable change in the relationship between death and violence. It was rather late in the day, after World War I, that Sigmund Freud questioned why humanity expresses vast destructive powers through war and atrocities, since he assumed that pleasure is the preferred individual experience. Ever since Freud's *Civilization and its discontents*, the attempt to understand violence, aggression, and death is more than ever present in the arena of intellectual and emotional inquiry. But according to the experimental psychologist Steven Pinker, violence is in decline. In 2011, Pinker published an almost eight-hundred-page work of quantitative history,

The better angels of our nature, in which he argues that violence is in decline, and the contemporary era is the most peaceful ever experienced. Pinker backs up this premise with an impressive amount of empirical data that makes it hard for the sceptic to refute his findings. Pinker traces the persistent historical trajectory of the decline of violence from wars, genocides, and the aggressive treatment of women, children, animals, and minority groups.

Through various processes and over thousands of years, Pinker argues, humans emerged from their violent state of anarchic coexistence into a society that values the pacifying effects of states, governments, commerce, trading, and the right to remain physically unharmed. Humans came to realize that it was much more beneficial to cooperate than to feud. The newfound value placed in reason and the abandonment of superstition, together with better infrastructure and education, led one-on-one violence to plummet over the centuries. Another positive trend, he suggests, is that wars have become fewer and shorter, but, due to the changed nature of weaponry, the deadliness of war has steadily increased. Yet, from the 1950s (or after the end of World War II) to 2000, the duration, frequency, and damage done by war were at the lowest point in the five-hundred-year interval from 1500 (before then, the great powers used to be at war regularly). Pinker stresses that, historically, we are witnessing an unprecedented decline in interstate war (Pinker 2011: 294).

Violence has declined profoundly, and unimaginable acts of cruelty are not typically part of the Western experience any longer, despite regular reports of horrific murder cases on television and the genocide in Bosnia, the “deadliest conflict in Europe since World War II”. In this conflict “from 1991–1999, about 140,000 people lost their lives and about 4 million were displaced as political refugees” (Krklijes 2014). Pinker is convinced that the power of the state and institutions, combined with Enlightenment reasoning, are the key ingredients for a peaceful era (Pinker 2011: 680–2). He comes to this conclusion mostly through evaluating empirical data and considering various classic philosophic concepts. Pinker embraces Hobbes’ conception of the Leviathan (Pinker 2011: 680–2) and stresses the pacifying effects of a state and judicial system that has a monopoly over violence. In this view, the advantage of using violence as a way of solving problems is diminished. He also mentions the Kantian idea of “perpetual peace” in which democracy and trade, among other factors, change the incentive structures through which nations consider the option of war (Pinker 2011: 289).

However, Pinker does not engage in an in-depth conversation regarding the power of the state, current environmental issues like climate change, and the looming holocentric sixth mass extinction. He also does not consider how global capitalism is wreaking havoc in Third and Second World countries in order to maintain the West's increasing needs for resources. His argument as to why violence is in decline is weakened further by his failure to engage with intellectuals like Adorno, Foucault, and Bauman. His curtailed understanding of violence is readily apparent when he dismisses, categorically, a broader understanding of violent relations:

[T]he fact that Bill Gates has a bigger house than I do may be deplorable, but to lump it together with rape and genocide is to confuse moralization with understanding. Ditto for underpaying workers, undermining cultural traditions, polluting the ecosystem, and other practices that moralists want to stigmatize by metaphorically extending the term *violence* to them. It's not that these aren't bad things, but you can't write a coherent book on the topic of "bad things". (Pinker 2017)

Instead of opening up a discussion about violence, Pinker closes the door to critical questions and thinking. Pinker might not be a stigmatizing moralist by his definition, yet he is an ideologue of a particular conception of rationality, which, I argue, keeps mortality awareness at a distance by circumventing existential issues. Through focusing merely on the direct material aspect of human experience, he ignores the intangible and systemic forces of destruction which drive contemporary culture. The decline of physical violence does not mean that the potential for destruction has lessened. Different, more obscure forms of violence with greater destructive power run as an undercurrent through our culture, and it is these undercurrents that I focus attention on in this thesis.

I suggest we are witnessing a transformative shift away from violence as physical force that inflicts damage towards a form of violence that is different in its expression. As Michel Foucault (1975) argues, modernity is inseparable from the establishment of new forms of power and domination. Foucault rejects the ideology of the Enlightenment as evolutionary and progressive and the idea that knowledge necessarily entails intellectual liberation. For Foucault, knowledge is a power struggle in which institutions and governments aim to control and dominate individuals. In *Discipline and punish* (1975), he addresses the infiltration of systems of discipline and surveillance in all spheres of life through social reforms, legislation, and the manipulation of discourses. This "disciplinary power", he argues, executes

hidden, monotonous, and invisible forces that at their core have the task to monitor, observe, and record the individual. For Foucault, the institutionalized demand to discipline the body and regulate desires and emotions is part of the rationalization of culture, evident in a variety of modern institutions such as mental asylums, schools, hospitals, the military and, of course, secret services. The policing of discourse by those in power is central to modern society, because it is through these very discourses that power relations are shaped and that the individual relates to a certain group or society in general.

In late modernity, however, global capitalistic forces are interested in individuals who are predominantly consumers. The ever-evolving range of goods and technological advances not only urges people to keep up with the latest developments, but also seduces them to fulfil their unconscious desires. Take the company Apple, for example. Apple not only dominates the market due to clever marketing ploys, but also is notorious for its technical superiority, beautiful aesthetics, and constant reinvention of its gadgets. The excitement of owning and upgrading a new Apple device, however, occludes the back stories of those who manufacture the goods or extract the needed resources for production. Some of the important metals needed for manufacturing computers and mobile phones are so-called conflict minerals that fuel the violence and destruction in central Africa. Yet the majority of people in the West remain oblivious to these issues and keep spending. Taking into account the deadliness and destructiveness of modern global capitalism and the way in which this status quo is maintained through the cooperation, ignorance, and spending power of the individual, one can point towards a symbolic death drive in its cultural expression. This deadly drive is executed through individual desire.

The psychoanalytic theory of the death drive offers an explanatory framework for understanding the ambivalent role of death and violence in modernity. Contrary to Sigmund Freud's early assumption that humans follow the lead of pleasure, or a so-called life force, in the essay *Beyond the pleasure principle* (1920), he argues that the death drive has the potential to hold a grip on our psyche and to express itself in repetitions of painful experiences and manifestations of emotional misery, as well as death, carnage, and destruction. The idea that a death drive could be innate within the individual was, and still is, very controversial. Yet, as Freud so rightly observes, the cultural realities, the belief systems, and the emotional environments of the modern world, in which individuals are immersed, are replete with death and destruction. In

Herbert Marcuse's (1962 [1955]) post-Freudian death drive theory, he develops the concept of Thanatos as a destructive force meshed within our society. The building and maintaining of civilization prohibit following the lead of pleasure (or Eros), and thus lead to its repression, for the sake of prevalent cultural parameters. This creates a conflicted, alienated individual who is now forced to adhere to the creed of social progress, which gives way to socio-pathologic tendencies within society — the work of Thanatos.

Death and consumption

The modern individual, under the weight of our historical inheritance, finds him or herself deeply intertwined with capitalism, which corresponds directly to the modern idea of a self. Zygmunt Bauman (2007) argues that we live in a time when the pleasure principle is married to the reality principle, and, not unlike Foucault, he suggests that human desires are aligned with capitalistic demands and practices, which aim at the control of resources and individuals by economic and institutional forces, as well as control over the “self” and the body on an individual level. People are driven by consumer creeds that channel into the contemporary obsession with designing an identity that is preoccupied with fulfilling material desires which correspond to a modern sense of self (individualism). Bauman (1992) labels these mechanisms “immortality strategies”, which are methods of emotional survival that extend the meaning of an individual's life beyond the individual self. In other words, it is a desperate attempt to give life meaning, while keeping mortality awareness at a distance, since it is an impossibility to define death in a secularized world.

The undercurrent of violence or aggression within this modern consumerist creed has become the foundation of our contemporary culture and has now turned towards the planet and the self (Bauman 2007). The contemporary sense of self is maintained, permeated, fixated on, but also corroded and threatened by, these materialistic desires. I argue in this thesis that death denial coupled with materialism has taken over the subliminal manipulation of the individual, whose choices now fall in line with modern capitalistic practices.

Erich Fromm (1973) conceived of malignant aggression as a form of necrophilia. In this thesis, I extend Fromm's concept to understand mindless consumerism as at the base of what I call the necrophile self, since modern forms of material worship and human ambition can be seen as infatuation with dead things.

Thus, this kind of modern cultural necrophilia is a form of carnage, an attachment to modern control fantasies, disguised as a joyful carnival on the glossy backdrop of contemporary Western materialism. Consumer necrophilia is our prevalent death drive — the ultimate immortality strategy that marginalizes any authentic awareness of our mortality.

Death and the media

This development also reverberates within the contemporary media industry and an audience that is willing to be entertained by violence and gore. If, as Pinker argues, the immediate realities of war have been forgotten by the post-world-war generations, and if the threat of the Cold War evaporated with the fall of the Berlin Wall, a proliferation of graphic images of violence has evolved as deadly conflict has retreated. In this thesis, I suggest that our contemporary relations with death and violence are more complex than many theorists allow. There is something more going on than the lack of traditional strategies for dealing with death. Yes, we lack comforting words for the ill, dying, and bereaved, or even comforting strategies for our own mourning. However, beyond this apparent lack of cultural rituals around death, a parallel curiosity has emerged. Modern life reveals a lust for blood and gore. Television channels are flooded with forensic teams analysing body parts, zombies and vampires munch on fresh human flesh, and bodies are tortured and blown apart. In action movies, thousands of people die, to be viewed in minute detail. Computer games invite their players to mutilate and shoot the heads off their opponents. The graphic intensity of violent death has never been so overwhelmingly real, nor has there ever been so much torture, bloodshed, or body parts scattered around for our entertainment.

The author Kate Berridge captures this paradoxical relationship with death in her book *Vigor mortis* (2001). She notices:

As in the story of the Emperor's New Clothes, we collaborate in the illusion of life without death, we suppress the instinct to expose the myth of invincibility. We collude and deny: *carpe diem*, not *memento mori*. We play our part in the elaborate hoax. We witness all manner of death as entertainment, as sound bites and soap opera, as a shoot-up computer game and a shoot-out in a movie, all conning us that we are getting up close to death, when in reality we have never been further away. Television is the main medium which delivers this paradoxical

perception of seeing things close up from a distance — an unreal reality. (Berridge 2001: 5)

She also observes the clash between the private experience and public representations of death:

This interplay between private and public experience confers a false sense that we are sharing the drama of death in other people's lives, while in reality we are completely insulated from it. The zoom lens focusing in on relatives visiting the scene of the rail crash, interviews with body recovery teams, close-ups of the teddy bear shrine impart illusory intimacy. Proximity to impersonal experiences of death co-exists with distance from personal experience. For although dramatic death defines the news and pretend death comprises an increasingly significant part of popular culture, the social context for discussion and consideration of death has eroded. Death no longer has a place in everyday life. In real life we pretend that death does not exist. (Berridge 2001: 5)

While I agree with her statement regarding the schism between the private and public handling of death, stating that death no longer has a place in everyday life does not quite catch the current phenomenon of violence and death representations in mass media. In this image-obsessed culture, media entertainment is becoming increasingly violent and gory. The Parents Television Council (PTC), a US organization that is concerned about children being exposed to violent television entertainment, claims that between 1998 and 2006 violence increased during prime time by up to 167 per cent (PTC 2007: 1). The group issued a report in 2007 that traced the increase in representations of violence on US television.¹ The conclusions of this study are alarming:

- Nearly half (49%) of all episodes airing during the study period contained at least one instance of violence.
- 56 per cent of all violence on prime time network television during the 2005–2006 season was person-on-person violence.

¹ Their methodology was to analyse “prime time* entertainment programs on the major [US] broadcast television networks (ABC, CBS, Fox, NBC, UPN and the WB) from the first two weeks of the November, February and May sweeps during the 2003–2004, 2004–2005, and 2005–2006 television seasons for a total of 1,187.5 programming hours. Television broadcasts of movies, news, and sports programs were not included in this analysis” (PTC 2007: 8).

- During the 8:00 pm time slot, 66 per cent of violent scenes depicted a death. During the 9:00 and 10:00 pm time slots 68 per cent of violent scenes depicted a death.
- Across the board, 54 per cent of violent scenes contained either a depiction of death (13%) or an implied death (41%) during the 2005–06 season.

In their summation:

Instead of popularity, the mechanisms of global marketing drive televised violence. Producers for global markets look for a dramatic formula that needs no translation, speaks “action” in any language, fits every culture. That formula is violence ... (PTC 2007: 14)

There is another noteworthy development that creates a paradox in the face of increasing media violence for entertainment. In the past, newspapers published pictures of war and imminent death, while now the public feels uneasy about viewing such pictures (Zelizer 2010). Interestingly, this new cultural taboo has co-emerged with the easy availability of gruesome pictures, thanks to the fast development of modern technology. Through the vast spread of smartphones, quality pictures and videos can be made during any situation. Easy access to the Internet allows individuals to share their media content with the world immediately and without hesitation. It has become easier than ever to come across media containing real-world violence and death through the Internet.

Thomas Macho observes that denial already consists of the return of the denied object. He argues in *Die Neue Sichtbarkeit des Todes* (2007) that, in the face of the increasing frequency of graphic violence, we can no longer talk about a denial of death. Does this mean that death has returned into our consciousness, or rather that the invisibility of death finds its completion with our consumption of it? I use the word consumption because it implies a zombie-like consumer culture in which the entertainment industry is a major agent. It implies the power of distraction used by the machinery of capitalism in the quest for profits. It might also imply that we feed on death in order to fill an existential hole we dare not face.

This thesis seeks to explore the following: why is it that, in a time in which deadly violence is in decline and life expectancies are on the rise, a chasm has opened between the private experience of death and dying and a visual excess of

violence and death in popular media? This thesis explores this schism of death and its impact on our sense of self in contemporary society.

In this thesis I ask: how do we (individuals in Western society) approach death, and how is the contemporary self intertwined with and affected by death? Could it be that the schism of death is generating a self that, due to his/her historical development, represents a fertile ground for the death drive to remain anchored in modern culture? The constant reciprocity of the anxious self and a death-denying society creates a status quo in which the absence of mortality contemplation accelerates the generation of meaning through materialism without touching the existential ground of our mortality and self-destruction. In this thesis I will argue that the schism of death produces a necrophile self. By this, I mean a self that is constituted by the inability to think about death coupled with an obsessional relationship to death. Thus, our sense of self is constituted by the very thing we deny and most fear. In some ways death (deadness) becomes us.

Structure of the thesis

When I talk of death and dying in this thesis, I am not only referring to the general definition of death as the “end of life” (‘Death’ 2017a) or more elaborately “the act of dying; [...]; the total and permanent cessation of all the vital functions of an organism” (‘Death’ 2017b) as some common online dictionaries define it. I am also referring to the underlying, and more or less consciously acknowledged, existential angst which accompanies death awareness within the individual. Death illiteracy, a term coined by Kerrie Noonan, director and cofounder of the GroundSwell Project (2017) (an initiative to change the negative attitude towards death), highlights the contemporary failure to see death as an inevitable social process (Noonan, Horsfall, Leonard & Rosenberg 2016). In this thesis, I use the words death, dying, and mortality interchangeably and treat them as an existential issue in which the individual struggles with accepting mortality and also navigates the social detritus of a death-denying culture.

My approach in this thesis is heuristically informed through the critical interpretation of the set problem through psychoanalysis, especially the theory of the death drive and its various interpretations. In order to dissect the various layers of contemporary madness, the psychoanalytic concept of the death drive presents itself as a valuable analytic tool. This helps to unravel the intangible forces that sit behind

the facades of our consumer culture that is obsessed with the imaginary of youth, beauty, and power. The idea of the necrophile self is my extension of the death drive theory. The necrophile self involuntarily and perpetually replicates death denial and its excesses in its negative cultural manifestations.

I rely on existing data from various studies and scholarly discussions regarding the central problem and also draw from past experiences and memories of my time as an aged care worker and palliative care volunteer. With this, I hope to enhance an understanding of a complex area through discussing various ideas and concepts from sociology, psychoanalysis, palliative care, and through examples drawn from media and art.

In the first chapter I introduce the most relevant discussions about death in the social sciences. I begin by looking at Phillipe Ariés' historical account of changing attitudes towards death and dying. The discussion then moves to various scholars who claim that we are living in a death-denying or stigmatizing environment. I also discuss the current situations of death in institutions, attitudes towards grieving, and Zygmunt Bauman's idea of immortality strategies, all of which are central to my work.

Chapter 2 introduces the death drive theory in a historical framework and explores how psychoanalytic thinkers have further developed Freud's ideas. I address how the self is driven to death and strategies for coping from a psychoanalytic point of view. I begin by discussing Freud, who introduced the idea of the death drive, and move on to thinkers such as Melanie Klein and the contemporary Otto Kernberg, who use and advance Freud's concept. Importantly, I discuss Herbert Marcuse and Erich Fromm, who developed an analysis of the cultural repercussions of the death drive lodged within the social realm.

Chapter 3 deepens the understanding of the death drive theory as an analytic tool for contemporary issues. Capitalism is able to maintain this all-encompassing influence, because it provides many modes of distraction and excitement for the death-anxious individual. In order to explain why consumerism is almost inescapable, I draw on Lacanian theory and Lacanian thinkers such as Julia Kristeva and Slavoj Žižek. This helps to explore how desire, as the very core of our being, constitutes an individual caught in a perpetual flux of attempting to still this yearning. Like a modern Sisyphus, people of the West are burdened by the endless loop of accomplishing the impossible, a motion which grinds away at freedom, health, and the health of the planet. The only crack in this loop is the uncanny, a

reminder that another reality exists in which our disdained vulnerability shows its face through nightmarish encounters.

In Chapter 4, I discuss how ideas of the self are constituted by historic forces and how the relationship between the individual and contemporary consumerism feeds into denial of, as well as obsession over, death. The psychoanalytic work I have laid out in the previous chapters highlights the individual's bottomless desire and how it has become hijacked by modern modes of consumerism. The reciprocity between a death-denying consumer society and the psychic constitution of the individual causes deadness at the human centre, in which the vulnerability of a mortal human life has no space to unfold. I call this the necrophile self.

Through an examination of various art works, exhibitions and media drawn from news and entertainment sources, I illuminate how the schism of death comes to be represented in these cultural forms. In Chapter 5, I discuss how the news and entertainment media associates death and dying with violence — a symptom of the current death illiteracy and cultural necrophilia.

In Chapter 6, I discuss artists who work with the materiality of death — the abjection of the dead body. Their confrontational approach aims to loosen the taboo of what Kristeva calls the abject. In contrast, I also discuss artists whose work I interpret as occluding mortality, and thus as representing the necrophile self and the death illiteracy of our time.

In the last chapter, I discuss how social institutions represent the cultural mismanagement of existential questions. Personal, cultural, and institutional death illiteracy has tremendous negative consequences for the individual. However, a very different approach to death and dying is emerging, which is capable of questioning modern creeds and allowing a needed space for vulnerability, grief, and sadness. Chapter 7 offers a look into this environment, which represents a stark contrast to a culture of death denial and looks directly up from the bottom of the abyss to seek healthier coping strategies.

Chapter 1

Theories on death

Denial versus anticipation: contemporary attitudes towards death

This chapter will address the central issue of the thesis — the contemporary denial of death. Many scholars seem to agree that the current cultural sentiment towards death involves struggle and denial. First, I will discuss the Philippe Ariès' classic account of how the denial of death emerged historically, and consider how sociologist Allan Kellehear's view of death denial differs from prominent death researchers such as Ariès, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross and Norbert Elias. Kellehear argues that we are not dealing with an issue of denial, but rather of stigmatization. Finally, I will discuss Ernest Becker and Zygmunt Bauman's psychoanalytically informed theories that the denial of death is culture building, because it keeps individual mortality anxieties at bay and, at the same time, leaves the doorway open for pathological manifestations of death repression.

A brief historical overview

Philippe Ariès is one of the most cited scholars in debates concerning historical transformations in relation to death. In *Western attitudes towards death* (1974) and his later more comprehensive study, *The hour of our death* (1981 [1977]), he conceptualizes historical transformations in attitudes to death into four key concepts or epochs: tamed death, the death of self, the death of others, and finally the denial of death. Ariès describes "tamed death" as the prevalent mode of acceptance of fate that became dominant during the humanist Renaissance in the late 1400s. In Ariès thesis, a dominant mode of anticipating death can be identified for certain timeframes, although different ways of dealing with mortality often arise simultaneously and not in a linear fashion. He considers the literature of these centuries to present his argument that, in the past, people had a strong sense of when their death neared — a very common theme in literature. He also stresses the importance of this knowledge, because, at that time, one had to prepare for the end upon realizing that death was pending. Literary accounts commonly present the dying person spending the last hours on their deathbed, but this must not be interpreted as a passive state of

existence. The end of life for a person was a public ceremony with children present, in a ritual organized by the dying person herself (Ariès 1974: 11). Death was familiar and near, an attitude that lasted until the nineteenth century.

Religious and spiritual beliefs played a fundamental role in the life of an individual. The immortal soul was at the centre of the personality or of individuality itself. The soul was understood to be safe from harm after the demise of the mortal body. Ariès refers to this as a “tamed” death, in that the anticipation of mortality was accompanied by the belief in a peaceful and subdued afterlife. This spiritual conviction helped people surrender to their fate. Death was tame in the sense that violations of routine through plagues, wars, and floods were perceived as normal, immutable, and inescapable. Zygmunt Bauman makes a similar observation in *Mortality, immortality and other life strategies* (1992). Before the Age of Reason, he argues, death was neither a secret nor an extraordinary event. It was present and unavoidable, and children were introduced to death’s ubiquity from an early age. Death was integrated into daily life. Identities were given, “everything was stuck to its place in the great chain of being and things ran their course by themselves” (Bauman 1992: 97). Or to put Ariès’ observation into a nutshell: tamed death, or the anticipation of mortality, is the oldest death there is, and people adapted to this fact, because it was “out of human control” (Ariès 1981: 29).

Ariès points out that subtle changes in the perception of this traditional familiarity with death can be traced as far back as the eleventh and twelfth centuries, even before “tamed death” took hold as people’s prevalent mode of anticipating death. He stresses that this traditional familiarity with death implied a “collective notion of destiny” or, to quote him further:

Familiarity with death is a form of acceptance which can be both naive, in day-to-day affairs, and learned, in astrological speculations.

In death man encountered one of the great laws of the species, and he had no thought of escaping it or glorifying it. He merely accepted it with just the proper amount of solemnity due one of the important thresholds which each generation always had to cross. (Ariès 1974: 28)

During the twelfth to fifteenth centuries an important development in the individual’s perception of their environment and the role they played within it, took place; the individual started to gain a heightened sense of their biography. In *The hour of our death*, he emphasizes that, by looking at the history of burial practices, one can

observe a shift from anonymity towards the “desire to be oneself” or “the discovery of the individual, the discovery, at the hour of our death, of one’s own identity, one’s personal biography, in this world as in the next” (Ariès 1981: 293). During these centuries, more emphasis was placed on the idea of a Last Judgment Day, coinciding with the emergence of a passionate attachment to private possessions, supporting a heightened awareness of one’s individuality (Ariès 1974: 46). A person would no longer succumb to the collective destiny of the species, but “in the mirror of his own death each man would discover the secret of his individuality” (Ariès 1974: 51).

Kellehear makes similar historical observations to Ariès. In his book *A social history of dying* (2007), he focuses on historical and archaeological material and texts, and points out that our experiences of dying have gone through tremendous changes over the course of human history. According to Kellehear (2007: 35), in the Stone Age death must have been an “otherworldly journey” since archaeological findings indicate that burial practices were based on religious beliefs about the afterlife. In the unpredictable world of the hunter and gatherer, death was sudden and unexpected. Reflection on mortality, much less preparing for one’s death, was out of the question. Dying was a displaced experience, an experience shifted into an afterlife and out of the individual’s control. One’s own dying became the task of other people and hence dispersed into the broader group’s identity. One could recognize death, but not anticipate it (Kellehear 2007: 25ff).

Ever since humankind settled down and pursued agriculture, death increasingly arrived in the form of infectious diseases, famines, and warfare. As a result, so Kellehear argues, death became more predictable, leading to a new rapport with death and the evolution of a “participating self”. Kellehear’s idea of a “participating self” is very similar to Ariès’ notion of “tamed death”; the terminally ill person is in charge of the death ritual and engages in preparations for their own death, always in cooperation with family and community. This new awareness was seen as creating a “good death”. In Kellehear’s words the otherworldly journey starts in life itself and dying becomes “a living thing in this world” (2007: 86). Of course, the flipside of this development is the “bad death” which hits unawares, leaving no chance to make any preparation. In this sense, Kellehear’s “good death” expresses a similar idea to Ariès’ “tamed death”.

What are the social dynamics that pushed death into our mental outskirts? A number of scholars argue that the eighteenth century brought forth a new attitude towards death. As Zygmunt Bauman aptly expresses it, death was “conceived as a

major scandal of the whole human adventure” (1992: 133). From the beginning of the eighteenth century, death had a new emphasis, which Ariès characterizes as the “death of the other”. With the dawn of Romanticism, death was embellished by melancholy and became admirable in its beauty; mourning took on an air of exaggeration. Suddenly, the death of the other became more feared than one’s own death (Ariès 1974: 68). This unwillingness to accept the demise of a loved one formed the basis of a new veneration, or cult, of the dead. In an era of increasing secularization, this cultivation of the memory of a loved one converged with the emergence of new beliefs concerning immortality that were no longer anchored in the religious belief in an afterlife. A new intolerance of death (of the other) took away the courage of friends and relatives to engage open heartedly with a terminally ill person’s condition. This new attitude soon led to another development, a major characteristic of modernity. In Ariès words:

One must avoid, no longer for the sake of the dying person, but for society’s sake, for the sake of those close to the dying person — the disturbance and the overly strong and unbearable emotion caused by the ugliness of dying and by the very presence of death in the midst of a happy life, for it is henceforth given that life is always happy or should always seem to be so. (Ariès 1974: 87)

Kellehear concurs with Ariès’ observation of a new intolerance towards death. According to him, with the Industrial Revolution, and the emergence of the middle classes, came the gentrification of the “good death”. The attitude that death was a natural event in life was replaced with anxiety and fear of death. However, differing from Ariès’ argument, in Kellehear’s account, neither the beauty of death nor a veneration or cult of the dead played a role in this process. Instead, he stresses that witnessing the agony of the dying brought on this shift. The loss of one’s dignity during a slow process of painful dying was at the core of the urban middle-class anxiety. In Kellehear’s words:

Dying, from the perspective of the anxious middle classes, could no longer be viewed as “good” if the severity of suffering took every dignity from one before the end, if one lost some of the most important values integral to one’s identity: personal control, the ability to think and choose, even to arrange one’s affairs with a clear mind. (Kellehear 2007: 145)

The idea of a “good death” was replaced with the idea of a “well-managed death” in which professions such as official authorities and lawyers played a major role. The personal relationships of once tight-knit communities shifted to interactions that, in their nature, were more professional and reserved. Medical personnel became a part of the dying process; hence, awareness of death and the processes of dealing with it were removed bit by bit from the everyday life of the urban middle classes. Dying became increasingly privatized and sequestered from community involvement. An “individualist model” of the “good death” emerged in which the dying person assumed as much control as possible over their own death, in order to please their own individual desires. The power of the dying could now be translated into their spending capacity, which became their ability to manage a personal crisis through paying for services like insurance. In Kellehear’s words:

Dying in hunter-gatherer societies was viewed as “unlucky”, malevolent or perhaps “mercifully quick” deaths for their communities. And among settler societies dying was viewed as morally “good” or “bad” for both individuals and communities. But among the urban middle classes all these moral prescriptions and judgments were transferred to themselves as individuals alone. ... Well-managed dying, then, is an individualist model of the good death forged and shaped by the equally individualist and occupationally specialised lifestyles of urban middle-class elites. (Kellehear 2007: 152)

Kellehear also emphasizes that with urbanization, increasing wealth, social power, education, and secularization, the belief in an afterlife was called into question. Death could no longer be a “good death”; it had become senseless, savage, incomprehensible, and thus seen as a threat. Similar to Ariès, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross noted the shifting attitudes in dealing with death. In *On death and dying*, she points out that, in the middle of the last century, the decline of religious imagination meant that suffering lost its meaning (Kübler-Ross 1976: 14). Death had to be brought under human control; it was no longer tame, and it had to be tamed.

In the mid-twentieth century, death became largely anonymous, and dying people were often isolated from the rest of the society. More precisely, the dying were removed from everyday experience and taken into medical institutions like hospitals and nursing homes (Aiken 2001: 16). In pre-industrial societies, people removed themselves from contact with the dying individual after their death; in contemporary society, people retire before the individual dies, leaving the dying

person's fate in the hands of medical personnel and specialized technologies. That which was once the domain of the church had now become the domain of medicine. Through this transition, so Elisabeth Kübler-Ross argues, dying lost its human dimension, and dealing with the chronically and terminally ill became mechanized, depersonalized, and dehumanized, a development that probably was especially felt after the Second World War (Kübler-Ross 1976: 12; Hunt 2005: 208).

Contemporary mourning practices provide an example of this shift towards a severe unease in dealing with death. The time given for mourning a deceased relative has drastically diminished in the last century. Now, in the corporate reality of the United States, workers are given a mere 3 days of paid bereavement leave in most states, not enough to time for the bureaucracy and logistics involved in organizing and attending a funeral (Tahmincioglu 2008). Plus it is hard to imagine the emotional constraints that individuals suffer, grieving a death under these time constraints. This is not enough time to contemplate the personal meaning of somebody's death or of death's meaning within society, in a broader sense. It is not enough time to mourn, come back to one's senses, or cope with one's own mortality anxiety. Mourning is a great challenge since the bereaved have to deal with silence around the loss, or worse, are expected to carry on as if the death has never happened. For the mourner, a chasm opens between the internal experience of loss and an (work) environment in which death and grief does not have a place.

Research about grief in contemporary society gives an interesting insight into how contemporary coping mechanisms support the idea of a culture of death denial. The death of the beloved other always provokes thoughts about one's own mortality and the shaping of one's belief systems. In *Continuing bonds* (1996), Klass, Silverman, and Nickman take a closer look at various studies about the subject of mourning. They argue that a meaningful life is achieved when there are meaningful bonds, intimacy, and a creative outlet. At worst, death can destroy these bonds we have with other people; at best, it redefines relationships with the deceased and provokes a transformation of one's own identity. A daughter becomes an orphan; a husband becomes a widower. With these transformations, shifts within the emotional and psychological landscape emerge. Studies on grief and mourning are rich sources of insight into how much death shapes our attitudes and us. They also help with understanding how societal expectations impinge upon the mourner. Silverman and Klass observe:

When we discuss the nature of the resolution of grief, we are at the core of the most basic questions about what it means to be human, for the meaning of the resolution of grief is tied to the meanings of bonds with significant people in our lives, the meaning of our membership in family and community, and the meaning we ascribe in our individual lives in the face of absolute proof of our own mortality. (1996: 22)

Silverman and Klass stress that the twentieth-century model of grief was based on the belief that successful mourning means disengagement from the deceased and the shared past. To continue to maintain a relationship with the dead, they suggest, came to be seen as a form of pathology, hindering the individual's ability to form new attachments. However, the researchers offer an alternative view centring on the idea of a continuous relationship with the deceased person. From their perspective, bonds with the deceased are maintained through memorializing and remembering, as well as a heightened awareness of a kind of everyday presence of the deceased that leaps into the inner life, as well as into outside interactions.

Silverman and Klass suggest that the modern definition of grief seems to be aligned with predominant attitudes towards death. Here again, we find the idea of a death that needs to be tamed, and concurrently a loss that needs to be rationalized and worked through in order to get on with life (Silverman and Klass 1996: 3). They argue that people's coping strategies indicate an actual adjustment or the anticipation of loss and death; thus, there is no necessity to cut the bonds of a former life. The experience of being a mother, daughter, and wife will not vanish with the loss of a beloved one; the survivors will always remain in a significant relationship with the deceased. Still, the death of a beloved involves a complex continuation and change in a person's identity, because, additionally and predominantly, one becomes something else, too. Against the background of heightened mortality awareness, this anticipation of death in the shape of continuing bonds with the deceased is not only a transformation of a former relationship and thus one's former identity, it also involves overcoming death anxiety and loss through the sincere anticipation of death.

However, there are developments that suggest that these twentieth-century death attitudes are transforming in late modernity. People are increasingly beginning to interact with death and dying more personally through the gradual rise in home deaths. For a long time, the dying were entrusted to the care of institutions, but now this trend is reversing. Studies show that in Western countries the majority of people (64–84% depending on which country), when faced with their mortality (due to age, illness, or caring for a sick relative), prefer dying at home instead of dying in

institutions (Thönnies and Jakoby 2011; Gomes et al. 2012; van der Heide et al. 2007). The Cicely Saunders Institute at King's College conducted an extensive population survey of 9344 participants from England, Flanders, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, and Spain. They found that almost two thirds of people have a strong wish to die at home if they should become terminally ill (Gomes et al. 2012). Gomes et al. argue that this development is influenced by an increased interest in having control over end-of-life decisions. People hope to be dying in their preferred place; they prioritize a positive attitude towards death and emphasize the involvement of family members in the case of incapacity to make their own decisions. Further, the preference for home death becomes more important for the oldest age cohort (Gomes et al. 2012: 2011). In another study undertaken in Britain, Gomes and her team observed a slow but steady increase in the numbers of deaths at home, from 18.3 per cent in 2004 to 20.8 per cent in 2010, a trend that is also observable in the United States and Canada (Gomes, Calanzani, & Higginson 2012: 1).

Death as stigma

So do we anticipate death after all? During my research for this thesis, I have observed a shift towards an open acknowledgement of death in the form of websites or death cafes where people get together to talk about all things related to mortality (e.g. Death Cafe 2017). Also, very personal accounts of people talking about their loss and grief, and terminally ill people philosophizing about their end of life seem to have become more frequent in various media outlets (Richell 2015). Recently, Oliver Sacks (2015) wrote an article for the *New York Times* in which he disclosed that he had terminal cancer. Other well-known people who have recently spoken publicly about their mortality include Christopher Hitchens, Betty Churcher and Clive James. While one can certainly argue that these are endeavours embracing end-of-life issues, they are still breaching the norm of a death-denying culture.²

Allan Kellehear argues that death was always anticipated and opposes the definition of death as radically opposed to life. Historically speaking, death has been a transformation and a continuation of life and, therefore, Kellehear doubts that death imposes such a big threat to people. He stresses that historically death was

² For media coverage of death cafes, see: Death Cafe (2017), Prichep (2013), Lloyd (2013), and Span (2013).

anticipated through religious traditions, and this mindset still prevails, even unconsciously (Kellehear 2007: 55). He argues:

What produces more activity from a person: anticipation or ignorance? What produces greater anxiety in a person: anticipation or denial and ignorance? Can a people, any people, remain uninterested, complacent or passive in the face of a known threat that they have witnessed time and again? Does death move people?

The answer to all these questions is that death motivates and activates people like little else because historically biological death has been viewed as no death at all, but rather, the most complicated and challenging part of living. [...] I have suggested that the challenge of anticipation might logically have played a crucial role in human living and dying by generating the following possible defensive anticipatory responses: a desire to predict the coming of death; the desire to ward it off; the desire to identify the risks of encountering it. (Kellehear 2007: 47)

What could Kellehear mean by “defensive anticipatory responses”, and how does this construct differ from the previously discussed issue of death denial in modernity? Surprisingly, Kellehear’s main critique is directed against psychoanalytic thinking about death and mortality. Kellehear points out that followers of the psychoanalytic approach (e.g. Zygmunt Baumann and Ernest Becker) have little or no empirical support for their theory, since the idea of an unconsciously repressed fear of death is inaccessible to empirical investigation. Further, they also fail to acknowledge societies’ religious attempts to come to terms with human mortality (Kellehear 2007: 55–8). In Kellehear’s understanding, psychoanalysts are dismissive of historical, sociological, ethnographical, and biographical approaches to death, and the data these methods generate. He argues that the main psychoanalytic agenda is rational, materialist, and logical, and therefore incapable of grasping the existential side of mortality. I find Kellehear’s suspicion of psychoanalysts unfounded, especially since he dismisses the fact that psychoanalysts, such as Freud, Lacan, and Kristeva, came to their conclusions through working closely with patients. Psychoanalytic practice has always had an intense engagement with the emotional impact social constraints have on the individual. I argue throughout this thesis that psychoanalytic thinking is an exemplary tool to deepen the understanding of the contemporary struggle with mortality. As we will see, the modern assumption that death is outstandingly unnatural — a puzzle that one is unable to piece together — still lingers. The modern paradigm focuses on materialism, progress, and mastery over the unpredictable, the unavoidable, the unexpected, and the unknown. But as

death cannot be overpowered, it marks a moment of modernity's failed promises, thus threatening everything modernity stands for. The denial of death is a logical, albeit desperate, answer to the landscape of modern expectations and hopes, and psychoanalysis can shed light on how fantasies of immortality sustain modern subjects.

Religious study professor Oliver Krüger (2007) gives an extreme example of this development in the form of cryonics. The members of cryonic societies preserve their bodies after death — or, as a cheaper alternative, only their heads — at very low temperatures. They hope to be resurrected — which they believe is possible as long as the brain, the consciousness-producing machine and the seat of their selves and personality, is intact — in a time when science has advanced to full mastery over life and death (Cryonics Society 2012). They hope that any damage that has occurred during life (and storage) will be erased, and the disease that killed them in the first place will no longer have a place in their glorious future. They hope to once again be among their human fellows, no matter whether this scientific progress happens in ten years or a hundred thousand. (It is interesting to note that cryonics enthusiasts are mostly male atheists with a high rate of death anxiety (Krüger 2007).)

Kellehear does, however, put forward an insightful thesis on the relationship between death denial and stigma. Kellehear's modern take on the concept of stigma draws on Talcott Parsons' theorization of the concept. For Parsons, illness does not only have mental-physical components, but also has an institutionalized, systemic side. The "sick role" is a role of deviance, so Parsons argues, because it interrupts social norms and conventions. In his words:

I should regard deviance and social control as phenomena concerned with the integrative problems of a social system. Illness we may speak of as, at least in one primary aspect, an impairment of the sick person's integration in solidary relationships with others, in family, job, and many other contexts. Seen in this perspective, therapy may be interpreted to be predominantly a reintegrative process. (Parsons 1975: 260)

Kellehear addresses the stigma surrounding the conditions of aging and AIDS/HIV, which kills people of any age cohort. Anticipation of death is transformed into an act of judgement of peoples' lifestyles regarding a "good death" (implying a quick, uncomplicated death in old age), and its connection to modern values and morality. Kellehear stresses that stigmatizing the dying is rooted in the idea that, if one has not

lived one's life properly (exercising, healthy diet, positive thinking, etc.), debilitating disease will occur, which reflects a modern attitude in which people are blamed for the state of their health. The social focus on the power of youth, well-being, and beauty serves as a mechanism to push death farther out of consciousness. The death of old people bears no relevance to the speed and creed of the modern lifestyle. Furthermore, humanity is challenged by new diseases like AIDS and the issue of over-aging societies in the West, all of which — so argues Kellehear — come with the stigmatism of shame. He observes:

The sheer numbers of people who now do not have “good deaths” or “well-managed deaths” because of age or AIDS are instead dying in shameful ways. The shame comes from the projected attitude and behaviour of younger and non-infected people on older and infected groups but also the internalised emotional and social responses of those victimised by these other people. (Kellehear 2007: 210)

In Kellehear's view, old people are not taken seriously, and contemporary obsessions with beauty and youth leave no place for ill, old, disabled, and declining bodies (when therapy as a measure of re-integration has failed, in the Parsonian sense). Chronic sickness and a prolongation of the process of dying make a precise identification of the onset of dying difficult. These factors contribute to turning dying into a terrifying journey tainted with stigma that leaves the dying desolate and desperate (Kellehear 2007: 210–11). For the dying, anxiety and shame are involved with the process of illness and dying, and it influences their ability to receive the care they need. The greatest threat to experiencing a peaceful death at home is the fear of burdening relatives with home care duties (van der Heide et al. 2007: 1414).

Strong fears of death and aging throughout one's life course are related to and associated with the fear of losing one's identity and sense of control — a common issue for the elderly (Aiken 2001: 287). Due to medical progress and the focus on youth, death is seen as the climax of old age, and perceived to be natural and therefore supposedly less threatening to the elderly. On the other hand, death in the young is met with shock, because it is not part of the social narrative of a supposedly natural life sequence. Research demonstrates that people of old age are less afraid to die than young people, and they tend to be more aware of their mortality (Aiken 2001: 287). Other studies oppose these findings. The death researcher Glennys Howarth, for example, stresses that a culture of death denial leaves people helpless in regards to knowing how to die well. Old people might be confronted with mortality,

but are not necessarily well equipped to deal with it. They are left to their own devices in dealing with their end-of-life fears and anxieties (Howarth 1998: 687). Both researchers agree that there is a widespread assumption in Western society that the elderly accept death more easily than the young. Kellehear calls this development the erosion of awareness of dying. He emphasizes that there is not only an erosion of awareness, but also an erosion of support for the dying, in the sense that nursing homes have become another way of institutionalizing the elderly dying. Further, AIDS/HIV is mostly viewed as a public health problem, which excludes a consideration of how to attend to those who are dying from this debilitating disease (Kellehear 2007: 210–11).

Strategies of immortality

Zygmunt Bauman is another avid defender of the concept of contemporary death denial. Bauman argues that, in order to stay sane on a personal level and to avoid breaking the continuity of everyday life, the knowledge of death must be actively suppressed on a collective level. Bauman stresses that it is impossible to define death; it is the absolute contrast to being, it is non-existence, an unimaginable, “hovering beyond reach of communication”, and the end of all perception (Bauman 1992: 2). However, one can perceive the death of others, and hence get an idea of one’s own mortality, and thus know that everything will die. The death of others is shattering and painful not because it affects the continuity of one’s own perception, but because it forces the subject to face the void that remains after the demise of the other.

Contemporary society deconstructs mortality by staging a battle against health problems and diseases (Bauman 1992: 9). Nowadays, when people seek immortality, they attempt to create a social realm of security and stability. However, the power of humans is limited, and therefore the unavoidable nature of human finitude implies a threat to the social order. This is the reason why the dying, especially, need bystanders, but also why people avoid everything that reminds them of their mortality. Modern subjects attempt to die a tame death, noiselessly and hygienically, leaving no trace of the connections between life and death.

As Bauman points out — and here he concurs with Kellehear — an awareness of mortality is the ultimate condition of cultural creativity as such. Culture is a “never stopping factory of permanence” and thus — and here both scholars differ

fundamentally — acts as a suppression of mortality awareness. Cultural structures allure us into engaging in tasks and projects (making money, gathering knowledge, etc.) with aims and goals reaching beyond our biological existence.

Humans have always had strategies to deal with death, mechanisms which Bauman (1992) and Elias (1985) define as strategies of immortality, because they are methods which extend the meaning of an individual's life beyond the individual self. Immortality relates to surviving, to getting beyond death, to denying it. Immortality strategies seek to remove the sinister and horrifying significance of death. Immortality is something we need to build ourselves, in order not to get caught up in the open loop of the ontological bleakness of our mortality: “immortality is not a mere absence of death; it is the defiance and denial of death” (Bauman 1992: 7). Bauman argues that, through the gigantic project of creating our culture, we become God-like, living a life that soars above the fact of human finitude to contain meaning and purpose. Through religion, identity, and community, we can feel a part of something bigger than ourselves. On the other hand, this meaningfulness cannot be generated or maintained without suppressing the awareness of death (Bauman 1992: 8).

Ernest Becker gives the “strategy of immortality” a face with his concept of the hero system. *The denial of death* (1973) addresses human heroism, which he sees as a reflex response to the terror of death. People pursue, or at least are fundamentally fascinated by, heroic actions or lifestyles. Behind this fascination, Becker argues, lies an urge towards immortality arising from the font of narcissism. Referring to Freud's theory of narcissism, he explains the urge to be a hero as a narcissistic feeling that everyone is expendable except ourselves (Becker 1973: 2).

In man a working level of narcissism is inseparable from self-esteem, from a basic sense of self-worth. [...] his sense of self-worth is constituted symbolically, his cherished narcissism feeds on symbols, on an abstract idea of his own worth, an idea composed of sounds, words, and images, in the air, in the mind, on paper. And this means, that man's natural yearning for organismic activity, the pleasures of incorporation and expansion, can be fed limitlessly in the domain of symbols and so into mortality. (Becker 1973: 3)

But the human unconsciousness knows neither death nor time, and therefore the individual is always attracted by the warm spark of the inner immortal feeling. The terror of his or her mortality moves the individual towards heroism:

He must desperately justify himself as an object of primary value in the universe; he must stand out, be a hero, make the biggest possible contribution to world life, show that he counts more than anything or anyone else. [...] It is still a mythical hero system in which people serve in order to earn a feeling of primary value, of cosmic specialness, of ultimate usefulness to creation, of unshakable meaning. (Becker 1973: 4–5)

Becker further points out that “society has always been a symbolic action system, a structure of statuses and roles, customs and rules of behaviours, designed to serve as a vehicle for earthly heroism” and thereby “every society is a religion” (Becker 1973: 4–5). Thus heroism is an issue of self-esteem that seeks affirmation and recognition in the outside world. Furthermore heroism is a form of ideological justification that allows people to face death and to go on with life, because, paradoxically, it transforms the human fear of death into the illusion of self-perpetuation (Becker 1973: 217). The human trait of selfishness acts in the shadow of self-preservation, which sets up a tight-knit structure of heroic outlets. People not only fight to gain control of at least one accepted heroic role, but also to pursue an identity in the name of heroism (an identity which underscores one’s own superiority in comparison with a competitor). “We” uplift ourselves into the realms of immortality by giving “our” lives a meaning that might outlive death. People, according to Becker, are divided into winners and losers by these social ideologies. Hence, a deep gap arises on the sharp edge of human interdependency and heavily influences how people self-sustain and self-express themselves as well as relate to each other.

The fear of death is behind all our functions, which feeds the self-preservation drive, but this mechanism is also pushing us away from the intensity and depth — and hence greatness — that mortality bestows upon our lives. Humanity faces an existential paradox of having a dual nature, to be half animal and half symbolic. The individual is within and without nature through self-consciousness. From this double nature arises the vital lie of the human character. So humankind not only fears death, we also shy away from life in contemplation of our individuation and compelling life experiences. Becker observes: “We might call this existential paradox the condition of *individuality within finitude*. The individual has a symbolic identity outside of nature, a symbolic self, a creature with a name, a life and history” (1973: 26). And further: “all our meanings are built into us from the outside, from dealings with others. This is what gives us a ‘self’ and a superego. [...] and we never feel we have authority to offer things on our own” (Becker 1973: 48). Thus, the excessive

demands of this world not only challenge us to become a hero or winner ourselves; ironically, we also shy away from “the all-consuming appetites of others” (Becker 1973: 53).

Repression, Becker suggests, is a protective response to this fear of death; and through repression and the promise of immortality modernity has disconnected heroism from the nature of death (Becker 1973: 11–12). But to deny the fact of our mortality by adopting the illusion of security and identity, we actually make ourselves vulnerable. Human heroism is a blind “driveness that burns people up” (Becker 1973: 6) which manifests in the weak spot of modern heroism and in its failure to account for a profound lack of self-esteem. To nourish this unconscious hunger for self-esteem, humanity chooses to make life valid by creating greatness through sacrifices, degradation, and destruction. This creates the back door, which brings death back into our very lives.

Conclusion

Birth and death create the cycle of life for every living thing. The modern quest of invincibility has not managed to break this cycle; however, it has managed to put the once ever-present death under a clandestine blanket of unacceptance. As outlined in this chapter, death was commonplace in the past and came in the form of encountering the dying on their deathbeds, freak accidents, violence, high child mortality rates, and diseases for which no cure was available. These events all had their place in one’s daily life trajectory while the riddles of death were scrutinized through the lens of religious or spiritual belief systems. Ever since the Age of Reason, the new weight assigned to rationality has increasingly cleansed the modern world of traditional and spiritual tools that once assisted in coping with the tides of the life cycle. Death equated with non-existence — the total annihilation of one’s life and accomplishments — has become an unbearable thought for most people. However, modernity could not keep its promise to combat death. Even though leftover sentiments of this modern ideal can be found in groups like those who believe in cryonics, who still cling to the hope of future scientific advancements capable of breaking the cycle of birth and death, the vast majority of modern Western humans have drifted into the realm of a perceived gut-wrenching powerlessness in the face of death.

So do we anticipate death or deny it? The life cycle is an archetypal truth, an anchoring point around which our social currents flow. If a fundamental truth, like death, is denied, a society will generate certain strategies or systems that occlude this truth. Advances in modern medicine do not make dealing with death any easier. In *Rethinking life and death* (1994), Peter Singer elaborates on new ethical approaches towards life and death and observes that traditional views about the sanctity of life need to be revised. Besides the aforementioned threats to life, the border between the living and the dead is blurring as a result of techno-medical pressures for continuous progress and development. In a less medically developed past, signs of death were determined by the senses, through physical traits such as coldness, rigor mortis, and spots on the corpse's skin. But, over time, a growing impatience has developed in regard to timing the moment of death. Today, brain death has to be determined professionally, which is impossible to do through merely sensory input. Complicated cases of anencephalic babies (cortically dead infants), patients in a vegetative state, and those who are medically declared brain dead show us that our definition of death no longer has clear and set criteria (Singer 1994: 191–2). Moreover, new developments in neurological research show that brain death, as a minimal criterion to prove death, is becoming obsolete, based as it is, on a centralistic idea of the human, in which the brain is the centre of the person.

This is more than an “erosion of awareness of death”; this behaviour is an unconscious attempt to keep mortality awareness at a distance. Keeping death at a distance is a form of denial, especially if this void is filled with activities and belief systems — immortality strategies — that in the end provide no protocol on how to deal with death encountered in private or how to approach our own loss and mourning. This is one of the reasons why modern life has become a carnival of escapism. One might argue that culture necessarily equals escapism since in the past religion used to be a crutch to help people through their existential crisis.

Death can only become a tangible gestalt within society if it sublimates the deceased, which means if death is overcome. For a secular society, we replay the same story of resurrection over and over again — the hero system. We are reminded that death is a brute reality in the spectacular deaths of celebrities like Princess Diana or John F. Kennedy. Celebrities of this magnitude resist the magnetic pull of death's weight because — and here Becker's hero system concept provides insight — they have created a legacy that outlasts their death. Becker's heroes (these celebrities) have reached a state of power that is only possible through their wealth,

accomplishments, talents, and popularity plus they have a global, political, and social impact that makes them icons of power. They defy the cycle of life by confronting their survival fears and defence mechanisms; they overcome death through their legacy that survives them and thus have attained a status of immortality to the benefit of the whole of society. Iconic images of the likes of James Dean, Marilyn Monroe, and Kurt Cobain are omnipresent in our society. They are surrounded by an air of mystery that speaks of something outside of human influence and our realm of experience — death.

To gain deeper understanding in this regard, the inner workings of the individual need to be investigated. In the next chapter, I turn to the psyche and its reciprocal relationship with society, and the potential to understand the phenomenon of death denial through examining our attitudes to death and destruction.

Chapter 2

Thanatos: death drive theories

Sigmund Freud's theory of the death drive

Thus far, I have discussed the contemporary issue of death denial and the erosion of awareness of death. In this chapter the focus shifts towards destructive forces that are located within us at the level of the psyche. I engage with the question of the relationship between exterior violence, be it real or virtual, and the interior life of the individual. As outlined in the introduction, the climate of cultural death illiteracy makes coping with death privately harder while violent death in the media is overrepresented. Before I turn to discuss the manifestations and impact of this schism of death in this thesis, it is important to gain a deeper understanding of violence.

Sigmund Freud was one of the first modern thinkers to propose that unconscious forces, which seemingly arise from nowhere, dictate daily actions, emotions, and thoughts. In this chapter, I turn to Freud's dual drive theory and predominantly to his conceptualization of a competition between Eros (a drive towards love and life) and Thanatos (a drive towards destruction and death) to explore the relationship between psychic drives and the social sphere. I delve into his theorization of the development of the psyche with particular attention to the internal origins of outward violence and destruction. Freud's drive theory can help us to deepen our understanding of how death functions as a symbolic threat to the individual's psyche. Furthermore, his theories and their uptake by post-Freudian thinkers can provide insight into the disjuncture between the omnipresence of violent entertainment in the media and the destructive impact of Western capitalistic lifestyles and a coexisting cultural death phobia.

Early Freud

Freud's *Three essays on the theory of sexuality* (2000 [1905]) explore the human potential for sensual pleasure and put forward what was, at the time, the new and shocking concept of autonomous infantile sexuality. The essays also explore the dominant emotional conflicts of early childhood that arise out of infantile sexual experience. Freud's theorization of human psychosexual development focuses on

bodily interactions between the infant and the caregiver, which he saw as marking the genesis of desire. Meeting the child's physical and emotional needs contributes to a sense of pleasure and attachment to the caregiver. However, infants experience pleasure independently from their physical needs and through many means. For Freud, the human sexual drive is very flexible. Any body part or object can provide erotic pleasure in varying degrees of intensity. Freud described this as "polymorphously perverse" (Freud 2000: xxxii) and understood it as a seemingly normal human disposition.

From the first pleasure obtained through sucking, infants take their first steps towards sexual development, entering various stages that help them to create an emotional relation to their own bodies, other people, and the wider world. The oral stage is the earliest phase in which an erotogenic link between pleasure, the body, and sexuality is established. From there, other erotic zones become accessible. The anal stage, which Freud correlated to sadism, involves "letting go" or "holding on" to faeces. Here, erotic pleasure is derived from "expulsion". The phallic stage marks the development of the child's sexual energy, or libido, which is derived from stimulating the genitals and fantasies of control and self-sufficiency. In lectures given at the University of Vienna between 1915 and 1917, Freud posited that the child is driven by a curiosity which lacks a definite understanding regarding the aim of sex or intercourse, but is "sensual" in its nature and in the way pleasure is pursued (Freud 1966: 334–5) In Freud's words:

the libido-function, as we call it — does not first spring up in its final form, does not even expand along the lines of its earliest forms, but goes through a series of successive phases unlike one another ... The turning-point of this development is the subordination of all the sexual component-instincts under the primacy of the genital zone and, together with this, the enrolment of sexuality in the service of the reproductive function. Before this happens the sexual life is, so to say, disparate — independent activities of single component-impulses each seeking organ-pleasure (pleasure in a bodily organ). This anarchy is modified by attempts at pre-genital "organizations," of which the chief is the sadistic-anal phase, behind which is the oral, perhaps the most primitive. (Freud 1966: 337)

The mother, as the first love object, provides the infant with the breast (nutrition), introducing the child to the realm of pleasure. A restructuring of the child's psyche happens by necessity, as social reality constricts the constant search for pleasure. Impediments in the form of social restraints, such as the incest taboo, restrain innate

erotic impulses towards the mother and limit her possibility as a satisfying love object. The Oedipal conflict marks a milestone in the sexual development of the child, since it describes the conflict of symbolic internalization of the lost and tabooed object of desire. Unconscious to the individual, these desires remain and emerge from the psychic depths. The Oedipal conflict is also known as the phallic stage of sexual development, which functions as the anchor for all future repressions. Repression and the unconscious are “correlated” in the way that all that becomes repressed must vanish from a person’s conscious or accessible knowledge. The repressed material is stored in the unconscious and, from there, it may emerge as symptom (a fixation, anxiety, or obsession). Repression is the preliminary condition for symptom formation and “explicable as substitute-gratifications for desires which are unsatisfied in life” (Freud 1966: 310).

In *Instincts and their vicissitudes* (1997 [1915]), Freud further investigated the “complex relationships between autoeroticism, the sexual drives, narcissism, and the dynamic genesis of the ego” (Gale 2005). Freud expanded his metapsychology of the psyche with particular focus on the instincts (or drives). He distinguished between external stimuli that come from the environment and instinctual stimuli that well up from inside. Ten years earlier, in *Three essays on the theory of sexuality*, he defined the word instinct as follows:

By an “instinct” is provisionally to be understood the psychical representative of an endosomatic, continuously flowing source of stimulation, as contrasted with a “stimulus,” which is set up by single excitations coming from *without*. The concept of instincts is thus one of those lying on the frontier between the mental and physical. The simplest and likeliest assumption as to the nature of instincts would seem to be that in itself an instinct is without quality, and, so far as mental life is concerned, is only be regarded as a measure of the demand made upon the mind for work. (Freud 2000: 34)

Freud underscores that in the case of external stimuli one can remove oneself from the source of excitement, but one cannot escape the pull of the innate drive.

However, the individual will pursue homeostasis, a point of balance or lowered excitement through discharge. The “very essence” of the drive is “the amount of force or the measure of the demand upon energy which it represents” (Freud 1997: 87). The aim is to find ways in which to release and discharge the drive. In 1915, Freud observed:

An instinct, on the other hand, never acts as a momentary impact but always as a constant force. As it makes its attack not from without but from within the organism, it follows that no flight can avail against it. A better term stimulus of instinctual origin is a “need”; that which does away with this need is “satisfaction”. This can be attained only by a suitable (adequate) alteration of the inner source of stimulation. ... We thus find our first conception of the essential nature of an instinct by considering its main characteristics, its origin in sources of stimulation within the organism and its appearance as a constant force, and thence we deduce one of its further distinguished features, namely, that no actions of flight avail against it. (Freud 1997: 85)

Freud argued that the human organism will always try to release excess stimuli, because it strives towards a state of no excitement:

the nervous system is an apparatus having the function of abolishing stimuli which reach it, or of reducing excitation to the lowest possible level: an apparatus which would even, if this were feasible, maintain itself in an altogether unstimulated condition. (Freud 1997: 86)

The pursuit of these desires, or the search for relief, marks the pleasure principle that operates from the unconscious and which constantly influences the individual.

The ego emerges as a negotiator between the internal reality of a person (the pleasure principle) and the outside world that restricts the individual’s search for pleasure. Through splitting the drives (libido) into opposite reactions, love and hatred, the ego comes into being and uses these oppositions for and against itself:

The initial ego/reality opposition (or internal/external reality opposition) ... mutates into a purified-pleasure-ego under the influence of the pleasure principle in the narcissistic position. Then ego and pleasure correspond, and external world and unpleasure correspond. “At the very beginning, it seems, the external world, objects, and what is hated are identical”. (International Dictionary of Psychoanalysis 2017)

Freud then demonstrated the role of hate as a constituent in affirming and preserving the ego, as well as the autonomy of hate in relation to love. The dichotomy of love and hate would gain a stronger momentum in Freud’s later work by fleshing out the concepts of the instincts into a drive towards life/love and a drive towards death/destruction. As Freud’s thinking extended into the field of cultural analysis, his controversial theory of the death drive became central for understanding how the

perfect facade of a consumer-driven materialistic world can coexist with convoluted and obverse attitudes towards death and destruction in contemporary times.

Later Freud

Disillusioned by the atrocities and the extent of destruction wrought by the First World War, Sigmund Freud rethought his earlier theories of pleasure, sexuality, and the libido and came to the conclusion that, besides the life-preserving drive, there must be a major instinct that drives humanity towards death and destruction. In *Beyond the pleasure principle* (1961 [1920]), Freud elaborated a new theory of the psyche, which he reconceptualized as comprised of a three-part structure: the ego, the super-ego, and the id. Freud conceived the id as the oldest part of the psyche:

It contains everything that is inherited, that is present at birth, that is laid down in the constitution — above all, therefore, the instincts, which originate from the somatic organizations and which find a first psychological expression here [in the id] in the forms unknown to us.
(Freud 2004a: 127)

The id is also the area out of which “internal feelings and desires emerge from the instincts” (Bocock 1983: 77). Freud assumed that there was an impetus, a kind of motor force or energy behind a drive. The instincts, for Freud, are the forces existing behind the tensions caused by the needs of the id, and they represent the somatic demands upon the mind (Freud 2004a: 128). Freudian theory stresses that drives are impulses, wishes, and desires, which come from within the person, and are a fundamental component of the system of the unconscious, which is dominated by the pleasure principle. However, instinctual wishes (drives) cannot be known directly without linking them or mediating them to an idea, word, or phrase through which a drive accomplishes or pursues its aim. Thus, only ideas can become conscious, whereas the drive operating in the background remains obscure. The drives have discharge alone as their aim — “they seek satisfaction via the shortest routes” — the mechanism of the pleasure principle (Laplanche and Pontalis 1985: 324). Furthermore, Freud (2004a: 128) pointed out that the purpose of the individual’s life is the satisfaction of these innate needs.

The pleasure principle, in contrast, “is a tendency operating in the service of a function whose business it is to free the mental apparatus entirely from excitation or to keep the amount of excitation in it constant or to keep it as low as possible” (Freud

1961: 76). It is an “economic” principle since unpleasure is related to an increase in the quantity of excitation and pleasure is related to its reduction (Laplanche and Pontalis 1985: 322). Thus, one can say that the pleasure principle is concerned with a basic organic endeavour, the “return to the quiescence of the inorganic world” (Freud 1961: 76). Since the greatest pleasures (like orgasm) are concerned with the extinction of highly intensified excitation, “the binding of an instinctual impulse would be a preliminary function designed to prepare the excitation for its final elimination in the pleasure of discharge” (Freud 1961: 76).

Freud argued that what the consciousness contains consists essentially of perceptions of excitations coming from the outside world and feelings of pleasure and unpleasure arising from within the mental apparatus. He conceived of consciousness as turned towards the outside world while enveloping other inner psychological systems (Freud 1961: 26). The excitations from the deeper interior layers find their way into the consciousness directly and in undiminished amounts (Freud 1961: 32).

The ego is rooted in the unconscious. The ego is both conscious as well as unconscious, since it has developed from the id. As Bocock writes, “It is the aspect of the mind’s functioning which is responsible for reality testing, that is for rational thinking and for checking what is safe to do in a given physical and social environment” (Bocock 1983: 76). The ego is an intermediary layer between the external world and the id, and its functioning can be compared to a protective shield against outer influences. The ego develops through contact with the outer physical and socio-cultural reality, but it was once merged with the id. Through the influence of the outer world, the ego seeks to bear upon the id, both with its instincts and its tendency to search for pleasure. It tries to put the reality principle to the test, while striving to sustain pleasure and avoid unpleasure. In Freud’s model, the ego only senses change in the rhythm of the interchange between pleasure and unpleasure, which results in rising tensions. As already mentioned, Freud pointed out that a part of the ego itself is unconscious, because it reaches down to the id where the repressed (painful experiences or forbidden wishes) are stored. “An action done by the ego is as it should be if it satisfies simultaneously the demands of the id, the super ego and of reality – that is to say, if it is able to reconcile their demands with one another” (Freud 2004a: 127). In his late work *Civilization and its discontents* (2002 [1930]), Freud argued that it is a delusion to experience the self, or the ego, as an autonomous and independent entity. The ego “extends inwards, with no clear

boundary, into an unconscious psychical entity that we call the id, and for which it serves, so to speak, as a façade” (Freud 2002: 4-5).

The ego is connected with two opposing principles that govern mental functioning. One is the id, or the pleasure principle, but the ego also works under the influence of the reality principle. The reality principle supports the individual to adjust to cultural demands by delaying pleasures until a later moment. Freud connects the reality principle to the third element in the psyche, the super-ego. Freud’s concept of the super-ego steadily evolved as his theories extended into the realm of cultural analysis. The super-ego is the agency of the psyche that is in charge of the limitation of satisfactions, and it undertakes the work of repression. In one of his later public lectures from 1932, Freud likened the super-ego to the conscience, or more precisely, he described the conscience as a function of the super-ego; it consciously and unconsciously functions as a censor, punisher, and critic (Freud 1981: 53).

The ideals of this super-ego are introduced into the psyche of the child through parental/external authority and their cultural ideologies. These ego ideals have the function of generating guilt, which convinces the individual to adhere to the reality principle. The evolution of culture is not possible if everybody is purely in pursuit of his or her own pleasurable agendas. Also, guilt directs destructive aggressiveness towards oneself, or one’s own ego, instead of towards the outer world; you cannot have your mother; you cannot kill your father; you have to abide by the laws of the nation; you have to play by the rules of your workplace; but you can self-loathe, be painfully critical towards oneself and others, and abuse drugs and alcohol. In Freud’s model, guilt rises in the place of aggression towards others. And repression is the outcome of the reality principle’s dominance (Bocock 1983: 78). As Freud expressed this:

Following our view of sadism, we should say that the destructive component had entrenched itself in the super-ego and turned against the ego. What is now holding sway in the super-ego is, as it were, a pure culture of the death instincts, and in fact it often enough succeeds in driving the ego into mania if not into death itself. (Freud 1962: 53)

The death drives

The late Freud developed two key concepts to further understand instinctual behaviour: Eros (the drive towards life) and Thanatos (the death drive). Eros and

Thanatos are deeply intertwined and, in analysing their interplay, one struggles to find where the quality of Eros ends and that of Thanatos begins. War, for instance, is culturally justified as necessary to preserve the community, society, and nation, to defend its resources, identity, and pride. In this instance, destruction serves preservation and, paradoxically, death serves Eros. Freud probed the dynamics of the interior relationship between destruction and preservation, hate and love, and explored how these are projected onto the historical stage as well as how they play out in the individual. Freud summarized his concepts of sexuality/libido and the self-preservation instinct under the term Eros, the impulse to bind together ever-greater unities (family, tribe, community, nation, civilization), to preserve these units, and to bind them together through (object-related) love.

Defining the death drive is more complex. For Freud, a tug of war is observable between Eros and the death drive, and it manifests in the way in which people relate to and live with each other. Until Freud's clinical observations of negative repetitive behaviour, he assumed that the unconscious always operated in favour of the pleasure (principle), based on his libido theory. In the essay "Remembering, repeating and working-through" (2004b [1919]), Freud made clear that the compulsion to repeat negative experience was symptomatic of many of his patients. Painful memories were not remembered and thus could not be worked through, but instead they were acted out without the awareness of the person. Freud observed that the "compulsion to repeat ... replaces the impulsion to remember" (Freud 2004b: 139). These repetitions emerged under the condition of resistance against the progress of treatment. He wrote:

he repeats everything that has already made its way from the sources of the repressed into his manifest personality — his inhibitions and unserviceable attitudes and his pathological character-traits. He also repeats all his symptoms in the course of the treatment. And now we can see that in drawing attention to the compulsion to repeat we have acquired no new fact but only a more comprehensive view. We have only made it clear to ourselves that the patient's state of being ill cannot cease with the beginning of his analysis, and that we must treat his illness, not as an event of the past, but as a present-day force. (Freud 2004b: 140)

Freud realized that veterans repeat traumatic events in dreams and that children have an insatiable need to repeat certain games or behaviours in order to process difficult experiences. He thought that this behaviour seemed to give people a kind of

satisfaction that could not be derived from the need of the unconscious to maximize pleasure and minimize pain. In order to explain this repetition, he introduced the concept of the death instinct, which strives to undo connections, to destroy, and to lead life back into an inorganic state. He suggested that all living creatures have this impulse to return to the inorganic state from which they have emerged (Freud 2004a: 127). The death instinct is the source of negative, destructive energies expressed or suppressed in our daily life. Life instincts are much more obvious in the way they unfold, whereas death instincts are much more obscure. In his analysis of cultural formations, Freud argued that the drives and culture are necessarily intertwined, because the super-ego (the carrier of the cultural traditions and demands) receives its power from the depths of the id where the drives reside. Hence the death drive is not put into motion by outer events only but is part of the psychic structure of the individual.

While the relationship between Eros and Thanatos is often obscure in Freud's work, one key point that emerges from his thinking is the idea that the drives strive towards discharge and aim to keep the psyche in a state of equilibrium. He introduced the nirvana principle to point to this disturbing convergence of pleasure and death. This principle caters to the same character of both drives, their fundamental regressive or conservative tendency. The drives aim at a constant equilibrium, which constitutes a final regression beyond life itself. "The nirvana principle is conceived of as deriving its energy from the death instincts, and the pleasure principle serves these too, sometimes, and therefore it loses its former primacy in the unconscious life of man" (Bocock 1978: 113). Freud stressed:

The dominating tendency of mental life, and perhaps of nervous life in general, is the effort to reduce, to keep constant or to remove internal tension due to stimuli (the Nirvana principle ...) — a tendency which finds expression in the pleasure principle; and our recognition of that fact is one of our strongest reasons for believing in the existence of death instincts. (Freud 1961: 49–50)

In Freud's last big work, *Civilization and its discontents* published in 1930, he appeared disillusioned, as his thinking focused more directly on an understanding of culture and society. The common assumption is that culture is supposed to work for the benefit of the community and, to this end, must necessarily suppress the individual for the sake of cultural progress. For culture to express itself smoothly, a balance has to be found between the individual's constraints and cultural demands.

These two poles, nature (drives) and culture, seem contradictory, but Freud's introduction of the idea of the death drive brought a different dynamic into cultural analysis.

Freud was very much aware of the difficult implications of transferring psychoanalytic theory from the individual to cultural analysis (Lorenzer and Görlich 2001: 8). While his earlier work set the stage for the development of a culture-theoretical meta-view, he abandoned his attempt to find genetic principles for psychoanalysis, as he moved towards articulating individuals' connections to their cultural and social environment. In the later Freud, the structure of psychic conflicts is deeply embedded in a broader conflict culture (Lorenzer and Görlich 2001: 8–12). These fundamental and unsolvable contradictions between culture and human drives are visible in various areas. For instance, culture serves to help humans thrive in a hostile natural environment but can also serve as a tool for a powerful few to gain control over the masses. Also, within the individual, there is a hidden disdain for abiding by cultural mores due to the demanded abdication of one's drive towards pleasure. This secret rejection leads to a heightened feeling of guilt, yet cultural progress and evolution relentlessly demand constraint to work and the renunciation of the drives (Lorenzer and Görlich 2001: 13–15).

Freud's work was pioneering because it opened up the incredibly rich and complex interior life of the individual for consideration. He laid the groundwork for many thinkers after him to take seriously the many manifestations of love and destruction in the human psyche, as well as in culture. In the upcoming sections, I discuss Freud's heirs, who have been inspired to deeply understand the dual drive theory both within the individual realm, like psychoanalysts Melanie Klein and Otto Kernberg, and the social, like Herbert Marcuse and Erich Fromm.

Melanie Klein on the death drive

The death drive found an important place in Melanie Klein's theory of how personal identity and emotional life are shaped. In formulating object relations theory, Klein focused on the early mother–child dyad and how the infant generates an idea of self and others, central for the ego development, as well as the ability to form relationships. Klein adopted the Freudian notion of the Oedipal conflict but assumed that the death drive is already in operation in the young infant through emotions of destructiveness, hatred, and envy. Freud did not consider objects important as

representatives of the instincts. A subtle difference between Freud and Klein's understanding is that she assumed that "instincts are always directed towards objects", instead of being unfocused psychic urges (Frosh 1999: 122). In Klein's words:

The threat of annihilation by the death instinct within is, in my view — which differs from Freud's on this point — the primordial anxiety, and it is the ego which, in the service of the life instinct — possibly even called into operation by the life instinct — deflects to some extent that threat outwards. This fundamental defence against the death instinct Freud attributed to the organism, whereas I regard this process as the prime activity of the ego. (Klein 1957: 22)

Klein understood the infant to be already enveloped in a total world of fantasy from birth, supporting the connection between drives and objects. For an infant, the first object of desire is the breast. Such encounters with external objects form the basis of early psychological development. Stephen Frosh observes: "Klein provides not just a bridge between classical and object relations theory, but also a distinctive view of development which combines biological and social outlooks in the single concept of an instinct" (Frosh 1999: 122). Kleinian theory gives some explanations as to why the infant has this disposition towards objects. For example, they might be inherent in the instincts themselves; come out of the infant's urge to comprehend the images of bodily parts, as he or she perceives them; or an attempt to comprehend early internal sensations (Frosh 1999: 122).

The assumption that the infant has a disposition to experience the death drive builds the groundwork for the development of the paranoid-schizoid position, which is central to Kleinian theory. Experiencing these destructive emotions leads to anxiety in the child that needs to be relieved. The infant deflects this destructiveness towards the outside world, which, at this stage, means primarily towards the mother or the primary caregiver. In directing these primitive fantasies towards her, the child attempts to eliminate the dreadful negative emotions and the consequent internal stressful feelings. Paradoxically, this defence mechanism leads to even greater anxiety, because now the infant fears the retribution of the object towards which his/her destructiveness was directed. As a result of this fear, the mother's body (or parts of it like the breasts) becomes associated with the death drive. Anthony Elliott expresses this issue very poignantly:

the infant's fear now rounds back upon itself, giving rise to intense feelings of persecution and dread. Klein argues that the child consequently fears aspects of the maternal body, entertaining fantasies that the breasts will devour it, cut it into bits, destroy it and scoop out its insides. There is, if you like, a kind of "eye for an eye" mentality at this psychological stage. If I sadistically attack you, then I can only expect retaliation in return. (Elliott 2002: 83)

Haunted by negative feelings, which the infant unsuccessfully attempts to cast off, the child now fears complete disintegration through retaliation — an impossible situation requiring a solution. Thus, the next step in the child's coping mechanism is to split the object into good and bad. It is crucial to keep these two aspects, good (breast)/bad (breast), apart because the good (that is the idealized part of the mother with which the infant lovingly and narcissistically identifies) is in danger of being tainted by the experience of the death drive, coupled with maternal frustration and deprivation (Klein 1957: 23).

The aim of this strategy of splitting is to protect the ideal object (the good mother/breast), as well as the self, by limiting the harmful anxiety generated by the death drive. At the base of this paranoid splitting behaviour, Klein considered the Freudian idea of projection, as well as introjection. Here the child projects negative and positive feelings on the outside; and in the case of introjection, absorbs what it imaginatively perceives of others and the outside world. Freud understood projection as disposing of unconscious drives towards objects. But Klein went a step further than Freud. She believed that projection and introjection work through and operate inside unconscious fantasy. Describing the fundamental mechanics of ego formation, she wrote:

To return to the splitting process, which I take to be a pre-condition for the young infant's relative stability; during the first few months he predominately keeps the good object apart from the bad one and thus, in a fundamental way, preserves it — which also means that the security of the ego is enhanced. At the same time, this primal division only succeeds if there is an adequate capacity for love and a relatively strong ego. My hypothesis is, therefore, that the capacity for love gives impetus both to integrating tendencies and to a successful primal splitting between the loved and hated object. This sounds paradoxical. But since, as I said, integration is based on a strongly rooted good object that forms the core of the ego, a certain amount of splitting is essential for integration; for it preserves the good object and later on enables the ego to synthesize the two aspects of it. (Klein 1957: 24)

Therefore, this fragmenting of the psyche marks not only the emergence of the ego, but it can also facilitate emotional life, since these paranoid-schizoid mechanisms help to keep anxiety at bay. As the ego matures with time, the capacity to judge and discriminate and the ability to experience the emotions of love and hatred is established. In normal psychic development, good experiences dominate over the bad ones. Of further importance to the infant's sense of selfhood, he or she begins to see people as "whole objects and relates himself to this object" (Segal 1964: 55) rather than perceiving fragments of them with a certain quality. The infant begins to make a connection to the mother as a person with good and bad characteristics and begins to understand that the relationship to her can have qualities of love and hatred. This realization, however, facilitates feelings of guilt and sorrow in the infant regarding his or her negative emotions and negativity towards her. In Kleinian understanding, this marks the "depressive position". Hanna Segal clarifies this condition:

In the paranoid-schizoid position, the main anxiety is that the ego will be destroyed by the bad object or objects. In the depressive position, anxieties spring from ambivalence, and the child's main anxiety is that his own destructive impulses have destroyed or will destroy, the object that he loves or totally depends on. (Segal 1964: 56)

In Klein's object relations theory, the drives play a central role in the genesis of the self and the perception of others. In her understanding, the infant is already set up to experience strong emotions of destruction, hate, and envy — strong emotions that are always directed towards an object. This leads to the experience of anxiety early in life and thus coping strategies become an essential part of early human development. Essentially, the effectiveness of a good coping strategy that leads to the emergence of a healthy individual relies on the child's ability for love. In the next section, I discuss a contemporary psychoanalyst's take on how and why pathological psychological structures may arise.

Otto Kernberg on malignant narcissism

The contemporary psychoanalyst Otto Kernberg, whose work is influenced by Melanie Klein, considers the theory of the death drive to be irreplaceable for clinical observations, since it points to the fundamental struggle between love and hatred. As already stated in this chapter, Freud considered the struggle of life centred in erotic impulses and aggression as fundamental. However, Kernberg's clinical observations

of the pathological behaviour of individuals led him to believe that the death drive is a secondary phenomenon, instead of a primary drive. Kernberg makes an important distinction between the biological and pathological roots of an aggressive impulse that sheds further light on this discussion of the death drive and its various expressions. Further, I will draw upon his analysis of psychopathological behaviour in chapter 3 and 4 of this thesis, when I turn more directly to cultural analysis.

Kernberg's key paper "The concept of the death drive: a clinical perspective" (2009) gives an overview of his central findings which synthesise the latest neurobiological findings regarding affects in relation to instincts. Affect, in this paper, is understood as an instinctual disposition of a behavioural mechanism, triggered by environmental influences. In Kernberg's understanding, if a chain or sequence of behaviours is established, this constitutes the instinct (say for instance the flight-or-fight response). Therefore, an instinct is the product of interaction between inborn, biological triggers and environmental factors. A drive, however, is a sequence of affective responses that are organized in terms of unconscious meanings; therefore, the drive is forged on the basis of affects. Kernberg observes:

affects constitute the primary motivational system, and ... they are integrated into supraordinate positive and negative drives, namely, libido and aggression. The drives, in turn, manifest themselves as activation of their constituent affects with varying intensity, along the line of libidinal and aggressive investments. In short, I believe that affects are the primary motivators. They organize into hierarchically supraordinate motivations, or the Freudian drives, and the drives, in turn, become activated in the form of their component affectively valenced representations manifest as unconscious fantasies. (Kernberg 2009: 1011)

Kernberg makes an important distinction between aggression (biological) and aggressive drive, or death drive (pathological). He refers to the original Freudian assumption that instincts are biological in their nature, now verified by much clinical observation, as well as neurobiological findings of primary aggression (Kernberg 2009: 1012). As in all mammals, humans have the biologically inscribed response of aggressiveness in order to combat frustration, which is a reaction to scarcities in the environment. Our fundamental need for love and closeness may be naturally related to this biological aspect of aggression, for instance, as manifested in the territorial defence of a newly born mammal to protect its source of nutrition and shelter or in competitive mating behaviour. Humans also display these instinctual behaviours, but

this does not explain the mechanisms of destructive, aggressive behaviour that are beyond these instinctual responses to danger or frustration, which are basic to the survival of the individual or species. Beyond the pleasure principle and the frustration that arises when the demands of the pleasure principle are violated, Kernberg argues that there exist severely self-destructive psychopathological constellations that lend support to the concept of a death drive.

Kernberg points to the clinical support for the phenomenon of repetitive compulsion (originally one of Freud's main anchor points in support of his theorization of a death drive), which suggests a relentless self-destructive motivation (Kernberg 2009: 1013). Repetitive compulsion can function to work through a conflict or, in other circumstances, to represent the unconscious repetition of a traumatic relationship with a traumatizing object.

Another pathological manifestation of the death drive is seen in negative therapeutic reactions such as extreme forms of self-directed aggression and/or sexual sadism and masochism. The symptoms of this phenomenon range from unrestrained cruelty towards self and others, severe self-mutilation (such as severing limbs), and even the common illness of anorexia nervosa in its extreme form (Kernberg 2009: 1014). Kernberg's findings regarding perversion are interesting:

Perversity involves the recruitment of love at the service of aggression, the effort to seduce another person toward love or helpfulness as a trap that will end with the destruction, symbolic or real, in a social and sometimes even in a physical sense of the person so seduced ... In normal love relations small doses of aggression intensify erotic pleasure. However, under pathological conditions perversity may destroy erotic pleasure and even more so its object. (Kernberg 2009: 1014)

Kernberg goes on to describe other forms of self-destruction, such as suicidal urges and behaviours. Freud described the emergence of suicidal tendencies (post dual-drive theory) as the result of turning the aggression towards the lost object inward. Melanie Klein theoretically extended this idea in her depressive position theory, a line of thinking which explored how mourning often contains aspects of ambivalence. However, in a pathological display of suicidal tendencies carried out by narcissistic personalities, unable to cope with the thought of defeat, failure, and humiliation, the aim is to protect the self's grandiosity by triumphing over reality, showing mastery and control over life without fear of pain and death (Kernberg 2009: 1016).

Kernberg (2009: 1017) refers to the work of psychoanalysts Freud, Bion, Turquet, and Anzieu on group behaviour to point out that unstructured groups have the tendency to project their needs and super-ego functions onto a leader. If this attempt is successful, group anxiety is lessened. However, such social situations run the danger of unleashing the death drive in the form of aggression towards perceived malicious outsiders “in order to protect the perfection and the security of the ideal group” (Kernberg 2009: 1017). Aggressive conflict, escalating in genocide and warfare, can be a worst-case scenario. In Kernberg’s words:

there is impressive clinical and sociological evidence for a universal potential for violence in human beings that can be triggered too easily under certain conditions of group regression and corresponding leadership, and that, from the perspective of survival of human societies, may be considered as fundamentally self-destructive. (Kernberg 2009: 1017)

Kernberg depicts pathological self-destructive behaviour as symptomatic of the death drive and its major motivational system. In this theorization, the death drive is not primary in its tendency, as it once was thought by Freud or Klein, but is, rather, indicative of the “dominant unconscious motivation towards self-destructiveness”, that it is a “particularly grave, organized motivational system” that aims not only to “destroy the self, but very essentially, to destroy significant others as well, be it out of guilt, revenge, envy, or triumph” (Kernberg 2009: 1018).

To summarize, Kernberg sees the death drive as a secondary phenomenon, since he draws a distinction between the biological expression aimed at preserving life and a destructive impulse that goes beyond the life-affirming actions of the drive. Despite his clinical research that focuses on individuals, Kernberg’s theorization takes on an aspect of social critique when he makes the observation that the death drive does emerge in group settings for the sake of protecting their perceived ideology. On an individual level, the death drive aims at the elimination of concrete and specific relations with significant others, and the self and the patient can experience great pleasure in the aggression directed towards self and others. He stresses that the death drive has great seductive powers and often lurks behind the façade of love. In this light, the death drive is not opposed to the pleasure principle

but in accord with it (Kernberg 2009: 1020).³ Having discussed various theories about the genesis of the death drive, as well as the impact of the death drive on individuals, I now want to expand on the question of how the death drive affects the social arena.

Critical social psychology: Marcuse and Fromm

Marcuse on a social death drive

The critical social thinker Herbert Marcuse was one of the most prominent members of the Frankfurt School, who in his main body of work fused Marxist theory with the psychoanalysis of Freud. The failings of Marxist social theory, after the collapse of the socialist revolutions in Europe, gave rise to new conceptualizations that incorporated a greater understanding of culture and social settings. The psychological side of human interaction and choice had been left out of the Marxist equation, and thus many scholars began to adjust their thinking via psychology and psychoanalysis. John Rickert analyses the growing interest in psychoanalysis:

Marxism originally turned to psychoanalysis in an attempt to understand the role of psychological factors in social phenomena. Specifically, it sought an account of the origin and power of ideology, the subjective conditions for social change, and the processes by which society enters the individual psyche. (Rickert 1986: 387)

In his 1955 work *Eros and civilization*, Marcuse attempted to merge Freudian theory with the philosophy of Karl Marx. Marcuse understood Freud's theory to be essentially sociological in its nature (Rickert 1986: 362) and built upon his understanding of the world as laid out in *Civilization and its discontents* (1930), but with a stronger emphasis on history. While Marcuse agreed with Freud that some basic repression of Eros is needed in order to make civilization or culture possible, he argued that modes and amounts of suppression vary from one society to another and from one historical period to another. Marcuse cautioned against an unbridled Eros, because he argued that, if all members of society followed their pleasure without

³ Kernberg (2009: 1019) believes that causes of the death drive include genetic predisposition, traumatic experiences in infancy and childhood, and narcissistic personality disorder.

inhibition, the social consequences could be as destructive as the death drive. In relation to the instincts, Marcuse observed:

Left free to pursue their natural objectives, the basic instincts of man would be incompatible with all lasting association and preservation: they would destroy even where they unite. The uncontrolled Eros is just as fatal as his deadly counterpart, the death instinct. Their destructive force derives from the fact that they strive for a gratification which culture cannot grant: gratification as such and as an end in itself, at any moment. (Marcuse 1962: 11)

Hence culture begins when the primary aim of the drives — the absolute satisfaction of the needs — is renounced with success or, in different words, when repression is heightened through restrictions placed on sexuality and eroticism. Marcuse stated:

The adjustment of the pleasure to the reality principle implies the subjugation and diversion of the destructive force of instinctual gratification, of its incompatibility with the established societal norms and relations, and, by that token, implies the transubstantiation of pleasure itself. (Marcuse 1962: 13)

But how much repression is needed for a thriving civilization? Marcuse drew on Marxist philosophy to consider when the suppression of Eros has a negative impact on individuals. In *The Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy*, Arnold Farr (2013) writes that Marcuse's attraction to Marxism is rooted in his wish to disassociate humanity from the burdensome oppressive forces of capitalism. Marcuse's critique of society focused on the emergence of what he saw as a "totally administered society", or a "mass society of blind conformity" (Farr 2013). Hence, to counter this development, he argued, a certain form of consciousness, a "radical subjectivity", is needed that cuts sharply through present social and economic conditions through critique and refusal and bears the potential for positive transformation. Regarding Marcuse's reception of the Marxian notion of alienation, Farr writes:

Marcuse argues that in the *1844 Manuscripts* Marx shows how the role of labor as a self-realization or self-formative process gets inverted. Instead of having his or her subjectivity affirmed the individual becomes an object that is now shaped by external, alien forces. Hence, Marx's theory makes a transition from an examination of the self-formative process of labor to a critique of the forms of alienation caused by the historical facticity of capitalism. (Farr 2013)

Marcuse himself stressed the historical component of capitalism:

this fact appears as the total inversion and concealment of what critique had defined as the essence of man and human labor. Labor is not “free activity” or the universal and free self-realization of man, but his enslavement and loss of reality. The worker is not man in the totality of his life-expression, but something unessential [*ein Unwesen*], the purely physical subject of “abstract” activity. The objects of labor are not expressions and confirmations of the human reality of the worker, but alien things, belonging to someone other than the worker — “commodities.” (Marcuse 2005: 104)

However, there are ways in which individuals can retain some of their humanity. Ideally, individuals can engage their reasoning capabilities and act upon their acknowledged need for pleasure. The gift of the reality principle, Marcuse suggested, is that it allows for the emergence of an organized, conscious, thinking ego with the function of reason. The pleasure principle, however, finds refuge in the unconscious and lives on in fantasy, which remains untouched by the reality principle. Yet fantasy does have enough power to influence the reality principle. Consequently, pleasure keeps sweeping back into reality and undercuts the foundations of the reality principle, which has to be established over and over again. Marcuse (1962: 14) stressed that a person’s desire and the change in reality are “organized” by society. Although pleasure needs to be renounced for the blossoming of culture, the pleasure principle cannot be divorced from culture and maintains its influence through fantasy, a mechanism that Marcuse called the “return of the repressed” (Marcuse 1962: 15). He stated:

The return of the repressed makes up the tabooed and subterranean history of civilisation. And the exploration of this history reveals not only the secret of the individual but also that of civilisation ...
Repression is an historical phenomenon. The effective subjugation of the instincts to repressive controls is imposed not by nature but by man. (Marcuse 1962: 15)

Unfortunately, acting upon one’s desires is often curtailed by society. Marcuse emphasized the particularities of capitalistic societies, which, to him, are essentially systems of stark repression with strong unconscious components. In capitalist societies, the excessive repression of Eros is detrimental to the well-being of people. Marcuse (1962: 32) introduced the idea of surplus repression, which he used as a supplement to the idea of repression introduced by Freud. In this theorization,

Marcuse addressed the power of humans over humans, or “the restrictions necessitated by social domination” (Marcuse 1962: 32). Surplus repression is a mode of domination, unnecessary for creating culture, that arises from specific institutions of authority, which are to be found in societies with a certain degree of technological development. Its aim is to align the drives with the dominating performance principle (a term I explain below). Anthony Elliott defines surplus repression as the “intensification of self-restraint generated by capitalist exploitation and asymmetrical relations to power” (Elliott 2009: 40). An example of this is the conjugal family embedded in the patriarchal tradition.

According to Marcuse, under conditions of *surplus repression*, society is stratified according to the economic performances of its members. He called this the *performance principle* and suggested that it is the prevalent manifestation of the reality principle in a capitalist, technology-oriented society. This principle might be generated through work that, on the one hand, has an alienating effect on the individual and, on the other hand, has the potential to liberate the individual from time and physical constraints. Hence, the performance principle does create a higher degree of freedom and thus could potentially serve the pleasure principle. Marcuse observed:

The performance principle, which is that of an acquisitive and antagonistic society in the process of constant expansion, presupposes a long development during which domination has been increasingly rationalized: control over social labor now reproduces society on a large scale and under improving conditions. For a long way, the interests of domination and the interests of the whole coincide: the profitable utilization of the productive apparatus fulfills the needs and faculties of individuals. For the vast majority of the population, the scope and mode of satisfaction are determined by their own labor; but their labor is work for an apparatus which they do not control, which operates as an independent power to which individuals must submit if they want to live. And it becomes the more alien the more specialized the division of labor becomes. Men do not live their own lives but perform pre-established functions. While they work, they do not fulfill their own needs and faculties but work in alienation. (Marcuse 1962: 41)

The way in which the pleasure principle is allowed to express itself in society is reduced to genital-focused sexuality on a local level and on a temporal level to mundane leisure activities. Workers lack control over their lives and the expression of Eros. Their work is entirely dedicated to the “apparatus”, which aims to maximize

profit for capitalists. This requires conformity on the side of society, plus, in order to gain economic reward in societies with a strong competitive character and the creed of consumerism, people have to renounce their “instinctual gratification” (Marcuse 1962: 3). Yet they have to develop desires in accordance with society, an important social mechanism on which Farr observes:

The worker must be manipulated in such a way so that these restrictions seem to function as rational, external objective laws which are then internalized by the individual. The desires of the individual must conform to the desires of the apparatus. The individual must define himself as the apparatus defines all humanity. As Marcuse puts it, “he desires what he is supposed to desire”. (Farr 2013)

In Marcuse’s understanding, these kinds of crass modifications of the drives alter Eros, as well as Thanatos. The organization of libido is restricted, channelled into culture-serving streams, and also turned into taboos and perversions. The constant restriction of Eros weakens the life drive and thus gives way to the destructive force of an unbridled death drive. Marcuse wrote on restrictions:

The restrictions imposed upon the libido appear as the more rational, the more universal they become, the more they permeate the whole of society ... [The individual’s] erotic performance is brought in line with his societal performance. Repression disappears in the grand objective order of things which rewards more or less adequately the complying individuals and, in doing so, reproduces more or less adequately society as a whole. (Marcuse 1962: 41–2)

Freud theorized restrictions as potentially giving rise to more creative action and fulfilling relationships (sublimation). Marcuse, however, warned that excessive restrictions distort the individual to the point where this form of sublimation becomes impossible. Restrictions shapeshift into repression, which produces new forms of subjective control and normalization so “as to prevent repressed desire from interfering with capitalist exchange values” (Elliott 2009: 40). This disciplining of the human body, in order to align it with the capitalist modality of being, is termed *repressive desublimation*, a term Marcuse coined in his later book, *One-dimensional man* (1964). In this work, Marcuse theorized that sexuality is stripped of its erotic aura and is used in advertising, scattering human energy and focus. According to Marcuse, capitalism is a chimerical fantasy used to sell things, plus it cleverly

distorts a person's own sense of their needs and wishes through production (performance principle) and consumption (influence through advertisements).

Marcuse's utopia

Unlike Freud, Marcuse assumed that scarcity is historically contingent and not an ever-present situation, and therefore the reality principle as a social construct changes over time. Thus Marcuse critiqued Freud's failure to recognize the potential of liberation within his own theory. He argued that human drives are altered through socio-historic conditions, and therefore display greater flexibility than Freud assumed. Further, Marcuse argued that the seed of liberation can be found within an oppressive society. "The very progress of civilization under the performance principle has attained a level of productivity at which the social demands upon instinctual energy to be spent in alienated labor could be considerably reduced" (Marcuse 1962: 117). In Marcuse's utopian view, the great hope lies with the alienation of the individual, as well as the liberation of the libido through technology. The problem lies in the unfair and unequal distribution of wealth generated by a capitalistic society. The greater the gap between a suppressed Eros that longs to be expressed and social demands, the greater the degree of freedom that can potentially be accomplished. In this way, Eros could once again live up to its creative potential, as well as limit the destructive impact of Thanatos. To elaborate on this point more clearly, Marcuse philosophized that work, technology, and mastery over natural forces can be outlets for both instincts, and he saw a great advantage in technological improvements, since technology could lead to less repression or even to a non-repressive development of the libido.

Marcuse recognized that the death instinct can have a socially useful, if not life-affirming, purpose. The entire progress of civilization is rendered possible only by the transformation and utilization of the death instinct or its derivatives. The diversion of primary destructiveness away from the ego, towards the external world, feeds technological progress. The use of the death instinct for the formation of the super-ego achieves the punitive submission of the pleasure principle to the reality principle and thus assures civilized morality. In this transformation, the death instinct is brought under the service of Eros; the aggressive impulses provide energy for the continuous alteration, mastery, and exploitation of nature to the advantage of

humanity (Marcuse 1962: 46). Hence, Thanatos can and does work in the service of society in the formation and upholding of basic civility and cultural cooperation.

Marcuse believed, as Freud did, that the instincts are innate to humans, but he emphasized that both drives are socially and historically malleable. The resistance or dominance of Eros over Thanatos is necessary, but impossible in such a developed and highly controlled civilization (Marcuse 1962: 80). The prevalent form of the reality principle, where capitalism strips humans of their essence and aligns their desires and pleasures with the capitalistic creed, is the reason why the death drive can have severe socio-pathological manifestations.

Erich Fromm on destructiveness

Another leftist critical thinker, who fused Marxism with Freud and Karl Abraham's psychoanalysis, is Erich Fromm. Fromm believed that the critical connection between psychoanalysis and Marxism is found in what he called a "psychoanalytic conception of character" (Rickert 1986: 352), a theory on positive and (extreme) negative human traits, such as aggressiveness and destructiveness. Although inspired by Freud's dual drive theory, Fromm put a weakened emphasis on the role of the Freudian instincts and hence earned the critique of his Marxist-psychoanalyst peer Herbert Marcuse, to whom the Freudian drives were crucial for understanding the status quo. Instead, Fromm developed a theory of instincts as rooted in the individual's physiological needs and the human passions as rooted in the individual's character. Understanding this conception of character is crucial in order to gain insights into Fromm's idea of how death and aggression are reproduced in culture.

Putting forward the theory of characterology, Fromm hoped to understand attitudes, actions, and ideologies of, not only social classes, but also entire societies. Fromm shifted focus away from the psychoanalytic traits of the individual to map out the character components of the members of a society, or what Fromm called the "libidinal structure of society" or "social character" (Rickert 1986: 353). In doing so, he argued, one holds the key to understanding the group as a whole and the role of prevalent character traits in ongoing social processes. Secondly, he argued, proper analytic social psychology must place emphasis on the socio-economic environment for its analysis of social character. As he argued:

The phenomena of social psychology are to be understood as processes involving the active and passive adaptation of the instinctual apparatus to the socio-economic situation. In certain fundamental respects, the instinctual apparatus itself is a biological given; but it is highly modifiable. The role of primary formative factors goes to the economic conditions. The family is the essential medium through which the economic situation exerts its formative influence on the individual's psyche. The task of social psychology is to explain the shared, socially relevant, psychic attitudes and ideologies — and their unconscious roots in particular — in terms of the influence of economic conditions on libido strivings. (Fromm 1970: 121)

While Fromm agreed with Freud that character is shaped and formed through the influence of the family at an early age, Fromm argued that Freud failed to acknowledge the extent to which family constellations are, by themselves, shaped by socio-economic forces. The character traits within a family that are moulded by the environment are then passed onto the child. Rickert writes: “The family, then, is both the product of social conditioning and the ‘psychological agent of society’, the medium through which the social structure places its stamp on the character and hence the consciousness of its individual members” (Rickert 1986: 345). Rickert further interprets Fromm's work:

Eschewing the vulgar Marxist view that consciousness directly reflects economic reality, Fromm argues that social character is the mediating link between the economic substructure and the prevailing attitudes and ideologies. Specifically, he claims that human drives dynamically adapt to socioeconomic conditions; that the product of this process is the social character; and that character is what directly determines consciousness — i.e., the attitudes and ideals dominant in a given society. (Rickert 1986: 355)

Social character is an active agent with the power to stabilize or undermine the social order, and ideology is anchored in this very character structure. Therefore, the main central claim of Fromm's Freud-Marx fusion is that “the central factor determining the nature of social character is the given socioeconomic situation” (Rickert 1986: 357).

In *The fear of freedom* (2001 [1941]), Fromm turned his back on Freud's libido theory and created his own analytic framework that abandoned the idea that social reality was mediated by the sexual instincts. Rather:

the socioeconomic structure directly molded human energy and passions in such a way as to produce the traits required for the

continued functioning of the given social order. The question of why a particular class should have a specific social character was explained not in the unconvincing terms of Freud's theory, but by saying that the socioeconomic situation of that class directly conditioned the character traits found in most of the population. (Rickert 1986: 360)

For Fromm, the ways in which individuals relate to each other through processes of "assimilation and socialisation" constitute their character structure. "Character, then, is a certain orientation to the world that develops in the process of meeting needs for survival and meaning" (Rickert 1986: 360). In this sense, the most powerful instance in shaping one's character is the network of social relationships to which one is exposed. Character is not developed, unlike in Freud's or Klein's musing, through certain innate infantile experiences during a child's early libidinal development. "Rather, it develops in direct response to the child's experience of social reality as constituted by the requirements of a particular socioeconomic system and transmitted by the family environment" (Rickert 1986: 360).

Passions and pathological aggressiveness

Passions, one is cautioned to understand, are not manifestations of the instinctual drives. Fromm conceived of these character-rooted passions as, again, having socio-historical and environmental dimensions. The dynamic structure of character is made up of the relatively permanent components of the passions, which represent the motivational source for the individual (Fromm 1976: 6). He wrote:

Although not directly serving physical survival they are as strong — and often even stronger — than instincts. They form the bias for man's interest in life, his enthusiasm, his excitement; they are the stuff from which not only his dreams are made but art, religion, myth, drama — all that makes life worth living ... he [the individual] suffers severely when he is reduced to the level of a feeding or propagating machine, even if he has all the security he wants. Man seeks for drama and excitement; when he cannot get satisfaction on a higher level, he creates for himself the drama of destruction. (Fromm 1973: 7–8)

To understand the depths and intensity of the passions, one must recognize that the energy of the passions is directly tied to the individual's search for meaning. They help the individual to bring sense to his or her life and environment. To what extent these needs are met and whether they are beneficial or pathological, therefore, is entirely dependent on the socio-economic conditions in which a person exists.

As an equivalent to the death drive, previously discussed in this chapter, Fromm put forward the idea of “malignant aggression”, which encompasses things like cruelty, destructiveness, sadism, and necrophilia. In this respect, and not unlike Otto Kernberg, he distinguished between benign or defensive aggression, which is a “built in” biological reaction geared towards survival, and malignant aggression, which is destructive (Fromm 1973: 1; 1976: 2). Again, in Fromm’s understanding, malignant aggression is not based on an inherent destructive instinct but needs to be understood on the basis of its historical and cultural environment, and therefore can be dominant and powerful within some individuals and cultures (Fromm 1973: 218). Even though pathological forms of aggression are rendered by the socio-economic environment and do not belong to the psychic structure that has survival at its core, the pleasure derived from destruction is inherently human (Fromm 1976: 3–4). “Malignant aggression is a human potential rooted in the very conditions of human existence” (Fromm 1973: 187). He further commented on people acting out this destructive potential: “They express life turning against itself in the striving to make sense out of it. They are the only true perversion” (Fromm 1973: 9).

In order to transcend the triviality of one’s life — a life in which one’s passions do not find an outlet — the individual seeks adventure, is prompted to engage in risky behaviour, and tries to venture beyond, or even across, the limiting frontiers of human existence. This is what makes great virtues and vices, as well as destruction, so attractive and exciting. One has to be discerning if one’s environment only supports the engagement with one’s passions on a superficial level but leaves core needs unfulfilled. These core needs are, in Fromm’s humanistic view, love, the ability to connect to fellow humans (brotherhood), freedom, equality, and an environment that nurtures these core needs (Fromm 1994: 100–4). Hence, drug addiction, destructiveness, and other social ills come into existence as a response to the barred access to fulfilling one’s essential needs (Fromm 1973: 267). Unmet core needs or an unlived life can have certain manifestations, which I discuss in the next segment of this chapter.

Necrophilia

For Fromm, character typology is a way of illustrating the various complex traits of human personality and defining core aspects that belong to certain characters rather than describing an individual. An individual, of course, can have various

combinations of certain character expressions. Fromm used the term character in a non-normative but descriptive sense (Rickert 1968: 383–4). I focus now on one of Fromm’s character types that I draw on in chapter four of this thesis.

One form of malignant aggression is necrophilia, a character-rooted passion. For Fromm, necrophilia is a mere psychological phenomenon that emerges due to hostile environmental factors. Much like the Freudian dual drive theory, Fromm defined necrophilia, in part, as an opposition to biophilia — a love of life. Above all, necrophilia as a kind of destructive aggression has certain components:

Necrophilia in the characterological sense can be described as the passionate attraction to all that is dead, decayed, putrid, sickly; it is the passion to transform that which is alive into something unalive; to destroy for the sake of destruction; the exclusive interest in all that is purely mechanical. It is the passion “to tear apart living structures”.
(Fromm 1973: 332)

In contrast, biophilia is the passionate love of life and of all that is alive. Biophilia refers to a biologically normal impulse and therefore aligns with Eros. The biophilous person constructs, rather than retains, and sees the whole, rather than the parts. Her/his biophilic ethics state that all that is good serves life; it is a reverence for life that enhances growth and unfolding. Necrophilia, however, is the outcome of an unlived life, of failure to arrive at a certain stage beyond narcissism and indifference. Evil, in this understanding, is all that serves death, that stifles life, limits and dismembers it (Fromm 1973: 364). Necrophilia can have many manifestations, which can range from the urge to physically mutilate an object or one’s own body or an obsessive interest in sickness and death. As we have seen, Otto Kernberg (2009: 1014) observed these kinds of behaviours in his clinical observations.

In Freud’s work, the life drive and the death drive have equal importance since both are based in biology. Fromm, like Kernberg, saw necrophilia as a secondary phenomenon that only emerges due to a hostile socio-economic environment. Biophilia, on the other hand, is a biological impulse to preserve and connect life. According to Fromm, tendencies of necrophilia and biophilia can be found in every human, but the question is which tendency is strongest. Therefore, Fromm urged us to seek greater understanding of the different expressions of this negative trait and to seek understanding of which social conditions foster necrophilia (Fromm 1973: 10). As he wrote:

Destructiveness is not parallel to, but the alternative to biophilia. Love of life or love of the dead is the fundamental alternative that confronts every human being. Necrophilia grows as the development of biophilia is stunted. Man is biologically endowed with the capacity for biophilia, but psychologically he has the potential for necrophilia as an alternative solution ... If man cannot create anything or move anybody, he cannot break out of the prison of his total narcissism, he can escape the unbearable sense of vital impotence and nothingness only by affirming himself in the act of destruction of the life that he is unable to create ... for destruction all that is necessary is strong arms, or a knife or a gun. (Fromm 1973: 366)

Importantly, Fromm recognized that human pathological behaviour is deeply intertwined with the social formations. Furthermore, the pleasure derived from malignant behaviour is an entirely human trait. Ethically, Fromm was concerned with “arriving at ‘objectively valid’ ethical standards on the basis of a philosophical anthropology” (Rickert 1986: 372), and in this he often underestimated the rich psychic interior of the individual. His social concepts of good and evil, life giving or life destroying, are also often dichotomized in their understanding of human nature and lack the complexities of Freud and Klein’s theorization of the drive. However, his theory on necrophilia and biophilia underscores the role of the socio-economic environment in which a person develops his/her stance towards life. As Fromm recognized, a social world that highlights materialism and does not foster love and compassion will most certainly leave its negative imprints on the individual.

Conclusion

Are aggressiveness, hatred, and destruction at the core of the human being, as Freud and Klein mused? From this troubled interior life, does the death drive seep out into the world to leave its imprints in the tribulations of war and homicide, if there is not enough love or libido to halt its impact? To what degree is the socio-economic environment a key factor in how the drives express themselves in the world?

Both Otto Kernberg and Erich Fromm see the drives as secondary phenomena and conclude that there are forms of aggression that are biologically distinct and serve the survival of the individual and the species. However, in talking about the pathological expression of aggressiveness and destruction, they point at something beyond, something excessive, and strangely pleasurable in its manifestation.

For Fromm, this is due to the socio-economic environment, which dictates how an individual’s character is moulded into being. This character, in turn, determines a

person's consciousness towards a love of life (biophilia) or a disregard of, if not hatred for, life (necrophilia). In Fromm's theorization, Eros and Thanatos are not as convoluted as in Freudian or Kleinian thinking. For Fromm, the degree to which love and compassion are present in an environment makes the difference between producing a healthy person and a shell of a human, filled with materialistic desires and disdain for the world.

Regarding love, Kernberg makes the observation that "perversity involves the recruitment of love at the service of aggression" (Kernberg 2009: 1014). But being lured by love and the willingness to be seduced can happen only in the presence of desire. Marcuse claimed that desire has to be brought under the service of capitalism. The bastion of the pleasure principle, fantasy, is distorted and wrought into the tracks of society and, through this depleting of existential erotic energy, it is harnessed for capitalistic purposes, emerging as Thanatos, which is lethal for self and others.

What exactly is it about desire that has such an immense power to turn groups of people into a society of "mass conformists", as well as to unleash such destructive powers? In the next chapter I will turn to Lacanian theory, which provides another framework to explore how individual interior states intermingle with the ambient expressions of society and how death illiteracy shapes the sense of self in contemporary society.

While the dual drives might only indirectly impact social attitudes towards death and dying, an investigation of the social (or symbolic) implications of the drives sheds analytic insight into understanding contemporary struggles with mortality. Lacan suggested that Freud's death drive theory might be obscure, but to dismiss the idea would be to overlook a significant discovery. Like Erich Fromm, Lacan understood the death drive to be a cultural phenomenon rather than an intrinsic biological urge to return to an inanimate state (Evans 2006: 32). He did not view the death drive in opposition to a life drive, but theorized the drive more generally through the lens of the death drive. Exploring this idea further will help illuminate not only the current climate of death illiteracy but also the individual as well as societies' propensity to violence, or what I call the schism of death.

Chapter 3

The functions of desire: drive in Lacanian psychoanalysis

After finishing high school I worked in a nursing home where I looked after a woman in the last stages of dementia. There was nothing left of her character, not a hint, a shine of personality, psyche or soul as we imagine it. No interaction was possible with her, nor conversation, nor were there signs of her experiencing pain or discomfort. All she could do was stand up from her wheelchair, chew and swallow, and compulsively masturbate. Every night and every morning when I got her ready for the day, as soon as she had access to her genitals she would masturbate. I was instructed to tighten her incontinence pants extra diligently to keep her hands out of her pants, because she would masturbate to utter rawness. I was a volunteer, untrained and unprepared for what I encountered in my work as a nurse in aged care, yet the scarcity of workers required that I do the same job as every nurse.

This woman was one of my first conscious encounters with what Freud named the drives. There she was, with her decayed mind, with no hope for orgasm nor hope for any other form of satisfaction, yet grinding away at a sexual drive that seemed, along with her ability to maintain her body through food, the only functioning force in her life. “Drive is not a universal thrust”, as Žižek argues:

broken and broken up, it is the brake itself ... — its “stuckness” ...
The elementary matrix of drive is not that of transcending all
particular objects toward the Void of the Thing ... but that of our
libido getting “stuck” onto a particular object, condemned to circulate
around it forever. (Žižek 2006: 62)

Mentally and emotionally the woman seemed evacuated, but her well-fed shell, masturbation compulsion and her ability to eat suggested a sheer excess of life —she was brutally sincere in her “self-less” state of existence. Yet, her daughter came lovingly every night to feed her dinner. How, I asked myself, does she align the memory of who her mother once used to be with who she is now? And although I felt compassion towards the mother and daughter, and nursed the mother to the best of my abilities, I could not, and still cannot make sense of these daily scenes. It reminds me of another statement made by Žižek: “human life is never ‘just life’: humans are not simply alive, they are possessed by the strange drive to enjoy life in excess,

passionately attached to a surplus which sticks out and derails the ordinary run of things” (Žižek 2006: 62).

Psychoanalytic theorization of the genesis of the ego and the pleasure and reality principles, as discussed in the previous chapter, brings a wealth of understanding to how individuals struggle with their innate needs and wants in a world in which reality seemingly stifles desire. My encounter with this strange drive in my nursing home experience pointed towards a certain dimension of desire which seems to be located beyond the pleasure principle. The French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan theorized this “something beyond” that marbles throughout our canvas of experiences and disrupts our experience of a familiar world. Lacanian theory enables one to dive deeper into the meaning of desire, outlined by pioneers such as Freud, Klein, Marcuse, and Fromm. Investigating desire is integral in understanding the schism of death because desire, excess and violence are not only intertwined in our current social climate, they shape our attitude towards death.

Lacanian theory

The imaginary/the mirror stage

The psyche is not as hardwired as contemporary attitudes about the self lead us to believe. In Lacanian psychoanalysis the self itself is called into doubt. In Lacanian understanding, the common notion of the “I” and the popular idea of “finding oneself” denote an impossibility due to a void at the core of our being. For Lacan, the self is a fetishized illusion; a true self, longing to be released, cannot be found. Yet, the resistance to the idea of the self as based on a lack is the thing that keeps our illusory self together. This idea can best be understood through an examination of the Lacanian threefold system of the psyche consisting of the Symbolic, the Real and the Imaginary. Let me begin with a brief introduction to the psychoanalytic background to the development of Lacan’s schema.

After Freud’s death two schools of thought emerged with two different approaches to ego conceptualization: a solid ego and illusory ego. Elisabeth Grosz remarks that believers in Freud’s “realist ego” saw it as an innate, naturally given, psychical instance in which the ego functions as a negotiator between the demands of the interior (id) and an exterior reality that constantly impinges upon the individual — very much the common idea of a self that is currently popular. In the view of ego

psychology, an individual who struggles is believed to have a weakened ego that must be strengthened against the tides of the interior and exterior in order to strike a healthy balance of selfhood. Lacan, however, argued that ego psychologists never challenge their own concepts of ego, id and reality, and he developed a new theory of ego interpretation, which he argued remained true to Freud. In Lacan's reading of Freud, he further explored the ego with its narcissistic tendencies, where its function involves a systematic refusal of reality. Elisabeth Grosz remarks that:

Psychoanalysis, for Lacan, is resolutely disconnected from medicine; it is not an analysis of the "self", consciousness, or the ego, aimed at boosting its performance ... Psychoanalysis neither strengthens or weakens the ego. It is not a system of "cure" ... Psychoanalysis is no more — or any less — than an analysis of the unconscious which belies the subject's ego or consciousness ... It subverts, renders ambiguous, and resists the ego's conscious ideals. The ego cannot judge reality or mediate between reality and desire, because it is always marked by error, (mis)recognition or lack. (Grosz 1995: 27–8)

Lacan drew on Freud's model of a narcissistic ego to develop his own theory of the ego's genesis. The Freudian narcissistic ego is "an entirely fluid, mobile, amorphous series of identifications, internalizations of images/perceptions invested in libidinal cathexes" (Grosz 1995: 28). For Freud, the ego was a container for libido, where "libido can be stored from its various sources throughout the body in the anticipation of finding appropriate objects in which it can be invested" (Grosz 1995: 29). Lacan was prompted by Freud's remark that a certain process, a certain structuring of all experiences, has to happen (yet in opposition to biological or instinctual processes) in order for the ego to come forth. "Ego is the psychical representation of the subject's perceived and libidinalized relation to its body" (Grosz 1995: 31).

The trajectory of normal ego formation consists of two key moments. The first phase is the mirror stage, which marks the constitution of the Imaginary Order, which is an illusion of a wholeness that covers up the infant's state of loss and lack. The second invokes the assimilation of language in which the subject is introduced into the Symbolic Order. In Lacan's understanding, the mirror stage — occurring between 6 and 18 months of age — invokes the formation of the ego via a process of objectification. Even before birth, the infant's desire is structured by the desires and intention of the mother. A human child is heavily dependent on the mother or caregiver for its physical and psychical survival. Its care is a necessity of a social organization, and in this sense ego development is naturally social as the child has a

“syncretic union with the mother” (Grosz 1995: 33). After birth, the child’s drives are channelled into erotogenic zones whereby the child is forced to respond to factors outside of him/herself. Lacan stressed that the ego emerges from a conflict arising from the contrast between an internal emotional experience and a perceived visual experience. In Lacan’s words:

The mirror stage is a drama whose internal pressure pushes precipitously from insufficiency to anticipation — and, for the subject, caught up in the lure of spatial identification, turns out fantasies that proceed from a fragmented image of the body to a what I will call an “orthopaedic” form of its totality — and to the finally donned armour of an alienating identity that will mark his entire mental development with its rigid structure. Thus, the shattering of the *Innenwelt* to *Umwelt* circle gives rise to an inexhaustible squaring of the ego’s audits. (Lacan 2004: 6)

Desire as primordial lack

To elaborate on this quotation, there are certain conditions that need to be in place for the mirror stage to happen. There is the child’s first recognition of a distinction between itself and the (m)Other. The child realizes it is not “complete in itself” (Grosz 1995: 35) in the sense of being fused with the world and its mother. The child also begins to understand that the mother is a separate entity. This is the first recognition of lack or absence; henceforth, the ideal state of primordial oneness or wholeness becomes an unattainable ideal, placing the infant in a state of disjunction between desire and the prospects of fulfilment. Due to this first acknowledgement of absence, lack or loss the child is thrown into the mirror stage. Frosh argues that “from the beginning, therefore, the child is constituted in relation to lack and loss, and that loss has its form in the absence of the object of the child’s desire” (Frosh 1999: 143). This is important, because whenever Lacan refers to desire it implies loss. For Lacan, desire is constituted by an absence, a lack.

The mirror stage then invokes the child finding a new self-reliance instead of a dependence upon the (m)Other. The mirror stage functions as compensation and enables the child’s acceptance of this newly discovered lack. This stage might be a triumphant moment for the child since it promises self-mastery and control over the bracketed and fragmented information that is relentlessly thrown at her/him. For the first time, a sort of cohesiveness and congruency has been established, that is independent from the (m)Other’s ability to gratify the child’s needs. In

acknowledging the mother as absent, a new independence is gained on which base the first psycho-sexual drives emerge. This newly discovered auto-erotic pleasure, in which parts of the child's body and its functions (defecation, sucking, etc.) serve as a substitute for dependence on the mother's ability to provide pleasure, is fundamental to the mirror stage. Hence the mirror stage is an "internalized psychic sensory image of the self and the objects in the world" (Grosz 1995: 32). It also means that for the first time the child acquires a basic understanding of space, distance and its position in the world.

It is important to understand that the mirror stage serves as an experience of integration or recognition of the individual, in which the child identifies with a vision coming from the outside. For Lacan a self cannot be constituted without taking on the meaning of the Other (Frosh 1999: 143). There is no innate core of a so-called self. What one generally views as self is created by something in relation to something outside itself. This process helps the child to distribute the pressures put upon him or her by the relentless chaos created by the drives.

Phallus/the Symbolic Order/castration

The mirror phase ends (if it ever does) with the second phase of ego constitution, involving the subject moving from primary narcissism into the social or Symbolic Order. According to Lacan, the internalization of language plus the relationship to the (m)Other determines how the libido is distributed within the Symbolic, as well as within the Imaginary Order. The predominant 'Other' encountered in the Symbolic Order is, according to Lacan, the father (also called the Phallus or the Law). The father is what sets up the barrier to full access to the mother (which for the child represents pure pleasure). This could be a father figure but it is also the mother's desire to pursue interests of her own, by which a child realizes the untruth of its primal desire for union with her. This father figure or, in Lacanian terms, the desire of the mother, is itself symbolized (Fink 1991: 25). The Phallus in the Lacanian sense is the signifier or the guarantee of the existence of symbolic meaning. As Frosh writes:

It is a generative and connecting *fantasy*, possessed, as one might imagine, of an aura of procreation and sexual linkage. On the other hand, it also acts materially with real effects, specifically signifying a cancellation — it is, therefore, not to be thought as something positive

and full of potency, but as a kind of divisive negativity. (Frosh 1999: 146)

Assimilation into culture demands a division between the imaginary unity between mother and child, as well as a symbolic differentiation. The child's libido becomes structured in the sense that it is redirected into culturally appropriate forms of expression, which includes the destruction of the incestuous relationship between mother and infant.

Once the child becomes aware of the mother's incompleteness, he/she experiences alienation. Alienation arises from the fact of the mother walking away from her child (be it mentally or physically) which then sets the child out on a quest to map out the mother's desire in an attempt to fill the void within her. This is how the subject (the individual) is constituted:

to be that which fills her up, to be the all-encompassing object of her desire. That very aspiration is what allows the subject to come to be — to occupy the space within the Other; he latches onto that space of desire, explores its boundaries and aspires to fill it. In doing so he proves that the mother is not whole and complete — she is barred. (Fink 1991: 22)

This mechanism, also known as castration, marks the dissolution of the Oedipal infatuation with the mother. The child experiences the Phallus as the mother's desire, which creates a moment of loss, depression and a profound sense of emptiness within. Realizing, at an important time in the child's development, that the mother has desires other than the child results in the experience of castration, in the sense of individuation from the mother. However, it is impossible to pinpoint what the missing thing is. "[T]he signifier which signifies the subject" (Fink 1991: 23) cannot be identified by the child. In this sense the (m)Other is always linked to an incompleteness or insufficiency. It is important to discern that the Other of the Symbolic Order has a different function than the primordial ideal of the Mother. Richard Feldstein defines the Other as follows:

The Other holds a place other than the site of the subject. A self-contained set of signification, the Other insists on the alterity of the unconscious: it has its own demand, its own desire, its own time, and its own linguistic effect, all of which can be understood as impersonal. For whenever we move from the personal, "I believe that you should do this," to the impersonal, "It is imperative that you do that", we

witness the linguistic turn indicating our identification with the place of the Other. (Feldstein 1995: 156)

The Real

The Real, existing outside the Symbolic and Imaginary orders, is lurking underneath the perceived normality, leaving its fingerprints on the façade of the imaginary's integrity. The Lacanian Real is not to be mistaken with what is generally understood as reality, which includes its imaginary and symbolic representations. For Lacan the Real is what the world is to an individual prior to his or her entry into language. Life, one could say, is the constant progression of the Real, which is all that is pre-lingual, into reality (the Symbolic). Thus, the signifier, the Symbolic Order, cuts "fissures" into the Real in order to push it outside our perception.

The infant is born into the field of the Real. The emergence of the ego marks the point when the child ventures outside the order of the Real. Elisabeth Grosz defines the Real:

The real is the order preceding the ego and the organization of the drives. It is an anatomical, "natural" order (nature in the sense of resistance rather than positive substance), a pure plenitude of fullness. The Real cannot be experienced as such: it is capable of representation or conceptualization only through the reconstructive or inferential work of the imaginary and symbolic orders. It is what is "unassimilable" ... in representation, the "impossible" ... Our distance from the Real is the measure of our socio-psychic development. The real has no boundaries, borders, divisions, or oppositions; it is a continuum of "raw materials". (Grosz 1995: 34)

The impossibility of desire and its social determinants

According to Lacan, social reality is structured through meta-narratives or what he calls master signifiers in order to create a "unified field of meaning" (Feldstein 1995: 150). Master signifiers structure the meaning-making process, which implies that a free-floating signifier's meaning is altered depending on which master signifier it relates to. For example, free-floating signifiers like success take on a different meaning in relation to the master signifier "democracy" than in relation to the master signifier "God". Under the master signifier "God", the signifier "success", for example, might take on the meaning of spiritual liberation or unity with God. Under

the master signifier democracy, “success” might imply financial freedom and materialism.

This shows that the master signifiers determine the ideology, the final reference or guarantee of meaning, according to which all other signifiers will be understood. It is important to discern that this is not because the master signifier actually has an inherent meaning or essence:

but simply because it is able to halt the process of referral by the empty gesture of referring only to itself. This “reflective” signifier is, therefore, nothing more than a kind of cul-de-sac in the chain of equivalences. This means ... that “beneath” the alleged unity of the field of meaning, there is only a tautological, self-referential, performative gesture. (Gunkel 2014: 193)

Further, the master signifier is arbitrary; in fact, it is no different from any other signifier. However, other terms cluster around and gain their significance through this master signifier. Because of this arbitrariness, the master signifier is introduced not through reason but rather through an, often concealed, violent and capricious imposition within the Symbolic Order. In order to understand any ideology, Žižek (2006) argues, the master signifier at its centre must be analysed.

There is an important link between symbolization and desire in Lacanian psychoanalysis. For Lacan, desire is based on castration (alienation), which means that the subject becomes structured by the Other and this marks a loss of “primal jouissance” (Feldstein 1995: 156) — the primal unity with the mother. This “primal jouissance” is ruptured by the Other’s lack, which means that the child is prompted to map out the (m)Other’s desire, which in turn determines their assimilation into the Symbolic Order. However, something of the “primal jouissance” remains and this resists symbolization. In Lacanian terminology these aspects that resist symbolization are referred to as *objet petite a*, but I will refer to them as “object a”. Object a (although escaping the Symbolic) therefore becomes a reminder of the first encounter with the Other, and becomes part of the subject, yet will always remain more than the subject.

It is important to note that object a is not desire in itself, it is the *cause of desire* and through object a one gets attached to an empirical object of desire. Russel Grigg gives the following definition:

In this respect we need to distinguish between the desired object, which is an empirical object, and the object as cause of desire, which Lacan calls object a; for it is through and by means of object a that the empirical object becomes an object of desire; the object doesn't form part of the desired (empirical) object but constitutes, causes, the desire for that object — hence its name, “object a, cause of desire”. (Grigg 1991: 34)

But, so Lacan argues, the formation of our specific desires comes from outside the social order. Meanings are fixed and predetermined by the overarching structure of culture, as are each person's desires aligned with the omnipresent Symbolic Order; therefore desire is the function of the Law.

Regarding desire, one must take into account the important social function of fantasy, which Lacan understands as “a screen between the subject and the Other” (Grigg 1991: 34). Fantasy is not to be understood as escapism but an enactment of desire. Fantasy acts as a structuring, stabilizing force, acting in the name of the Symbolic, that turns simple objects into objects of desire. “Far from being a retreat from reality, fantasy is what gives shape and structure to desire and makes it possible for the neurotic subject to act upon his or her desire in the empirical world” (Grigg 1991: 34).

Language and the Thing

To further the understanding of desire, one has to look at the earliest experiences of the individual. For the infant, birth involves a separation from nothing less than her/himself in the sense of an assumed unity with mother and environment. Hence, the first encounter with the Other is also the encounter of the lack of her/himself — the object that cannot be regained (Frosh 1999: 142). The infant probably has actual distinguishable needs since there is a difference between the sensation of having a full diaper and an empty tummy. However, it is doubtful whether the infant is capable of differentiating between sensations of desire and gratification. For example, the mother/caregiver responds to the baby's discontent and, by naming him/her, attempts to soothe the child, thus introducing him/her to language. Frosh observes: “in this sense language confers individuality on the subject introducing the I–you dialectic by structuring its position with respect to culture” (Frosh 1999: 145). Speech serves as a means to receive a response from the Other, but the identification with language leads to an object-like self-loss. The subject cannot be present to itself

due to the fact that the “I”, experienced in language, is constructed through the discourse that surrounds it (Frosh 1999: 148). Therefore, the omnipotence of “I” encountered in the state of the Imaginary is under siege once it enters into the Symbolic Order:

The positioning of the subject with respect to language requires an encounter with otherness in a way that fractures the omnipotence of the mirrored “I” in the Imaginary. If the Imaginary celebrates the fictitious identity of subject and ego, it is the tearing of this identity that produces the positioning of the subject into the Symbolic order, and at the same time constructs the unconscious by repression. (Frosh 1999: 145–6)

Thus humans are primordially within language and used by language. And here is where distinct desire resides. In order not to experience the self-loss in language, the boundary between self and the other needs to be reemphasized. Although at the core of desire is the fulfilment of the subliminal loss and lack, satisfaction is impossible, as discussed earlier. Once need is articulated in language, it can be called an actual desire, emerging from the embodiment of speech. In this sense Lacan stated, “The symbol first manifests itself as killing the Thing [*la chose*] and its death results in the endless perpetuation of the subject’s desire” (Lacan 1966: 391).

To elaborate on this point let me explain the importance of the Thing (*la chose*) in the Lacanian context. “[T]he signifier, Lacan argues, can be full only because it is empty, because it brings into being with its creation a void, a gap at the heart of the Symbolic” (Rutherford 2000: 32). Yet something remains that resists symbolization — the Thing. As Freud had earlier argued, the entry into language involves a “transformation of perceptions into a system of associations” (Rutherford 2000: 33). The pre-lingual representations are essentially without substance, without anything to hold on to.⁴ These representations are at the level of the Real in the sense that they are not packaged into a thought; they are not yet wrapped in signifiers. These representations are beyond words, “unthinkable, unnameable, unspeakable” (Fink 1995b: 227). Our engagement with the objects of the world, Freud argued, is fragmented and chaotic. Once symbolized, they are organized through laws of association and combination, metaphor and metonymy. What is in the unconscious

⁴ Another term would be the German *Vorstellung*, which is what is represented by the signifiers. It is not the signifier itself, but rather a presence, image or visual idea (Fink 1995b: 227).

can only be known once it finds its way into the conscious in the gestalt of experiencing pleasure or pain. Let us take the experience of a hungry infant:

The screams of the baby are unable to provide satisfaction; only the intervention of an external other can archive a return to the equilibrium of the pleasure principle. Thus discharge of the endogenous excitation requires communication, the cry to an other — and Freud conceives of this as the origin of all moral motives: “the initial helplessness of human beings is the primal source of all moral motives. (Rutherford 2000: 34)

Thus the experience of satisfaction is an empirical one and relies from the very beginning on the Other, “a speaking subject” (Rutherford 2000: 34). Grigg describes Lacan’s thesis as “beyond desire as desire articulated to a desired object, there is the Thing” (Grigg 1991: 32). Rutherford provides the following definition of the Thing:

The Thing is both a residue that resists symbolisation and the void that symbolisation creates ... The Thing, for Freud, is a first outside: a real that never enters into the constitution of reality through language. The Thing exists prior to, and as a consequence of, the constitution of reality by the reality principle, by the transformation of perception into thought. It is the primary Other which never enters into the construction of that sifted and selected reality we inhabit, but is nevertheless present. Lacan understands sociality as organised around the attempt to capture, repudiate or control the unsignifiable Thing. (Rutherford 2000: 32–3)

The Thing is constitutive for the subject but it is loss as such, “a loss that is prior to that which is lost, prior to the lost object ... loss itself that is original ... pure loss” (Grigg 1991: 33). It marks that which cannot be signified and is unable to enter the Symbolic Order. And while it indeed follows the principles of metonymic substituting within a signifying chain, that means the objects that represent this desire are substitutable (romantic partners, expensive gadgets, etc.). However, the desire as such cannot be touched and must not be confused with the desired object. Russel Grigg defines the Thing as “that which is in me more than I am” (Grigg 1991: 34). It lies within but at the same time it remains terrifyingly alien. Fantasy, Lacan argued, as the enactment of desire, serves as a screen or barrier between the subject and the Other, behind which the Thing is located. This protective screen prevents the subject from a traumatic encounter with the Thing. The Thing is essentially ambiguous, which means that at the same time it attracts, repels, and provokes both desire and shame (Grigg 1991: 34).

Repetition/the death drive

To return to the question of the death drive, to understand the Lacanian view of the death drive, one must consider its relationship with the Symbolic Order, in which repetition compulsion plays a major role. The death drive, Lacan wrote, is not a “perversion of the instinct, but rather that desperate affirmation of life that is the purest form in which we recognize the death instinct” (Lacan 2004: 321). The death drive represents the “fundamental tendency of the symbolic order to produce repetition” (Evans 2006: 33). Lacan understood it as a form of masking of the Symbolic Order, a cultural mechanism to keep the Thing at a distance. He referred to repetition compulsion using the terms “insistence of the signifier” or “insistence of the signifying chain”, implying that the compulsion to repeat is “fundamentally the insistence of speech” (Evans 2006: 167). Language allows for difference by becoming assimilated under a sign, and through the repetition the signifying difference is made equivalent by language. As Bruce Fink explains: “All identification ... is based on the taking up of events, objects, etc. into the symbolic order, their being attributed particular words or names” (Fink 1995b: 223). Fink gives the example of a woman for whom all boyfriends have blue eyes. The signifier does not change (the boyfriends are different but not the colour of their eyes), thereby creating a serialization of substitutes. In *Seminar IX* Lacan states that repetition is a missed encounter with the Real. Hence the urge to repeat and repeat (the blue eyes of each boyfriend), because the unsignified element within the Symbolic cannot be located.

The Real, Fink writes, is “that which always comes back to the same place” (Fink 1995b: 224) because the excluded element makes it impossible for the subject to meet it. Or in other words, repetition is a missed or impossible encounter with the Real (Rutherford 2000: 38). Laplanche and Pontalis define this compulsion to repeat as an “ungovernable process originating in the unconscious” (Laplanche and Pontalis 1985: 441), hence the attempt to find the lost object is foredoomed. That the selection criterion for the boyfriend is blue eyes cannot be known consciously, because it is excluded from this signifying chain, but the chain revolves around this excluded element (Fink 1995b: 225). Unaware of this repetitive behaviour, the subject seems unable to identify what is at stake. Hence Lacan’s famous remark:

“Repetition is an insistence of signs” (Fink 1995b: 225), but whatever is “represented” through repetition is never “presented”:

It is the missing *Vorstellung* (missing in the symbolic, in the representational space of the dream — not something missing in the real) that leads to repetition. It thus seems to be situated at the level as the lost object — the object that never *was*, as such, but which is retroactively constituted as having had to have been lost. (Fink 1995b: 227–8)

Thus object a, the cause of desire, is repetition. “Object a” is the placeholder for the Real, that “cannot speak for itself” (Fink 1995b: 228). The signifier creates, and by the same token kills, the very thing it aims to represent. The lost satisfaction, the constant re-visiting of the place that is incomprehensible, is constituted by the Real. No object will ever fill the void and deliver the kind of satisfaction one is yearning for, because “the symbolic order kills the living being or organism in us, ... and only the signifier lives on” (Fink 1995a: 101).

Let me now return to the question of death and its elision in modernity. Existential questions of death and desire are at the core of human experience, yet historically, cultural attitudes have changed and shaped the individual itself, thus radically altering approaches to both death and desire. As I discussed in chapter 1, death, infused with the mystery of the Real, has lost its place in society. As life expectancy has risen so too has the cultural occlusion of death. But something else has also gained a cultural stronghold — capitalism — an economic system playing a central role in the transformation of the individual and in the emergence of a self with an eroded death awareness. Capitalism has hijacked people’s desires and funnelled them into consumerism and its related displays of status. The emergence of the Protestant ethic has long been recognised by sociologists (Weber 2000, Fromm 2001, Lemert 2011) as playing a central role in the emergence of capitalism. I want to now look more closely at how the spirit of capitalism fuels the cultures of the death drive in order to further pursue the implications of the Lacanian death drive and desire in connection to death elision in capitalism.

Desire and the case of the Protestant ethic

The Reformation was a turning point in the history of modernity. The Reformation began as a theological revolution that spread to the social, political and economic

realms. In the sociological classic *The protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism* (2000 [1930]) Max Weber famously argued that modern individualism evolved from the transformation of Protestants, during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, into the secular individuals who became the driving agents behind worldly and economic progress and success. These individuals became a force in history whose impact reverberates to this very day. Indeed, some argue that democracy, the nation-state and the free market as well as modern individualism have sprung from their development (Taylor 2007: 43; Lemert 2011: 8).

At the core of the Lutheran revolution was a new understanding of the self, or human subjectivity, brought on through one mechanism: the turn inwards. Luther's Reformation drew its revolutionary force from capturing the desire of people for more financial security and for greater protection from the institutions of the church. As Charles Lemert puts it so aptly:

The very idea of the Protestant Reformation was that it was the individual alone who acts in faith to believe and, by the time one gets to later Calvinism, the believing individual is meant to demonstrate faith by acting as if he one were among the saved — this by the hard work of building up God's world. (Lemert 2011: 8)

The church had held power through its position as mediator between humans and God. People needed to rely on the church's sacraments, attained by buying one's remission from punishment in purgatory from the Pope. Luther's doctrine uprooted the power of the church and gave people a new independence in religious matters; authority was handed to the individual.

In *The fear of freedom* (2001 [1941]) Eric Fromm explores the emergence of the Protestant ethic and its influence on the meaning of freedom. While Luther and the later Calvin gave people greater freedom from the authority of church, the flipside, so Fromm pointed out, was Luther's "emphasis on the fundamental evilness and powerlessness" of humans (Fromm 2001: 64). In order to overcome this evilness, individual will had to be demolished and submission to God became a must. Only then was there hope of receiving God's grace. Therefore, one of the crucial points of Lutheranism was the understanding of faith. Luther's Ninety-Five Theses of 1517 contained the revelation that faith was the path to God and that faith was given by God for one's salvation. Fromm described Luther's belief system:

The individual is essentially receptive in this relationship to God. Once man receives God's grace in the experience of faith his nature becomes changed ... However, man can never become entirely virtuous during his life, since his natural evilness can never entirely disappear. (Fromm 2001: 66)

In the era before Protestantism the purpose of one's life was spiritual salvation. Now with these newly articulated beliefs, especially that of one's worthlessness, the stage was set for searching for one's individual purpose outside of oneself. The individual became more and more ready for economic productivity, the accumulation of capital, obedience towards authority and subordination of one's life to economic achievements (Fromm 2001: 72). The theologian John Calvin added new layers of complexity to Luther's ethics. One can even argue that his main contribution was in systemizing, institutionalizing and internalizing Protestantism in subjects who in turn went out to change the world.

The dualism of the Protestant ethic was enhanced in Calvinism through the notion of God's radical transcendence on one side and the world, which is entrenched in sin and corruption, on the other. According to Calvin humans are totally dependent on God's grace not only for salvation but in all aspects of life (Taylor 2007: 71). In Calvinism, the transcendence of God aims to describe God's omnipresence in all realms, so that God and the world cannot be divided. Through this immanence of the divine, God acts even through the sinner's wrongdoings. Taylor writes:

The affirmation of human impotence and divine omnipotence leads to the unexpected identification of God with self and by extension world. At this point, the logic of opposition reverses itself in a logic of identity and creates the implosion of the sacred and profane. (Taylor 2007: 73)

This collapse of transcendence into immanence gave way to a new subjectivity.

The cornerstone of Calvin's school of thought was his doctrine of predestination, in which some are predestined for salvation and others for damnation. This, however, is not brought on and cannot be controlled by something a person does in life but is given pre-birth. Reasons for this selection remained a secret one was not allowed to question or dwell on. This newly held belief in the inequality of individuals, however, increased the feelings of powerlessness and insignificance already set forth by Luther. To ease this quandary, Calvin proposed that moral effort

and a virtuous life was of utmost importance, despite the fact that one's predestination could not be changed and he stressed the need for ceaseless effort to accumulate merit (Fromm 2001: 78).

With time, this striving to accumulate virtue gained more and more significance. Fromm argued that Calvin's rationalization of people as powerless and insignificant must have left individuals in an unbearable state of anxiety and uncertainty. To lessen the sting of this situation, Calvin's doctrine offered a frantic escapism, which progressively translated into seeking for worldly signs of God's benevolence (Fromm 2001: 78). Although Calvin taught his followers that worldly success were an assurance, but never the cause, of salvation, soon the hope and belief that redemption could be earned through good works and a virtuous life (or at least the pretence of one) crept in and took the movement in a new direction.

The Protestant/Calvinist pursuit of unity and salvation unfolded historically and culturally against a backdrop of high anxiety, driven by fear regarding one's unworthiness of God's benevolence — the fear of the ineffable as such. For Luther faith alone was the critical element. For Calvin, however, in order to showcase one's status as saved, one needed empirical riches and success. These belief systems organized the experience of social reality through a master signifier "God" in which arbitrary signifiers like "salvation" implied ceaseless work and financial success.

Despite this new burden of ceaseless work, Calvinism proved to be engaging for the Western world and thus had the power to transform society from within. In this line of thinking, people were now encouraged to engage directly with the world rather than retreat from it (Taylor 2007: 67). But as Fromm cautioned, work has now become an inner compulsion that goes beyond maintaining one's living standard, or simply enjoying the realization of one's productive creativity and ability (Fromm 2001: 81). Luther and Calvin's doctrines presented a picture of an individual in which the individualistic relationship to God provided the psychological preparation for the individualistic character of people's secular activities — and this forged the basis for contemporary capitalism.

This Protestant inward turn as well as the new possibility of a direct relationship between humans and God was motored by an internal desire. The Protestant ethic was grounded in the ceaseless effort for a moral and virtuous life and relentless striving for productivity. Desire was articulated through the accumulation of worldly riches as evidence that one had been chosen by God. The fantasy of being saved was based on an individualistic relationship to God and led directly into the

secular pursuits that remain a central part of contemporary society. While in this mindset the Calvinist God was now directly accessible, people still had to negotiate their perceived powerlessness and God's assumed omnipotence. We can see that anxiety and desire go hand in hand in Protestantism plus it has injected anxiety directly into the culture, where it remains at the centre of contemporary cultural formations. Believers in the Protestant ethic and the Calvinist school of thought adhered to an excessive, never-ceasing productivity and effort (repetition compulsion) in order to avoid the existential pitfalls in their belief system creating a scenario for the death drive to find fulsome expression. In the next chapter I will discuss the fallout of this existential anxiety but first I want to return briefly to Lacan's concept of *jouissance* to better understand how repetition and the pursuit of one's desires can lead to excess and pain.

Desire and *jouissance*

Jouissance is a term that is hard to translate into English. It relates to the English "enjoyment" but also carries the meaning "orgasm". *Jouissance* is a key term that takes on various meanings throughout the progression of Lacanian thinking. These meanings include *jouissance* as the pleasure of orgasm, hinting at joy that in itself is beyond communication and thus can acquire a mystical flavour. The term *jouissance* also contains the idea of desiring desire. This is distinct from desire in that the subject does not only strive to satisfy his/her desire but enjoys desiring itself. To enjoy one's desire is essential to *jouissance*. Dylan Evans explains:

In other words, desire is not a movement towards an object, since if it were then it would be simple to satisfy it. Rather, desire lacks an object that could satisfy it, and is therefore to be conceived of as a movement which is pursued endlessly, simply for the enjoyment (*jouissance*) of pursuing it. *Jouissance* is thus lifted out of the register of the satisfaction of a biological need, and becomes instead the paradoxical satisfaction which is found in pursuing an eternally unsatisfied desire. (Evans 1999: 5)

The later Lacan (1959–60/1992) understood desire as the drive that aims — unsuccessfully — at *jouissance*. There is a distinct difference between these two different versions of the *jouissance*–desire relationship. In the first version desire and *jouissance* coexist: the subject enjoys desiring and *jouissance* sustains desire. In the latter account desire aims at *jouissance*, because "desire is predicated on a lack of

jouissance, since one can only desire what one cannot have” (Evans 1999: 6). Here jouissance is aligned with pain and suffering, since desire is pursued and manifested to the point of excess. One can think about the pleasure principle as a cost–benefit analysis of a given situation, in which sometimes the renunciation of the desired object leads to a better future or the improved well-being of the subject. The pleasure principle, therefore, focuses always on the subjects’ overall enjoyment.

Jouissance, however, has an utter disregard for the potential negative long-term consequences of a decision. It is when the calculating cost–benefit homeostasis of the pleasure principle is axed that the ego experiences pain. Jacques-Alain Miller suggests that “jouissance in itself is a certain destruction, and precisely in this it differs from the pleasure principle, in its sense of a certain moderation and a certain well-being. The very name jouissance fundamentally translates what resists the pleasure principle’s moderation” (Miller 1992: 26). Russell Grigg argues that jouissance is a “traumatic irruption of an appeal to the impossible, pitiless and insatiable jouissance, enjoyment, which disrupts the homeostasis of the pleasure principle and its prolongation of the reality principle” (Grigg 1991: 32). Jouissance means ambiguity. As Grigg writes, “there is enjoyment and satisfaction here, but its kernel is essentially horrifying. It simultaneously attracts and repels, provokes both desire and shame” (Grigg 1991: 34). In this understanding, pleasure cannot be obtained without the by-product of suffering, although suffering is distinctively not enjoyed. Evans describes the link between jouissance and the death drive as follows:

The prohibition of *jouissance* (the pleasure principle) is inherent in the symbolic structure of language, which is why *jouissance* is forbidden to him who speaks, as such ... The DEATH DRIVE is the name given to that constant desire in the subject to break through the pleasure principle towards the THING and a certain excess *jouissance*; thus, *jouissance* is “the path towards death” ... Insofar as the drives are attempts to break through the pleasure principle in search of *jouissance*, every drive is a death drive. (Evans 2006: 93–4)

Jouissance is the important factor that prevents the Symbolic Order from being immune to the death drive and to compulsive repetition. Hence, desire (empirical objects), jouissance and the compulsion to repeat (object a) are connected through the death drive. The subject finds itself on losing ground, unable to attain the essence of the desired thing which has no basis in the Symbolic Order. Every drive is a death drive because it pursues its own extinction, it engages the subject in repetition and it aims at the “realm of excess jouissance where enjoyment is experienced as suffering”

(Evans 2006: 34). Jennifer Rutherford stresses that, for Lacan, “lived reality” is primarily constructed as defence, and sociality functions according to the logic of this defence:

Thus he conceives of desire as a movement that seeks to transgress the limit of the pleasure principle, and in contrast he conceives the law as a system of defence that seeks to uphold it — to maintain the distance separating the subject from the object cause of desire. (Rutherford 2000: 37)

In the Lacanian sense the death drive connotes a reaching beyond the limits of the pleasure and reality principle. Culture therefore is a product of its defence habits regarding the Thing and its desirous strivings towards the Thing.

To return to the example of the Protestant ethic, the new concept of the self (the individualized relationship to God) was concretized through individual (repeated) action, involving the ceaseless effort to live a virtuous life to showcase one’s individual relationship with and one’s election by God. This relentless drive correlates to the felt social anxiety on which modern individualism is based. This anxiety is birthed in the shadow of individuating away from a God through a change of perspective. Instead of bargaining oneself a way into heaven, through ceaseless effort and virtuous deeds, one can now assume and disguise this existential uncertainty.

The object

To return to the question of mortality, reminders of mortality are not as prevalent as they used to be but sickness, brushes with mortality, or even a moment of sincere contemplation can act as *memento mori*. Here death awareness, the interruption of the assumed permanence, has the potential to enter the realm of the uncanny, a place that cannot be embraced by rationality, or escaped by busyness, where social milestones measuring success or failure lose their importance. The realm of death is pure emptiness, where meaning liquefies and human ambition becomes pointless. In the process of dying, the wider world, the inner ring of sociality, the body, and the mind begin to fade; the body breaks down and the hard work of the ego and its illusions are shattered or once-established boundaries begin to fade. The individual encounters being-ness as neither subject nor object. The sheer existential knowledge of the body’s and mind’s decay brings forth a feeling of powerlessness, horror and

rejection. This rotting of borders and the breakdown of the binaries (world vs. me, subject vs. object, order vs. chaos) is the space where meaning collapses. The Lacanian influenced psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva describes this as abjection.

Once one is beset by abjection, Kristeva observes, the content of thought no longer has a definable object, “the object has only one quality of the object — that of being opposed to I” (Kristeva 1982: 1). The object and abjection, however, also stand as a safeguard, in that they send the subject away from the horror of sinking into this moment. Kristeva describes a

“something” that I do not recognize as a thing. A weight of
meaninglessness, about which there is nothing insignificant, and
which crushes me. On the edge of non-existence and hallucination, of
a reality that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me. (Kristeva 1982: 2)

According to Kristeva the object marks the phase in which the self is established, in which the infant separates from the mother and the individual comes into being. This is the phase in which the borders that separate the self from the other are created. As we have seen, in Lacanian theory the infant moves through the mirror stage, in which the Imaginary is grounded, and from there is introduced into the realm of the Symbolic through the acquisition of language. The object marks the horror, the threat which arises when one fears being thrown back into the pre-linguistic realm. Kristeva calls this primal repression (Kristeva 1982: 10). The object serves as a guard against the uncanny ineffable, and in guarding the self it becomes clear that “‘I’ am in the process of becoming an other at the expense of my own death, during that course in which ‘I’ become, I give birth to myself amid the violence of sobs, of vomit” (Kristeva 1982: 3).

Nothing evokes the feeling of disgust, shock and horror more than the corpse. A corpse symbolizes that which one casts away in order to live, and to function in the symbolic:

In the presence of signified death — a flat encephalograph, for instance — I would understand, react, or accept. No, as in true theater, without makeup or masks, refuse and corpses show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border. Such wastes drop so that I might live, until, from loss to loss, nothing remains in me and my entire body falls beyond

the limit — *cadere*, cadaver. If dung signifies the other side of the border, the place where I am not and which permits me to be, the corpse, the most sickening of wastes, is a border that has encroached upon everything. It is no longer I who expel, “I” is expelled. The border has become an object. How can I be without border? (Kristeva 1982: 3–4)

The abject is not only a border; it is ambiguity. In our expulsive, disgusted reaction, “revolt against” allows a space out of which “signs and the object arise”. Kristeva says:

I experience abjection only if an Other has settled in place and instead of what will be “me.” Not at all an other with whom I identify and incorporate, but an Other who precedes and possesses me, and through such possession causes me to be ... Significance is indeed inherent in the human body. (Kristeva 1982: 10)

Conclusion

Life has this uncanny push towards excess. In the beginning of the chapter I discussed the woman I encountered as a young nurse who still obsessively followed the call of her sexual desires although her decaying mind was in the end stage of dementia. This is one example of excess that happens behind closed doors but it shows that *jouissance* is deeply rooted in the human psyche. Excess, while not acutely at the centre of our cultural awareness, has certainly infiltrated the fringes of current cultural self-understanding.

Excess comes in all kinds of disguises. For instance we find evidence of excess in the shape of overeating, over-exercising, over-drinking, smoking, hoarding, gaming, shopping obsessions and various forms of exclusion and inclusion. Climate change is another form of social excess, spawned by relentless overconsumption and exploitation of global resources. Yet it is hard if not impossible to break the cycle of our own contribution to overconsumption.

Lacanian theory seeks to explain this propulsion of the subject by his or her desires. In the era before Protestantism the purpose of one’s life was spiritual salvation. In what Ariès called the era of the tame death, religion and mysticism served to keep the Thing within its bounds and provided people with the means to cope with living in the shadow of death. This worked well in a time when the social environment was tightly organized. The emergence of modern capitalism and its associated belief structures, exemplified by the Protestant ethic, settled as a deep-

seated anxiety in the midst of our culture as the cost of greater freedom — direct access to God. The pursuit of secular economic success has provided no means to escape this new form of existential anxiety. Luther's Protestantism aimed at worldly asceticism but over time the opposite effect unfolded as materialism became conflated with spirituality.

The Protestant ethic triumphed (and fails the individual) through its cruel notion that humans are inherently evil and that some are elected and others not. This ideology is incapable of providing a map to navigate our existential angst. It puts the Thing as the invisible elephant amidst our social environment, unknowingly framed by ceaseless productivity, while at the same time mortality awareness has declined. Today, death, illness, climate change, and other life-transforming occurrences simply carry no meaning for many individuals. It is difficult to be open to the existential meaning of death because of its lack of symbolization in contemporary culture. A heightened understanding of death requires letting death infuse and reframe one's life and belief systems. This change is often initiated physically through illness, trauma, loss, or the intense labour of caring for a dying person. Or one can be confronted through the gaze, when faced with a dead body. Here the abject, the physical response of encountering the Thing, is the very threat that pulls at the ego. This contemporary existential illiteracy is deeply rooted in the Protestant ethic and it comes as no surprise that death denial has taken hold of modern society.

The repercussions of this and its impact on our current self-understanding will be discussed in the following chapter. It will then become clear how a contemporary death drive is enmeshed in language, culture and individual preferences. In the meantime capitalism has hijacked desire and anchored it in consumerism, death still remains at the fringes of awareness and thus creates what I call the necrophile self.

Chapter 4

The necrophile self

Capitalism and desire: consumption and excess

In his essay, “The reality principle and the pleasure principle strike a deal” (2007), Zygmunt Bauman argues that we live in a time where the pleasure principle is married to the reality principle. Pleasure has become an integral part of everyday reality. Life for the individual is devoted to the search for pleasure. With modernity and the shift towards an obsession with consumption, desires are no longer constricted but rather encouraged through an ideology of consumerism. Consumption is understood to make one “feel better”. The maximization of consumption has become a new mechanism, a new rationality that is fuelled by instant gratification, consumer spontaneity, and credit cards (Bauman 2007: 187).

This consumerist creed is deeply intertwined with the increasing social and global unpredictability of late modernity. Shopping, Bauman notes, has become the new coping mechanism in a world that is haunted by the constant threat of change and instability. People experience an acceleration of transient partnerships, job insecurity, abruptly changing demands for skills, and an unstable community, signs of the constant flux and unpredictability of society. Bauman suggests that the living body itself becomes the only constant in a sometimes abruptly changing, untrustworthy world. As the body provides the last bastion of stability, consumerism provides a mechanism for streamlining and optimizing one’s ego and personal life. Society, Bauman contends, cannot produce continuity anymore. It is left to the individual and his/her consumerist habits (Bauman 2007: 193). The body, aging and susceptibility to disease and accidents, also reminds us of our mortality. The ever-present invitation to partake in instant consumption pushes away the fear of the future, cuts ties to the past, and helps create a superficial sense of liberation. As he writes, “The rationality of consumer society is built out of the irrationality of its individual actors” (Bauman 2007: 188). Consumerism is self-perpetuating since it is both addictive and easy, and the lure of shiny products gives false promises that one can buy predictability and stability:

The consumer market sets the finishing lines close enough to prevent desire from exhausting itself before the goal is reached, but frequently

enough for the runners never to worry about the durability of the spoils' value and for desire never to ponder frustration but always be eager to start afresh and never lose its vigour. (Bauman 2007: 194)

Slavoj Žižek's critique of capitalism and ideology provides insight into how attitudes to desire have changed. Žižek argues that capitalism has become the hidden background to which all sociality and symbolization relates. Capitalism structures the field on which many elements (master signifiers) fight for domination. The pervasiveness of this background makes it increasingly impossible to envision a world not entrenched in the capitalistic *modus operandi*. It is easier — as popular culture attests — to envision the end of the world than the undoing of capitalism. In Žižek's understanding, capital becomes the new Real, constituting a background against which all symbolizations must relate. The smooth functioning of capital is that which remains the same, that which “always returns to its place” (Žižek 2000a: 223). He also states that we are unable to envision an alternative to global capitalism since it “structures in advance the *very terrain* on which the multitudes of particular elements fight for hegemony” (Žižek 2000b: 320–1).

The ruthless expansion of capitalism, with its absolute demand for growth and progress, is in utter disregard of humans and the environment and has now reached a point at which it is threatening human existence through the proliferation of wastelands, pollution, and the extreme economic inequality between rich and poor. Echoing Žižek, Naomi Klein argues that people of the Gilded Age in the USA (between the end of the Civil War and the market crash in 1929) actually experienced a time before contemporary capitalism dominated and thus had a different vision for which to fight. This is in contrast to today:

The latest inequality chasm has opened up at a time when there is no popular memory — in the United States, at least — of another kind of economic system. Whereas the activists and agitators of the first Gilded Age straddled two worlds, we find ourselves fully within capitalism's matrix. So while we can demand slight improvements to our current conditions, we have a great deal of trouble believing in something else entirely. (Klein 2015)

Capitalism is both consuming, but it also excels in using crises for self-generation. For example, financial speculation can have a negative impact on whole populations and societies. Nowadays, the financial sector can generate large sums of money by speculating on the failure of a corporation or even on the economic struggle of whole countries. This is not an act committed by evil-spirited human beings. It is a purely

“objective”, systematic and anonymous undertaking. Capitalism appears indestructible because it uses any obstacle to propel it forward, and it is permanently self-revolutionizing and self-reproducing. In this crude focus on materialism that drives capitalism, the circulation and expansion of capital becomes an end in itself. Žižek writes:

Its dynamic of perpetual self-revolutionizing relies on the endless postponement of its point of impossibility (its final crisis or collapse) ... in capitalism, crisis is internalized, taken into account, as the point of impossibility which impels it into continuous activity. Capitalism is structurally always in crisis — which is why it is expanding all the time: it can only reproduce itself by “borrowing from the future”. (Žižek 2012: 473)

In an unpredictable social world, materialism is predictable and can be comforting, because capitalism speaks to an individualized morality lodged in the creed “follow your desires”. Contemporary capitalism has a grip on subjectivity, because it not only seduces subjects but also demands enjoyment. These demands upon the body are a form of super-ego enjoyment, the prevalent form of enjoyment of late capitalism. Drawing on Marcuse’s concept of the performance principle, one could say that pleasure has risen out of the ashes and merged with a reality that demands excessive enjoyment, mostly through the consumption of commodities. Here, even the most absurd desires (manifestations of object a) become consumable, as long as they are profitable. The subject’s cannot penetrate and withstand the capitalistic grip because capitalism is presented as freedom, which fools the individual into adhering to its standards. This freedom, however, is illusory and acts as a mere distraction while serving capitalism’s reproduction.

Consumer individualism is fuelled by phantasmatic images proliferated by modern media. In the rise of popular social media platforms like Pinterest and Instagram, seductive images accelerate and strengthen the desire to consume. As Žižek writes:

At the immediate level of addressing individuals, capitalism, of course, interpolates them as consumers, as subjects of desire, soliciting in them ever new perverse and excessive desires (for which it offers products to satisfy them); furthermore, it obviously also manipulates the “desire to desire,” celebrating the very desire to desire ever new objects and modes of pleasure. However, even if it already manipulates desire in a way which takes into account the fact that the most elementary desire is the desire to reproduce itself as desire (and

not to find satisfaction), at this level, we have not yet reached drive.
(Žižek 2006: 61)

The consuming self

Social theorists have explored the question of how capitalism alters the perception and conception of “the self”. Anthony Giddens, for example, looks at the modern individual’s preoccupation with composing an identity through image, bodily attractiveness and various self-realizing accomplishments. Self-development, he argues, is “the creation of a personal belief system by means of which the individual acknowledges that ‘his first loyalty is himself’” (Giddens 1991: 80). While emphasizing the concept of reflexivity that allows for an opening up of identity, he also points out that, while throughout history an identity or self has always been valued, modernity has brought changes in how this identity becomes nuanced. The self becomes a project for which the individual is responsible: “We are not what we are but what we make of ourselves” (Giddens 1991: 75). Further, the “trajectory of the self” is organized in the sense that it appropriates the past in order to create a future. Monitoring one’s inner reactions in relation to outside events is mandatory for the reflexive self. Reflexivity can only be accomplished by spinning a narrative of one’s inner and outer life. Of course, the story of oneself would not be complete without making, creating, and being aware of one’s body and its functions. Giddens argues that the body forms part of an “action system” which is daily honed and controlled via diet and exercise: “Experiencing the body is a way of cohering the self as an integrated whole, whereby the individual says ‘this is where I live’” (Giddens 1991: 76). The body is a focal point in the endeavour to construct a narrative of self-development, a “reflexively mobilized trajectory of self-actualization” (Giddens 1991: 79). In this imaginary construct, one’s authenticity is discovered by laying open the “true self”, removing the “false” one, and by continuously grasping new opportunities and weaving them into a “series of passages”, turning one’s autobiography into a successful story. All these endeavours aim at fulfillment of the modern ideal of the self’s trajectory. In Giddens’ words:

Fulfillment is in some part a moral phenomenon, because it means fostering a sense that one is “good”, a “worthy person”. “I know that as I raise my own self-worth, I will feel more integrity, honesty, compassion, energy and love”. (Giddens 1991: 79)

In this sense, Giddens understands reflexivity as a mental tool that anchors the body and modern self as a beacon of stability in a fleeting and fast-changing world.

The attention one's body and inner life receive can have various manifestations. In *Reinvention* (2013), Anthony Elliott draws on the concept of reflexivity to describe contemporary society as obsessed with outer appearance and modern lifestyles. Dieting, life coaching, cosmetic surgery, reality television, and other means of consumerism create shiny new products that promise an enhancement of oneself and one's experiences. Elliott argues: "the art of reinvention is inextricably interwoven with the lure of the next frontier, the break through to the next boundary, especially boundaries of the self" (Elliott 2013: 4).

The human body becomes a commodity that is highly valued and seen as a playground (or rather a battlefield) on which the evaluation of self-worth and societal values are made. Reinvention, so Elliott argues, is a central driver, not only within the personal realm, but also nationally and globally. The global electronic economy plays a central role in the ways in which corporate and institutional uncertainties (off-shoring, lay-offs, company reorganizations) force people to adapt and redefine their relations and experiences regarding intimacy, family, work, and the self. In a world in flux, these new realities play a crucial part in generating a cultural anxiety that restructures identities and contributes to a cultural obsession with change and reinvention. Elliott argues this involves a recasting of the self:

In this narcissistic condition, the self is recast as a do-it-yourself assembly kit. Reality becomes magically deflated, as there are no longer any constraints imposed by society, at the same time the self is inflated to the level of work of art [...] drunk on the narcissistic fantasies of the ego, the endlessly self-fashioning individual of reinvention society is revealed as a compulsive neurotic, addicted to repeating the highs and lows of a life made over, again and again. (Elliott 2013: 6)

Elliott pins this down to the idea that through reinvention one affirms oneself and legitimates one's experiences. He argues:

The reinvention craze paradigm extends beyond the core of the self to the body, that distracting reminder of mortality in a world where disposability has been elevated over durability, plasticity over permanence. The culture of speed and short-termism promoted by the global electronic economy introduces fundamental anxieties and insecurities that are increasingly resolved by individuals at the level of the body. (Elliott 2013: 99)

Now at the centre of contemporary anxiety is the constant validation of self. This kind of makeover response to global anxieties is quite new, since individuals are left to their own devices to work out their life and future prospects. People are judged and assessed, not on their previous accomplishments, but on their adaptability to embrace change and their willingness to succumb to the ideal of personal makeover.

Long before Giddens and Elliott, the US historian Christopher Lasch warned that the contemporary self is influenced by the ideas of privatism and absorbed by an antisocial preoccupation with self-image, appearance, bodily self-improvement, and social survival. In his book published in 1979 *The culture of narcissism*, Lasch views the change of self-conception in the shadow of capitalism as inherently negative. He argues that, in the wake of this superficial consumer culture, narcissistic personalities emerge that are unable to form caring and open relationships since they are hooked into consumer capitalism's promise to fill emotional holes. Life becomes drained of meaning, in Lasch's reading, because capitalism has become, as Žižek suggests, the backdrop of everything. Personal relationships falter in the wake of this development and are replaced by an attitude of detachment necessary to navigate the demands of the modern world and its sudden changes. This disconnection leads to the misrecognition of local, as well as global, problems as people increasingly succumb to capitalism's seductive invitation to follow one's desire. Yet, the inability to make meaningful cultural and symbolic connections leaves the individual with a deeply disturbed sense of self-worth and self-esteem. The following passage eloquently elaborates the implications of the narcissistic self as it plays out in aging patients:

the great argument for making the attempt [at psychoanalysis] at all, in the face of the many difficulties presented by narcissistic patients, is the devastating effect of narcissism on the second half of their lives — the certainty of terrible suffering that lies in store. In a society that dreads old age and death, aging holds a special terror for those who fear dependence and whose self-esteem requires the admiration usually reserved for youth, beauty, celebrity, or charm. ... "To be able to enjoy life in a process involving a growing identification with other people's happiness and achievements is tragically beyond the capacity of narcissistic personalities". (Lasch 1991: 41, quoting Kernberg 1975: 312)

This bleak analysis of the modern self has been critiqued for its negative focus on the individual as merely a cultural victim, instead of a conscious participant (Aronson 2013: 263). But Lasch is not alone in his stark view of the modern individual. Richard Sennett (1977: 333) boldly claims that narcissism is the new Protestant ethic

of contemporary society. In Chapter 3 of this thesis, I discussed Weber who proposed that the loss of ritualistic religion (Catholicism) led to a “denial of gratification for purposes of validating the self” or in different words “worldly asceticism”. By denying immediate pleasure while ceaselessly pursuing a virtuous life, one could enact this worthiness as a “chosen subject”. Sennett compares the traits of the modern narcissist with the “worldly asceticism” of Protestantism and concludes that both focus on the inner emotional life as validation of the worthy self. In Sennett’s thesis: “In both there is a projection of the self onto the world, rather than an engagement in worldly experiences beyond one’s control” (Sennett 1977: 334). This inward turn is generated and maintained through secularism and capitalism, which have erased “the belief of an experience external to the self” (p. 334). The mechanism of this narcissistic attitude is withdrawal from the environment and from others, especially if self-validation is not found through others, or if one’s self is not the centre of attention.

Narcissism and asceticism mesh because the inside is conceived as absolute reality, the search for the self — for one’s self. Optimizing mind, body, and emotions has found a major market in modern times. The individual is in constant self-optimization mode, or conversely in a state of guilt through failing to adhere to the standard of self-optimization (eating the wrong food, not exercising enough, etc.). Sennett argues that there is a flow of continuous self-denial. The flawed self is rejected (as signifying one’s inner unworthiness, which equates to a form of social death) and, because of this experienced dissatisfaction, one’s energies are constantly focused upon oneself. Self-denial and self-absorption go hand in hand for the narcissist.

If we recall that the existential anxiety at the centre of Protestantism and Calvinism was never resolved but heightened, the belief that humans are inherently evil and that one’s salvation (essentially one’s immortality) is based on the non-penetrable arbitrariness of a fickle God, narcissism provides a bastion against an existential deadlock. Brené Brown suggests that the underbelly of narcissism is shame. While she is sceptical about the frequent use of the term narcissism, she observes:

The topic of narcissism has penetrated the social consciousness enough that most people correctly associate it with a pattern of behaviors that include grandiosity, a pervasive need for admiration, and a lack of empathy. What almost no one understands is how every level of severity in this diagnosis is underpinned by shame ... Shame

is more likely to be the cause of these behaviors, not the cure. (Brown 2013: 21)

God, as master signifier, is greatly diminished; worthiness must still be negotiated through increasingly self-centred actions. Brown makes a further observation about contemporary narcissism:

when I look at narcissism through the vulnerability lens, I see the shame-based fear of being ordinary. I see the fear of never feeling extraordinary enough to be noticed, to be lovable, to belong, or to cultivate a sense of purpose. (Brown 2013: 22)

Lasch and Sennett developed critiques of capitalism and the modern self long before the obsession with the body took on new heights in the form of today's reinvention culture. The body has emerged as a mirror to the inner life of a person, and one's morals and value are judged by its surface. Having one's inner life judged by its outer appearance henceforth determines one's social life or death, since one does not appear to be a congruent being if body and mind appear to be mismatched. This requires a narcissistic reflexivity that operates in the narrow framework of contemporary immortality strategies. However, rarely stepping outside its boundaries, this reflexivity never graduates into a reflection of existential matters because of the inaccessibility of the meaning of mortality and death. Thus, it comes as no surprise that attitudes towards desires have changed as well.

Attitudes towards (empirical) desires

Fantasies of the body are the magic of our time by which an abruptly changing world seeks refuge, distraction, and defence. Empirical indicators suggest that in the West this is transforming the individual's relationship to desire. Desire is no longer viewed as something off limits. In an international study on consumer passion, social scientists Belk, Ger and Askegaard found that consumers today love to be seduced and are yearning for unity with the product of their dreams. Belk et al. define desire as a

powerful cyclic emotion that is both discomfoting and pleasurable. Desire is an embodied passion involving a quest for otherness, sociality, danger, and inaccessibility. Underlying and driving the pursuit of desire, we find self-seduction, longing, desire for desire,

fear of being without desire, hopefulness, and tensions between seduction and morality. (Belk et al. 2003: 326)

Desire, they found, is a highly charged expression that contains seduction, sexual passion, a burning drive, emotionality, and passion. Desires come alive in a social world which “directly addresses the interplay of society and individual, of bodily passions and mental reflection” (Belk et al. 2003: 329). The imagination that underlies desires is fuelled by social context, lifestyle, and value systems. Attempts to fulfil these desires often involve consuming. They suggest that an underlying concept of the self supports this system of consumption:

The modern subjectivity produces a more subtle form of power that is perceived as freedom. To do this, individuals must first come to feel that they have a free will, agency, a freedom to choose their lifestyle. This, in turn, requires that people “monitor their inner thoughts and desires” ... in order to become the sorts of people they would like to be. This does not mean that they are really free agents, but it entails a felt agency, a particular (modern) self-construction, and self-presentation. In modernity, we have a choice of selves, but becoming a choosing self is not freedom but a strategy of modern governance. (Belk et al 2003: 331)

Writing on subjectivity in modern Turkey, Belk et al. made the observation that older generation Turks with a working-class background did not see themselves as in a position to indulge their passionate desires, whether for a car or a house. The “call of duty” towards family, land, and work prompted them to take a practical stance towards their desires. They observe:

With consumer desire beyond hope, some feel that they do not have a life. But, rather than despair, they construct desire itself as unrealistic for themselves as well as many others like themselves. These are also voices not only of poverty but also of a duty-first mentality. Such a mentality reflects the Islamic notion of God’s will and the traditional cultural emphasis on the family, downplaying the individual, free will, and choice. (Belk et al. 2003: 334)

This is exactly the sentiment expressed in the classic “deferred gratification” pleasure–reality principle dichotomy, in which postponing desire is necessary in order to attain the greatest amount of pleasure at a later date. This presumes the ability to calculate and sacrifice short-term pleasures for long-term ones, the very core of reasoning. The reality principle thus functions as an inherent prolongation of the pleasure principle.

Ideologies of consumption — consuming ideologies

Ariely and Norton argue that, in order to understand consumption today, one has to consider a shift from the consumption of food to the consumption of ideas or concepts that address people's insatiable desire for stories. Materialism, they suggest, not only aims to satisfy basic needs but also to signal one's social identity, attitudes, beliefs, status, and lifestyle to others. In all forms of consumerist behaviour, there is an investment in a story, or concept. This also extends to physical consumption, because "preconceptions and ideas about consumption can act to modify the physical consumption experience itself" (Ariely and Norton 2009: 380). The way people engage with the environment, the goals they pursue, are all built upon a certain understanding, certain concepts of what they ought to immortalize or to which group they want to belong. People are driven by the desire for experience, because experiences can be shared with others or displayed in various forms of social media, (as the popularity of the "selfie" suggests). Pursuing a certain goal such as fitness or health has an impact on the consumer's purchasing decisions and thus plays into the hands of the health and fitness industry by providing a ready market for expensive sport gear, dietary advice, supplements and so on.

Consumption also seduces by offering the hope of transformation, the appeal of an altered state, which promises escape from one's mundane and trite existence. In 2013 the US corporation Apple ran a print, online, and television advertising campaign named "Designed by Apple". In one of their advertisements one can read:

This is it.
This is what matters.
How it makes someone feel.
Will it make life better?
Does it deserve to exist?

If you are busy making everything,
How can you perfect anything?
We spend a lot of time
On a few great things.
Until every idea we touch
Enhances each life it touches.

You may rarely look at it.
But you'll always feel it.
This is our signature.
And it means everything.

Designed by Apple in California. (Macleod 2013)

While there is no image of their product, the picture shows two black teenagers sharing Apple's iconic white headphones and gazing down at something outside of the picture (probably one of the Apple gadgets). Apple lures with an "experience" that promises a light-hearted change for the better. This longing for transformation is sometimes driven by nostalgia, other times by curiosity and, in the case of young Turks, as Belk et al. (2003: 335–6) argue, a disdain towards one's own non-modern environment. The same is reflected in Apple's advertisement which claims that their push towards perfection guarantees the enhancement of one's life by purchasing their product. Consumption, or the desire behind it, also targets the need for sociality or belonging. In this case, the object of desire becomes the code for entering a certain social group with a certain lifestyle, or ideals. The desire behind consumption is felt almost viscerally and is often also attractive because of its "wildness", "danger", and "immorality". Belk et al.'s interviewees often used words like "excitement", "fear", "inner turmoil", "free", "alive", and "active" to describe these yearnings (Belk et al. 2003: 337–9). Furthermore, desire is fuelled by the inaccessibility of the object of desire. Belk et al. make an interesting observation:

Although the distance, restraints, and inaccessibility themes emerged in each site, there were subtle cultural differences, with distance being greatest among the Turkish informants and least among the Americans. This helps us to understand the muting of desires among some lower-income Turks who felt that there was no hope of attaining desires. (Belk et al 2003: 340)

Ariely and Norton (2009) provide another example that suggests that even charity can function as a form of consumption. Happiness, so Ariely et al. argue, increases when people trade off their physical consumption for the benefit of others in the form of donations. However, the willingness to donate is generated by connecting with the story of an individual and her/his struggle, rather than through donating to a statistical anonymous group in need. This suggests that people need a storyline in order to connect with a group of people before they make a donation. Ariely and Norton point out that a possible reason might be that people like to "consume a view of themselves as altruistic individuals, leading to the benefit of increased well-being" (Ariely and Norton 2009: 487).

Like Žižek, Belk et al. see consumer desire as a cycle that has a self-revolutionary, self-reproducing factor. They observe:

Although desire is experienced as an emotion focused on a certain object, it is also seen as a process during which emotions change, especially with the realization of desires. The initial course of the cycle of desire is seen as involving self-seductive imagination and active cultivation of desire. Desire is cultivated and kept alive until the object is acquired or until it becomes clear that it is beyond hope, that it will never be acquired. (Belk et al 2003: 340)

Consuming concepts involves essentially adhering to the ideology inherent within an idea or concept. Ideology is an important social illusion, made of signifiers that constitute social groups or political identities. A master signifier fixes the meaning of these floating signifiers, which then become part of the structured network of meanings. In this sense, Žižek's term "ideological interpellation" carries the following meaning: "Ideologies are conceptualized as composed of signifiers that constitute the political identities of social groups, but that 'float' because they can be articulated into various constellations, so that the struggle to articulate a hegemonic ideology is always open" (Boucher 2014: 130).

Consumption, in this sense, becomes a social and ethical experience and mode of statement shackled to the capitalistic demand for enjoyment. This is also, if not especially, true for progressive causes (i.e. organic food, fair trade), as Žižek argues. Manipulative products, which promise that with their purchase a tree is planted, a child saved from running around barefoot, and so on, operate on a false state of emergency. People are propelled into activity on the grounds of guilt over their own pleasurable lifestyle and privilege. Such products have the implicit message "buy, don't think", whereas their motive is de-politicization while easing guilt. This marketing keeps capitalistic engines running while abolishing consumer guilt and deeper critical reflection. "The very act of participating in consumerist activity is simultaneously presented as a participation in the struggle against the evils ultimately caused by capitalist consumerism" (Žižek 2010a: 356). This liberal, tolerant hedonism flourishes in a time in which no break between the pleasure principle and the reality principle exists, as Bauman observes in his essay "The reality principle and the pleasure principle strike a deal" (2007). In his interpretation, human desires are aligned with capitalistic demands and practices just as Marcuse warned fifty years ago in his book *Eros and civilization* (1962 [1955]). In his thought, capitalism strips humans of their essence, and a person's desire becomes organized by a largely materialistic, productivity-oriented society.

Drive vs desire: undeadness

To understand the global, cultural, and local consequences of consumerism and its mechanism, one must carefully distinguish between drive and desire. In Žižek's understanding, the death drive does not stand in the service of total annihilation of tension (as in the Freudian idea of the nirvana principle). The death drive is in the service of self-reproduction. Desire, to reiterate, is the

standard notion of the terrifying and fascinating abyss of anxiety which haunts us, its infernal circle which threatens to draw us in, the second stands for the “pure” confrontation with *objet petit a* as constituted in its very loss, [in other words] this sole object with which Nothing is honored. (Žižek 2006: 61)

Desire is grounded in its constitutive lack. The drive, however, circles around a “gap in the order of being”:

Drive inheres to capitalism at a more fundamental, *systemic*, level: drive is that which propels the whole capitalist machinery, it is the impersonal compulsion to engage in the endless circular movement of expanded self-reproduction. We enter the mode of drive the moment the circulation of money as capital becomes “an end in itself, for the expansion of value takes place only within this constantly renewed movement. The circulation of capital has therefore no limits.” (Here we should bear in mind Lacan's well-known distinction between the aim and the goal of drive: while the goal is the object around which drive circulates, its (true) aim is the endless continuation of this circulation as such. (Žižek 2006: 61)

In order to distinguish between desire and drive, one must understand that desire is about the lost object, whereas drive is about the loss itself as an object.

That is to say: the weird movement called “drive” is not driven by the “impossible” quest for the lost object; it is a push to enact “loss” — the gap, cut, distance — itself directly. There is thus a double distinction to be drawn here: not only between *objet petit a* in its fantasmatic and postfantasmatic status, but also, within this postfantasmatic domain itself, between the lost object-cause of desire and the object-loss of drive. (Žižek 2006: 62)

The domain of the death drive is spectral undeadness. In fact, it insists in its cycle of repetition and undeadness. Again, to quote a very relevant paragraph of Žižek:

it is, on the contrary, the very opposite of dying — a name for the “undead” eternal life itself, for the horrible fate of being caught in the endless repetitive cycle of wandering around in guilt and pain. The paradox of the Freudian “death drive” is therefore that it is Freud’s name for its very opposite, for the way immortality appears within psychoanalysis, for an uncanny excess of life, for an “undead” urge which persists beyond the (biological) cycle of life and death, of generation and corruption. The ultimate lesson of psychoanalysis is that human life is never “just life”: humans are not simply alive, they are possessed by the strange drive to enjoy life in excess, passionately attached to a surplus which sticks out and derails the ordinary run of things. (Žižek 2006: 62)

What Freud called the death drive is his psychoanalytic term for immortality, obscene immortality: the evil persistence and insistence that pushes beyond life and death, a zero level and almost metaphysical dimension of a self-relating negativity — the ultimate immortality strategy.

For Lacan, desire is an ethical category in terms of *jouissance* that dismisses long-term calculations for pleasure, for an immediate push towards (and beyond) the desired object. Lacan, in saying “do not compromise your desire”, refers to the consistency with and fidelity to one’s own desires, which are beyond the pleasure principle. This is encouraged and exacerbated by contemporary materialistic immortality strategies. Hunting after one’s desires (empirical objects) is exactly what maintains the capitalist status quo and creates the many diverging lifestyles so notorious in capitalist societies in the West. The need for constant consumption concerns object *a*, which is not part of the Symbolic Order. However, it causes the desire for material objects and reinforces the capitalistic backdrop. Žižek believes that the subject is capable of radical autonomy. This sheer possibility of truly autonomous ethics does not allow for a cultural standard, because it pushes towards object *a*, which lies outside the Symbolic order:

the Lacanian *objet petit a* is the exact opposite of the Master-Signifier: not the subjective supplement which sustains the objective order, but the objective supplement which sustains subjectivity in its contrast to the subjectless objective order: *objet petit a* is that “bone in the throat”, that disturbing stain which forever blurs our picture of reality — it is the object on account of which “objective reality” is forever inaccessible to the subject. (Žižek 2000a: 239)

Object *a*, as the remainder of the primary *jouissance*, is part of the subject. Thus the subject cannot be reduced to a place in the Symbolic Order because within him or her is always that excessive thing, that something “more than itself”. This is exactly

where the modern individual runs into the knife of capitalism. Bauman's idea that the pleasure and reality principles are fused should be refined by an understanding that the contemporary hunt after one's desire does not concern pleasure, but *jouissance*. The pain and excess of this *jouissance* is not an immediate experience, during or right after consuming, but delays the consequences in forms such as financial debt and ecological disasters, fostered by the ruthless manufacturing machinery of capitalism. It is the systemic consequence of the modern (albeit manifold) modes of consumption.

Death-illiterate consumers

The contemporary creed of consumer individualism — enjoy! — gives the illusion of control of one's self and life, while discouraging reflection on the consequences of this experience-enhancing lifestyle. Aging, illness, death and decay, pollution, climate change, and so on are opaque signifiers that are unable to penetrate the shiny surface of the Symbolic and only find their way into the lives of the individual when directly confronted. Let me give you an example to flesh this theory out. In a recent *New York Times* article, Kate Bowler, a historian in her mid-thirties with stage IV cancer, talks about her struggle in a death-illiterate environment. For her earlier book *Blessed: a history of the American prosperity gospel* (2013), she researched a popular belief among Christians that those with the “right kind of faith” are granted wealth and health from God. This belief is partially based on the American metaphysical tradition of the “New Thought”, which Bowler explains as “a late-19th-century ripening of ideas about the power of the mind: Positive thoughts yielded positive circumstances, and negative thoughts, negative circumstances” (Bowler 2016b).

During her research, Bowler encountered televangelists with “spiritual formulas for how to earn God's miracle money”. She visited mega churches, undertook pilgrimages and interviewed believers from various backgrounds. She says, “If there was a river running through the sanctuary, an eagle flying freely in the auditorium or an enormous, spinning statue of a golden globe, I was there” (Bowler 2016b). In this tradition, spirituality is conflated with materialism. To Bowler's surprise, even Mennonites, known for their humble appearance and simplicity, cannot resist the pull of God's grace in the shape of quasi-spiritual abundance, wealth and luxury. Bowler argues that the American fascination with the power of

the mind manifests in the popular self-help genres used to answer difficult questions about hardship and disease, why some people are healed and some not:

The modern prosperity gospel can be directly traced to the turn-of-the-century theology of a pastor named E. W. Kenyon, whose evangelical spin on New Thought taught Christians to believe that their minds were powerful incubators of good or ill. Christians, Kenyon advised, must avoid words and ideas that create sickness and poverty; instead, they should repeat: “God is in me. God’s ability is mine. God’s strength is mine. God’s health is mine. His success is mine. I am a winner. I am a conqueror.” Or, as prosperity believers summarized it for me, “I am blessed”. (Bowler 2016b)

For people following the prosperity gospel, the term “blessed” has become their ideology, a master signifier under which one affirms “God’s goodness” and Jesus’ sacrifice, so humans can live in abundance. The idea of “being blessed” merged into an American phenomenon in which people feel encouraged to excuse their excessive consumptions, their *jouissance*, as God’s will. Bowler stresses:

Blessed is a loaded term because it blurs the distinction between two very different categories: gift and reward. It can be a term of pure gratitude. “Thank you, God. I could not have secured this for myself.” But it can also imply that it was deserved. “Thank you, me. For being the kind of person who gets it right.” It is a perfect word for an American society that says it believes the American dream is based on hard work, not luck ... This is America, where there are no setbacks, just setups. Tragedies are simply tests of character. (Bowler 2016b)

The signifier “being blessed” creates meaning that occurs at the site of the Other, and the big Other here is the God of the prosperity gospel. Material abundance is seen as a worldly recast of God’s benevolence, but it also spawns death-illiterate subjects, who are incapable of relating to illness or death without their predetermined map of signifiers. “Blessed” is their defence strategy through which they protect themselves from the thing. Troubles, like illness and death, are merely seen as testing one’s character, or as punishment for scorning God. The inability to let the meaning of death penetrate the subject’s awareness has to do with the non-symbolized reality behind death and illness, a reality that Bowler, as somebody “critically ill with cancer” (Bowler 2016a), is forced to confront. The believers are unable to meet Bowler where her life becomes consumed by illness and death, because these concepts remain opaque to them. Lacanian psychoanalyst Bruce Fink observes that

individuals keep nudging against certain terms, with which they cannot establish a connection:

It might be a term like death for instance, or any other term which seems opaque to the analysand, a sort of repeated endpoint in what he or she says, which always seems to put an end to associations, instead of opening things up. Here the analysand is, in a sense, encountering a total opacity of meaning — he may well know what the words mean in his mother tongue, remaining ignorant, however of what they *mean* to *him*, their special, personal meaning that has some kind of subjective implication. The subject here is eclipsed by a master signifier without meaning. (Fink 1991: 27)

This death illiteracy surfaces when interacting with people. A well-meaning believer told Bowler's husband that everything happens for a reason. Bowler writes about the encounter:

"I'd love to hear it," my husband said.

"Pardon?" she said, startled.

"I'd love to hear the reason my wife is dying," he said, in that sweet and sour way he has.

My neighbor wasn't trying to sell him a spiritual guarantee. But there was a reason she wanted to fill that silence around why some people die young and others grow old and fussy about their lawns. She wanted some kind of order behind this chaos. Because the opposite of #blessed is leaving a husband and a toddler behind, and people can't quite let themselves say it: "Wow. That's awful." There has to be a reason, because without one we are left as helpless and possibly as unlucky as everyone else. (Bowler 2016b)

The inability to relate to the meaning of death and illness is not only a shortfall of people adhering to the prosperity gospel. Bowler observes the same kind of unease in other friends, no matter if they are of academic or "hippie" background. Researchers urged Bowler to "out-know" her disease while the hippies pushed her towards "healing foods". The master signifier, whether it is "being blessed", "living naturally", or "knowledge", serves to deflect the thing. Regarding the Christian ideology, she remarks sharply:

The prosperity gospel popularized a Christian explanation for why some people make it and some do not. They revolutionized prayer as an instrument for getting God always to say "yes." It offers people a guarantee: Follow these rules, and God will reward you, heal you, restore you ... My world is conspiring to make me believe that I am special, that I am the exception whose character will save me from the grisly predictions and the CT scans in my inbox. I am blessed.

The prosperity gospel holds to this illusion of control until the very end. If a believer gets sick and dies, shame compounds the grief. Those who are loved and lost are just that — those who have lost the test of faith ... There is no graceful death, no *ars moriendi*, in the prosperity gospel. There are only jarring disappointments after fevered attempts to deny its inevitability. (Bowler 2016b)

This kind of death illiteracy is at the base of Kellehear's suggestion that death awareness has been eroded, as discussed in the Chapter 1 of this thesis. Stigma, Kellehear suggests, is a reaction to avoid defeat, as well as the suppression of a sincere, personal connection with the meaning of the word "death". Death establishes the incoherency of this ideology. Death is a fissure through which the real pushes itself back into our lives, colliding with the ideology of its effacement of stigma. Bowler describes the undoing of her own desires and beliefs through her illness:

CANCER has kicked down the walls of my life. I cannot be certain I will walk my son to his elementary school someday or subject his love interests to cheerful scrutiny. I struggle to buy books for academic projects I fear I can't finish for a perfect job I may be unable to keep. I have surrendered my favorite manifestoes about having it all, managing work-life balance and maximizing my potential ... Cancer requires that I stumble around in the debris of dreams I thought I was entitled to and plans I didn't realize I had made.

But cancer has also ushered in new ways of being alive ... everything feels as if it is painted in bright colors. In my vulnerability, I am seeing my world without the Instagrammed filter of breezy certainties and perfectible moments. I can't help noticing the brittleness of the walls that keep most people fed, sheltered and whole. I find myself returning to the same thoughts again and again: *Life is so beautiful. Life is so hard.* (Bowler 2016b)

Interestingly, both spirituality (or God) and death hint at the un-symbolizable, the unknown or mystical, that is the very driver, the very desire, of these congregants. However, Bowler, being caught in the quicksand of the thing, is now staring into the abyss of her own vulnerability, which is opposite to and disproportionate to (capitalist) ideologies that promise control and distraction. The capitalist demand to enjoy! is surely exaggerated for the ones buying into the ideology of "being blessed", and their denial (as well as the unease of Bowler's friends) is essentially heightened by consumerism. Although death illiterate and unable to be present to the difficult emotions arising in the shadow of a terminal diagnosis, they attempt to break through the walls of their symbolic shackles through excess accumulation. That is the mode of jouissance, a path towards death, towards the Real.

Despite the vast choices of experiences or ideologies, consumption is a dominating force. Letting these non-sensical master signifiers inject new meaning into well-groomed lives might seriously undermine the scheme of capitalism. Naomi Klein writes of her denial of climate change:

I denied climate change for longer than I care to admit. I knew it was happening, sure. But I stayed pretty hazy on the details and only skimmed most news stories. I told myself the science was too complicated and the environmentalists were dealing with it. And I continued to behave as if there was nothing wrong with the shiny card in my wallet attesting to my “elite” frequent-flyer status.

A great many of us engage in this kind of denial. We look for a split second and then we look away. Or maybe we do really look, but then we forget. We engage in this odd form of on-again-off-again ecological amnesia for perfectly rational reasons. We deny because we fear that letting in the full reality of this crisis will change everything. (Klein 2014)

While not every member of society participates in compulsory consumption or in excess, they remain hooked into its networks of consumption. One needs to buy meat and vegetables from the supermarket; one prefers to rely on information supplied by mass media and short-lived technology; one needs transportation and housing and so on. The choices for each of these forms of consumption have expanded exponentially with the evolution of capitalism. Whether one decides to adhere to a liberal tolerant hedonism and its ideology or prefers to live off the grid, no matter if one enjoys one’s consumption or one displays an aversion towards it, in contemporary times, the generation of meaning is linked to capital. The modern way of desiring and consumption is ever-present and impacts on the life of all members of society. Living in contemporary society means, whether you like it or not, you are (to whatever degree) a contributor to excess.

Perverved immortality strategies

To return to Bauman’s idea of an immortality strategy by fusing both his and Žižek’s theories, the systemic destruction and violence of our contemporary times becomes clearer. Zygmunt Bauman points out that his book, *Mortality, immortality and other life strategies* (1992), was not meant to be read as a study of something necessarily dangerous or unhealthy, but rather aimed to be a study of “liminal situations”, of human strategies to deal with the most existential issues that are by their nature

impossible (Bauman in Jacobsen 2011: 383). It is more of a human bargaining with the aim to postpone, defeat, disarm death or escape the fact of mortality (or the impermanence of things as such). His *Mortality, immortality and other life strategies* (1992) is, as such, not concerned with the event of death but with the way death is coped with, its effects and impact on life areas that have no direct connection with death. In an interview, Bauman described this focus as “the presence of death as a ghost haunting the totality of life” (Bauman in Jacobsen 2011: 386). He further observes:

our presence-in-the-world is totally without foundations and therefore meaningless and absurd, yet the same facilities that allow us or force to be aware of that absurdity make of us obsessive meaning-makers. We are, simultaneously, victims of absurd and its indefatigable fighters/conquerors. (Bauman in Jacobsen 2011: 386)

On a physical level, seeking immortality is impossible. However, through prolongating life on a social level, we seek to leave behind a legacy, evidence of having lived a life of meaning. These sublime forms of immortality are, in Bauman’s words:

forms of “ethereal living”, in the sense of continuing to be present in human memory and never disappearing from it without chance of resurrection; not “being un-dead” is here at stake, but “being un-forgotten” — reminding ourselves to the living through the (durable, perhaps even indestructible) traces of our presence. (Bauman in Jacobsen 2011: 399)

Immortality, in this sense, can also be read as a defence strategy against helplessness, felt vulnerability, and our inability to control the existential cycles of birth and death. Bauman is right when he states that immortality strategies are not dangerous, since they are a human way to build culture, to make sense of our existence and to build a bridge from life into death. Yet in contemporary times, immortality strategies are infused with a lethal death drive that enjoys excess, produces excess waste, ever new ways of exploitation and the destruction of our ecosystems and human lives. Bauman mentions “survivalism” as the shadow side of immortality strategies, because it “is not about immortality or eternity: it is about surviving others — and when brought to its radical, and logical extreme, the survivalist obsession may well lead, as it all-too-often does, to murder as the surest means to that purpose” (Bauman in Jacobsen 2011: 389).

In rich countries, the majority of people do not commit or experience violence. However, capitalist choices make most of us unconscious participants in a global culture of violence. In April 2013, a factory building in Bangladesh collapsed and killed over 1000 workers. The collapse of the Rana Plaza Building has been called the deadliest disaster in the history of the garment industry globally. Apparently on the morning of the tragedy, the 3639 workers refused to enter the eight-story building because of strong evidence that it was unsafe. The owner of the building brought in gang members and forced the workers into submission with violence and threats to take away their pay (Institute for Global Labour and Human Rights 2017). The disaster gained global attention because Bangladesh is the world's second-leading exporter of clothing after China. The world's biggest fashion retailers like Walmart, Zara, and H&M produce their garments in Bangladesh, because it has the lowest wages in the world for garment workers (Yardley 2013). So-called fast fashion is a major driver of overconsumption in the West. Fast fashion stands for accelerating trends and shortening seasons, which means that garments are already outdated before they leave the shelves. Whereas fashion retailers exchanged their stock twice yearly in the past, fast fashion requires restocking many times a year. This shows that the hunt for the latest fashion has become a prevalent immortality strategy in which one aims continuously to tweak one's social status through outer appearance. Recently, newsweek.com exclaimed that fast fashion is creating an environmental crisis since its production has a major negative impact on the environment, since the low quality of clothing with its highly processed fibres renders it unfit for re-use and recycling (Wicker 2016).

Immortality strategies centre around an identity of the self which serves as a cover for the proficient sense of lack and insufficiency at the very core of identity. While politics and society serve to fill these gaps, however, self-labelling and self-definition are bound to fail. Just like Freud and Lacan, Žižek has argued in *The sublime object of ideology* (1989) that the decentred self is haunted by its lack and insufficiency. As Žižek emphasizes, the self is marked by a fundamental antagonism, hence the self-construct is fundamentally unstable and always on the edge of crumbling apart, because it is always failing to live up to the dreamed version of oneself.

Fantasy here shields the constitutive lack of the psyche, and the Other serves as receiver of our own projections of conflicting passions and ambivalences. This unacknowledged primordial lack remains and finds its confirmation within the more

destructive and negative aspects of contemporary society — the death drive in action. As Žižek argues in the *The ticklish subject* (2000c), a postmodern world generates strong ideologies. Globalization, he argues, is a colonization by the market of more and more aspects of human lives, in which one can observe an acceleration in the generation of signs, symbols, and significations. The many lifestyles available to choose from, plus advances in technology and communication, erode meaning and value. The self has become an ambiguous and ambivalent player in a global game that is bound to continue with its self-affirming strategies.

Contemporary society provides an ocean of miscellaneous choices regarding how to conduct oneself. Traditions have crumbled and social reforms have provided new freedoms for minorities and the unprecedented power of choice. One can define oneself as black, white, or neither; homosexual, metro-sexual, or anything one favours; as professional, artist, spiritual seeker, fashionista, vegan, paleo, blogger, stay-at-home mum, or working mum. The list of possibilities and possible combinations is infinite and provides the allurements of a mastery over one's identity. While this has good consequences, for instance as anyone who has come out as trans, queer, bi- or homosexual can attest, many so-called lifestyle choices are increasingly ensnared in marketing tricks.

The death drive is a sticking point in this vicious circle, and beyond it is the innate drive to destroy oneself and others. Just as Marcuse observed, our high-maintenance, progress-driven culture is only possible through the power of destruction (think about fast fashion and the deaths of the factory workers in Bangladesh).

While immortality strategies are probably as old as human culture, the alignment of human desires with capitalistic demands and practices brings a new destructiveness into play. The contemporary obsession with shaping, designing and altering one's identity or self is maintained, permeated, fixated on, and also corroded and threatened by materialist desires. This peculiar sense of self stands in direct interchange and reciprocity with contemporary manifestations of the death drive, a force of excess leading towards destruction and violence. Thanatos is a destructive force meshed within society and the illusory self of the individual.

The lack of death awareness is the foundation of a consumerist creed that has taken over the subliminal manipulation of the individual, who now has difficulty making choices that are non-supportive of modern capitalist practices. I would argue that death awareness runs counter to the shallow, yet excessive, pleasures that are

offered by the capitalist status quo. Immortality strategies are now more powerful than ever.

Conclusion: the necrophile self

Any ordinary dictionary would define necrophilia as the love of corpses or having a sexual interest in corpses. As clinical paraphilia, necrophilia is classified on a sliding scale, “whereby necrophiliac tendencies are rated from the most innocuous to the most heinous” (Aggrawal 2009: 319). While the “platonic necrophiles” (Aggrawal 2009: 317) merely play with the thought of necrophilia (role play, fantasizing), they never touch a real body. The classic necrophile needs the tactile visceral proximity of the dead for sexual arousal. Their actions are on a sliding scale from being close to the corpse without touching, to sexual intercourse, to mutilating the dead body. Most dangerous is the homicidal necrophile who does not blench from committing murder. Eric Fromm, however, gave a different definition of necrophilia as love of all things dead, bringing to the concept a much broader cultural dimension. Although Fromm explicitly rejected Freud’s theory of dual drives, his work remains indebted to Freud (Fromm’s theory of biophilia and necrophilia was inspired by Freud’s theory of the dual drives as I have discussed in chapter 2). Fromm’s recognition of the malignant psychopathological core of destructiveness is a useful addition to Freudian theory. Fromm targeted the individual’s infatuation with materiality, as well as the social currents which support materialism.

Eric Fromm’s idea of necrophilia is a malignant character trait shaped by social reality or one’s socio-economic environment, which essentially shapes one’s orientation to the world. In a globalizing world in which personal connections are eroded by fast-paced changes to one’s economic, social and ecological environment, consumption and materialism, as agents of meaning, are encouraged. To translate Fromm’s idea of necrophilia (the passionate attraction to all that is dead, sickly and putrid) into our contemporary time, it is not the kind of maliciousness towards one another that Fromm described. The maliciousness has crept into the fibres of our being or character (in Fromm’s words) in subtle, unacknowledged ways, through our embroilment with consumerism as the new, perverted immortality strategy. This maliciousness is displaced and plays out on a local and global level, as we can see in the example of fast fashion and the deaths of the Bangladeshi garment workers.

Just as consumerism is now in the fibres of our very being, capitalism has been relegated to providing the social backdrop. The assumed permanence of the capitalist ideology and its materialistic, self-focused individual is threatened by a shift in perspective, which could be through a master signifier like death or illness. It is as if, for the first time, one is looking back at one's psychical birthplace and finding nothing but the Thing staring back. When getting too close to the Thing, the fabric of the Symbolic and Imaginary, these meaning-making bastions start unravelling, and one is confronted with the nature of impermanence, or what Julia Kristeva called the abject. Lisa Downing writes in her book *Desiring the dead: necrophilia and nineteenth-century French literature* (2003):

Necrophilia hints at the imaginative collusion between life and death, an ambitious leap between the physical and the metaphysical. The obscure spark of desire in necrophilia lies precisely in the gap between the living erotic imagination and the object that is beyond desire. Fantasy operates by bridging the gap that is the threshold between the subject and the object of desire. (Downing 2003: 1–2)

In a normal sexual encounter, two bodies are meant to fuse into one. The orgasmic/orgasmic experience renders the singularity of the human body obsolete, and for a short moment one experiences “le petite mort”, a small death in which one's singular status falls into oblivion. Ideally, physical, mental and spiritual union with another being happens. The necrophile lover, however, does not seek to dissolve his singular status by fusing it with another living body. He or she is not bothered by the abject and dances on the edge of object dissolution. Hence the sexual attraction:

That body is just lying there, but it has what it takes to make me happy. The cold, the aura of death, the smell of death, the funereal surroundings, it all contributes ... Sure, I find the odor of death very erotic. There are death odors and there are death odors ... There is also this attraction to blood. When you're on top of a body it tends to purge blood out of its mouth, while you're making passionate love. You'd have to be there, I guess. (Morton 2017)

A necrophiliac union is not achieved through the fusion of bodies but through the breakdown of the binary of life and death, driven by a certain kind of curiosity about death. The dead body is a doorway to the ineffable. The mutilation of corpses often plays a central role for the clinical necrophile. As the body needs nourishment, so does the making of consumer individuality need constant new input in order to be sustained or to evolve. These are experiences of desires. The nourishment comes

from the world outside. The socio-economic environment not only reinforces the (self-) perception of the modern individual, it also maintains this self and reinforces its structures. The aim of the death drive is to desire, to keep the subject stuck in a vicious cycle of production and overproduction — of making, composing and reinventing the self. Fromm's conception of evil as a malignant form of destructiveness describes necrophilic tendencies, whether individual or cultural. Evil rises to the surface on the back of the oppressed and repressed, which pushes to be re-integrated into reality. These inner and outer forces create necrophilic tendencies in the self, the individual, and from there seep back into the very fabric of our societal structures.

The attitudes towards desire have changed so that desire is now felt on a visceral level, at a time when the body is the last bastion of continuity in a world of accelerated change. The obsessive pursuit of one's desire creates an illusion of a freedom of choice that plays into the modern subject's assumption of autonomy or freedom to conduct him/herself by the will to choose. The hidden backdrop of capitalism, to which all symbolization, all ideology, must relate, supports this. Death denial anchored in consumerism (a contemporary immortality strategy) is the curse of late modernity beyond which our latent necrophilic mental structures have not been able to operate. As Wittgenstein remarked, "the limits of the language (the language which I understand) means the limits of *my* world" (Wittgenstein 1999: 89) and the meaning of the word "death" is largely occluded in the West. The occasion of illness or death points out the incongruence of modern ideologies. Essentially, the necrophile self is the illusion of an independent self, which at its core has fused the reality and pleasure principles, leading to excess and overconsumption. This fusion corresponds to the modern (perverted) immortality strategy (the obsessive meaning-making attempt) of the necrophile self that is located within the death drive, the spectral undeadness that demands an enjoyment of life in excess — *jouissance*. Death illiteracy is the consequence of the excluded master signifier that has the potential to undermine capitalism's demand to enjoy.

When death is not only misunderstood, but also emotionally avoided in order to maintain the functioning of societal structures, a lot of energy is used to maintain cultural belief systems based on a lack of emotional involvement with the issue of death. Culture, however, is embedded in the excess of its denial. As I have argued in this chapter, the systemic destructive drive manifests in an array of (often

pathological) cultural and global tendencies lodged within the very construct that is closest to the individual: the self.

In the next chapter I explore one of these manifestations of the death drive — or death's visibility — in the form of modern (entertainment) media and how it represents death and violence. This area is of particular interest since death on screens is a daily occurrence, be it in the news or for entertainment purposes. These deaths are often violent and gruesome, yet they miss the very aspect that would make them valuable for developing death literacy, which is their existential dimension.

Chapter 5

Death in the media

I have argued that the death drive is lodged in the very being of the modern self and plays itself out on a personal, as well as global, level. Although the emotional reality of death is largely ignored and underestimated on the social level, strangely, death remains a presence in everyday life. Popular visual media exemplifies this, for example, where the necrophile self manifests in the ubiquity of violence presented and consumed via screens.

By way of introduction to this chapter, as a child, I watched more television horror than most of my peers. There were no restrictions on what I was allowed to watch or time curfews set during weekends and vacations. In addition to this media permissiveness, I was raised by a grandmother who was obsessed with horror movies, so much so, that I was the only child allowed into the ‘over eighteen’ section of the local video rental store. By age ten, I had watched all the horror movies available on German mainstream television, such as *Poltergeist*, *The omen*, *Rosemary’s baby*, *The exorcist*, along with many zombie and vampire films, the Freddy Krueger series, *Hellraiser*, and more.

At the age of 18, I went to the movies to see *Saving Private Ryan*. It was the first time that I had seen so much blood and gore on a large cinema screen and even my well-trained movie mind was shocked at seeing war depicted so realistically. However, ever since I left home at 17, I have not watched television on a regular basis. In fact, I did not even own a television for a long time. However, when I did occasionally go to the movies or watch a show, I was struck by the acceleration of violence occurring in the form of the depiction of hyper-real, gruesome screen deaths. My tolerance level for consuming violence has lessened since I was a child. I now detest watching violence and gore and actually refuse to watch horror movies. In researching this chapter, I tried to watch the notorious television series *The walking dead*, but after one and a half episodes: things cannot be unseen! I decided that I was no longer able to countenance the carnage. The film theorist Gwyn Symonds came to a similar decision to limit her research to “mainstream viewing choices”. However, this was only after she first almost violated her own comfort zone to establish the limits of what she was capable of as a researcher. She observes:

I stood in front of a video store turning over in my hands a DVD that was a compilation of actual executions, ostensibly put together as an anti-capital punishment tract and then walked away from buying it to view for research purposes. So I discovered my threshold as a researcher and a consumer. Perhaps, being an audience member will always triumph over being an academic in the end, especially when it comes to texts representing violence. (Symonds 2008: 210)

This chapter addresses the new visibility of death, particularly death as portrayed in film and television and other forms of media, like video games and social media websites. The emergence of the hyper-real depictions of violence and destruction along with their broad appeal and acceptance (while attitudes towards real-life death remain problematic) speaks of a deeply distorted relationship to the subject of mortality. Death's new media presence seems to be intrinsically interwoven with the subject of violence; however, in this chapter I will not delve into the gory details of the horror genre. Instead, I will look at the proliferation of violent imagery, its impact, the evolution of violent entertainment, and the emotional response and responsibility of the viewer, in order to identify the make-up of the necrophile self and its reciprocal relationship with media and entertainment. This is especially relevant when one takes into account that the average time per day that people spend on screens (TV, computer, smartphone and tablet) is between 5 and 10 hours, depending on the country (Frommer 2014).

The proliferation of imagery of death and violence

Geoffrey Gorer's essay "The pornography of death" (1955) is a classic study of the modern taboos around death. In this essay, Gorer argued that death as media entertainment has replaced sex as the new taboo subject. In the aftermath of World War II, people started to engage with the subject of sex while death became the new taboo. However, with the onset of this taboo, a mass audience emerged that longed to push beyond this taboo by showing curiosity in unnatural and violent deaths. Gorer labelled the *jouissance* around this form of entertainment pornography, in order to highlight the brutal and exploitative character of screen deaths and their deprivation of the usual emotional responses of grief and mourning.

But have these unmourned, unnatural and violent screen deaths increased since Gorer wrote this essay in the 1950s? As I have discussed earlier, in the introduction to this thesis, the conservative group Parents Television Council states in their 2007

report that violence in TV, especially prime-time TV, has exponentially increased between 1998 and 2006 (Parents Television Council 2007). Websites like moviebodycounts.com and bodycounters.com (their slogan is “A friend watches movies with you – A good friend helps you count the bodies!”) are devoted to tracking screen deaths. However, these websites are more amateurish since their readers seem to enjoy body counting as a hobby, rather than for research purposes.

According to more methodological studies that use content analysis to assess the frequency and quality of screen violence and deaths, there has indeed been an increase in deaths and violence on screen. The latest study on body counts, or screen deaths, is from 2012, and was commissioned by the website funeralwise.com, a site dedicated to “help you capably navigate all your funeral experiences” (Funeralwise.com 2017). This study (Funeralwise.com 2013) concludes that the top three deadliest television shows are the immensely popular zombie feast AMC series *The walking dead*, the CINEMAX series *Strike back*, followed by NBC’s *Revolution*. These shows account for 40 per cent of the total dead bodies in the investigated shows, with an average of 25 dead per episode. Of these deaths, 44 per cent died of gun violence and 19 per cent from knives or blades (the second most prominent weapons of choice). 89 per cent of the dead were male. However, while men mostly died through gun violence (50 per cent), women were more often killed by other means such as strangulation or beatings (70 per cent). (This leads to the consideration of whether the victimization of women is viewed differently, or whether this is a reflection of reality.) Finally, in comparison with an earlier body-count study also done by funeralwise.com, they found a 12 per cent increase in violent screen deaths. Such findings accord with Gorer’s observation that screen deaths are unnatural, extremely violent and not mourned.

Already in 2003, the sociologist Danielle Soulliere had come to the conclusion that prime-time television shows were predominantly about violent crimes and that narratives of (attempted) murder were overrepresented. Although in reality statistically these kinds of crimes are in decline, Soulliere fears that the high interest in crime shows might skew, if not undermine, the viewer’s understanding of crime and criminal justice (Soulliere 2003: 13). Analysis of the motives of the fictional perpetrators of violence rarely addresses the social-economic issues that lead to violence. Instead, explanations predominantly focus on the individual’s character, such as the perpetrator’s moral derangement, internal monstrosity, or mental

health issues. Again, the frequency of these fictional motives does not match reality (Soulliere 2003: 28–9). Soulliere concludes:

The overemphasis on relatively rare incidents of violent crime such as murder may be attributed to the escapist nature of entertainment television ... which is fueled by the tendency to dramatize crime shows by presenting extraordinary rather than ordinary events. It is precisely because murder is not the stuff of everyday life that it finds itself a prominent feature of entertainment television. Violent crime, especially murder, strikes at the very core of our humanity and is therefore fascinating, dramatic and entertaining. (Soulliere 2003: 30)

What about the increase in the detailed brutality and hyper-real imagery of screen deaths? The media researcher Gregory Desilet argues that traditional storytelling works with suspense and surprise in order to create desire and curiosity in the audience. Suspense arises through the withholding of information at a crucial point within the story in order to create an appetite and curiosity for the unfolding narrative. Surprise is the fulfillment of this appetite. They both enhance the experience of story, which would otherwise be a boring way of relaying information. In this way, a story can be told over and over again, whereas the news loses its appeal through repetition. The horror genre (as most genres that rely on violence) amplifies suspense and surprise into dread and shock. However, the genre must continue escalating its levels of horror in order to retain its shock value. The shock effects of horror films, therefore, have now moved into hyper-realistic and ultra-graphic depictions of brutality and violent death (Desilet 2006: 242–3).

However, in October 2016, an article in *The Guardian* asked whether television has reached “peak gore”, assessing the extremely brutal season 7 premiere of the already gory TV hit series *The walking dead* and the new TV show *Ash vs. evil dead* (O’Neill 2016). According to *Slate Magazine*, the premiere of season 7 of *The walking dead* attracted 17 million viewers but dropped below 12.5 million by mid-season, apparently due to its unsatisfying storyline (Adams 2016). Phelim O’Neill of *The Guardian* wondered whether the grizzly violence of the show had been pushed to a saturation point, in which even an audience that usually enjoys horror is left behind. O’Neill recaps an episode of *Ash vs. evil dead*:

Then came the capper, so to speak, as the guts, having snared Ash, pull him headfirst into the corpse via the rectum. Cue even more slapstick as Ash struggles to loosen himself from this bizarre predicament. It’s bloodless, but far from dry as Ash is covered with a different bodily fluid, one that stinks him up for the rest of the

episode. It's hard to count just how many taboos were broken in this sequence, but it's clear that nothing like this has happened on television before. Will it, indeed can it, ever again? (O'Neill 2016)

O'Neill goes on to lament the gruesome and extreme killing of a favourite character in the opening episode of *The walking dead* (season 7) that apparently struck at the heart of the zombie series' fans:

From a technical standpoint, Glenn's demise was no different than anything on *Ash vs. Evil Dead*; the gooey innards of one dummy head are not much different from that of another. Glenn's pulping looked pretty similar to the damage meted by Ash's possessed 1973 Oldsmobile as it spun its wheels on the heads of those it ran over, grinding their features into a bloody mess. There it's a side gag: here it was, for many, a step too far. Even after their annoying "fool me once" routine with Glenn's fake-out death last season, this was still tough to take in what was, overall, a particularly brutal and bleak hour of television. Online chatter is full of viewers claiming this is the final of many last straws, others annoyed that there's suddenly a lot of horror in this zombie TV show. (O'Neill 2016)

In the commentary on this article, a father who regularly watches the series with his son writes:

I'm a big fan of TWD. So is my son. The season opener was so damn graphic that I had a talk with him afterward. I've never felt as if I had to do that before. I put it to him simply, "what'd you think?" He looks at me and says one word, "disgusting." He's 14 and isn't phased by much. That episode got to him and it got to me too. When I was 14 (1984) that kind of gore would have been restricted to a movie theater with a big fat "R" rating and would have been considered extremely graphic. Now it's on television. I'm not going to stop watching, yet. But if they continue to "push the envelope" when it comes to gore and violence on AMC, I won't be watching much longer. It's unnecessary and it detracts from the story. (O'Neill 2016: comments)

Extreme violence of this kind is often labelled as appropriate for an audience of 13 years and older (PTC 2013: 5). For instance, the highly violent television show *Revolution* (rated TV-14, suitable for fourteen year olds), exposed its audience to an average of 91.5 acts of violence per episode during its autumn 2013 screenings. The Parents Television Council warns that this "is equivalent to a child seeing one act of violence every 39 seconds" (PTC 2013: 6). The AMC cable network used to rate *The walking dead* TV-14, then changed it to TV-MA (mature audiences) after the Parents

Television Council challenged the network to adjust its rating due to the show's severely violent content (PTC 2013: 2).

Impact of imagery of death and violence

Despite many parents auditing their children's viewing, children are surrounded by a culture that endorses entertainment violence. Research suggests violent themes in media and the play of children have increased, as seen in a recent study addressing the popular LEGO toy. The LEGO company has been in business since 1949, and its iconic toys are beloved by children and adults alike. However, in recent years, LEGO products have become increasingly violent, especially with the onset of themed kits featuring contemporary movies. 40 per cent of scenarios depicted in recent LEGO catalogues contain some form of violence or threatening behaviour, suggesting that LEGO is responding to the general trend of children's entertainment that includes a steady increase in levels of excitement (Bartneck, Min Ser, Moltchanova, Smithies, and Harrington 2016).

There is much debate over whether violence in films or computer games has a negative impact on young people, or generally on people of any age. Three potential impacts of violent content can be its mimetic effects, victimization or sensitizing effects, but also its desensitizing effects. However, research into these areas is contradictory and inconclusive. One argument is that aggressive behaviour is only correlated to violent media, not the cause of it, because violent media may be simply preferred by violent individuals (Desilet 2006: 22). In a more controversial framework, media violence is linked to catharsis. In this view, entertainment media may be a response to a culture of constraints that does not allow for authentic emotional expression. The consumption of violent media can bring on a catharsis, or release of latent aggression through the watching. The media researcher Gregory Desilet observes: "Entertainment media respond to this climate of constraints with violent video games and programming that allow the cathartic release of aggression through participation in a projected fantasy world that provides 'safe' targets and symbols for violence" (Desilet 2006: 19).

Those who endorse entertainment violence claim it is a cathartic release of aggression, rather than provoking violent actions (Desilet 2006: 19). In this sense, society and its repressions beget the return of the repressed in distorted forms that

find their outlet in media entertainment. Desilet quotes the novelist Andrew Klavan, who talks about the “joy of cruelty”:

that thing of darkness that must be acknowledged as our own ... Some emotions have to be repressed and repressed emotions return via the imagination in distorted and inflated forms: that’s the law of benevolent hypocrisy, the law of civilized life. (Desilet 2006: 23)

Another theory concerns media and its mimetic effects. This ancient platonic discussion targets how art imitates life and, reversed, how life imitates art. While art can be a reflection of the outside environment, art can also pull its viewers into its content:

In discussing tragic drama in particular, Plato reasons that in response to repeated viewings of the depiction of violent conflict the audience will be seduced — by the emotional outpourings of the characters — into similar emotional abandonment that will promote emotional hypersensitivity, suspension of rationality, and incapacity for action in the face of real violence and conflict. (Desilet 2006: 25)

Theories of mimesis and catharsis are relevant to this debate given that violent entertainment is infused with multiple layers of social, religious, mythical, metaphysical, moral, emotional, and psychological components. Yet the dramatic structure of entertainment violence portrays attitudes towards conflict that are part of our common social and cultural imagination, regardless of its potential mimetic or cathartic effects in regard to aggression (Desilet 2006: 26).

Research results regarding the impact of violent content are inconclusive, perhaps because the issue is under-researched, and also because of doubts that existing research findings, generated in sufficiently controlled lab environments, adequately translate into real-life environments. In a recent article in *The Guardian*, Rich Stanton (2016) discusses the obstacles to finding a conclusive answer regarding a causal link between entertainment violence and children’s violent behaviour. Stanton observes that in the past three decades research on violent video games has been flawed, limited, misleading, and misrepresented. He further blames the moral panic of a headline-hungry media that, all too often, jumps to conclusions linking murder and the influence of violent video games. Stanton discusses a recent research paper that draws on the Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children, a data set of 14,500 children born in 1991–1992, to find a connection between violent video games and conduct disorders. A conduct disorder involves a set of extreme, often

aggressive and defiant behaviours. This study found that there is a 19 per cent chance that, if a child plays violent video games by age eight or nine, they will be diagnosed with a conduct disorder by the age of 15. Stanton warns that these numbers represent a correlation, however, not a causation (especially since the sample numbers of diagnosed children were small), and that, in addition, there are various unknown factors that might play a crucial role in the causes of teenage aggression. Further, the degree of violent imagery in violent video games, just as in television and movies, is in constant evolution. One of the great difficulties facing researchers is that computer games are hard to categorize, and Stanton stresses that “genres” (like adventure, strategy, shooter, etc.) pose an inadequate classification since games often have complex modifications. Furthermore, there is a surprising lack of funding for such an important area of research. As he argues, “Without quality research, we allow debates about videogames to be influenced by ideologically-driven skeptics” (Stanton 2016).

But is it always moral values and ideology that drive the sceptics to want to protect young minds from gory violence, or could it be an (unconfirmed) intuitive hunch that extreme media violence is merely inappropriate for children? A recent study gives new, concrete evidence that, in fact, media violence induces both short- and long-term increases in aggressive thoughts, feelings, and behaviours. Tom Hummer summarizes innovative research done on this topic based on neuroimaging tools, allowing the observation of the effects of violence in the brain, which are usually hard to detect through more traditional research techniques. This kind of research helps to clarify how exposure to media violence in childhood affects brain development with possible lifelong consequences. He argues:

While such research is limited, evidence suggests that prefrontal mechanisms for controlling emotion and behavior are altered by exposure to violent media. Therefore, long-term increases in aggression and decreases in inhibitory control due to excessive media violence exposure may result from impaired development of prefrontal regions. However, additional neuroimaging research is necessary to establish whether and how exposure to media violence specifically shapes subsequent neural maturation. (Hummer 2015: 1790)

Hummer points out that research suggests “psychopathology may interact with the effects of media violence on the brain” and that “inhibitory mechanisms were altered by violent game play, including the ability of prefrontal regions to inhibit the

amygdala response to negative stimuli” (Hummer 2015: 1795–6). Hummer provides significant evidence to suggest a strong association between exposure to greater media violence and alterations of parts in the brain that regulate thoughts, emotions, feelings, and behaviour. These alterations have a negative impact: “neuroimaging research suggests that increased exposure to violent media content is associated with lower prefrontal control of emotions or behaviors and with delayed development of frontal or frontoparietal regions” (Hummer 2015: 1802). While more research needs to be done to disentangle people’s emotional reactions to screen violence and its actual impact on viewers, I would like to address a deeper question regarding the cultural implications of violent (entertainment) media.

The monstrous and the Thing

In his book *Our faith in evil* (2006), Gregory Desilet examines the reciprocal relationship between entertainment violence and cultural life. He argues that there are cultural traditions concerning inherited ways of dramatizing life. In order to understand the structure of contemporary narratives of violent films, one has to consider their roots in ancient traditions of tragedy and melodrama. These melodramatic structures are part of the rich and dense layers of cultural sediment that continue to have an impact on our understanding of the world and ourselves today. The prevalence of a melodramatic structure in contemporary texts, film, and drama depends upon a particular understanding of evil that leads to entertainment violence as we know it today. The melodramatic textual structure relies on a black and white morality and the resolution of conflict through destruction. Desilet defines the melodramatic form as

presenting conflict with a pole of radical and essential evil ... The focus on violence in certain contexts of film and drama leads to a focus on melodramatic form, which leads to a focus on the particular notion of evil that has been handed down through many layers and levels of tradition. (Desilet 2006: 2)

Evilness is a fundamental driver of the horror genre, and there are many theories that attempt to explain the genre’s appeal to a broad audience. One popular explanation is that the horror story symbolizes adolescent sexuality and teenage angst, particularly in relation to incest and the fear of rejection (Desilet 2006: 96–7). In this sense, the dual aspects and deep internal divisions of the protagonist manifest as an alien

agency that infiltrates the subject and launches its attacks on the subject and environment from “inside”, like the classic Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde, or Ridley Scott’s *Alien*, in which the alien uses human hosts for reproduction. Sexuality serves as a metaphor to further anchor the evil as an independent alien agency, and as an aggressive, destructive, and demonic presence. In the melodramatic presentation of the world, the good and the evil agencies have their own independent origins. Evil is not a once-good agency that has somehow been corrupted, polluted, or fallen from grace. Evil derives its powers from its spiritual and physical proximity to death and, through it, acquires the characteristics of pollution and defilement of an original, independent functioning, idealized whole. Desilet observes the role evil plays in the melodramatic conflict and the tragic myth of the origin of evil:

The notion of evil as defilement dominates the moral code and the moral structure of tradition, including the traditions of melodrama, and serves as a template for conflict, including especially the internal divisions arising from sexual anxieties ... this different way of understanding the operation of evil in the world was argued to be consistent not only with the tragic vision but also with the potential for structuring an alternative orientation towards conflict. (Desilet 2006: 97)

The world portrayed in this genre is often nihilistic and dominated by death and violence; however, change, defeat or escape is impossible. The resolution in these dark stories now relies on an escalation of the monstrous (Desilet 2006: 244). The torturous conflict emanating from the psyche is reallocated towards the destruction of the physical body, yet the sheer brutality in which the attacks of the monstrous are deployed points towards a cultural obsession with materiality still devoid of grief and mortality awareness. This is not only observable in the horror genre, but also in contemporary crime shows.

Jacque Lynn Foltyn observes that over the last decade a new obsession with forensic science, dissection, decay, and DNA as “crime-solving substance” has also found its way onto our screens. DNA, in Foltyn’s reading, has become a pop-culture icon, a sacred entity of science-worshipping societies that replaces the soul as a new form of immortality (Foltyn 2008: 170). Whether in fictional works or real life, celebrity deaths and CSI (crime scene investigation) have become a familiar spectacle for the sake of entertainment, as can be seen in the obsession over the deaths of Anna Nicole Smith, Princess Diana, Pope Paul II, and so on. Foltyn observes:

The infotainment coverage devoted to the corpses ... created a series of overlapping media spectacles with sometimes preposterous narratives not only about DNA, but about the disfigured, decomposing, embalmed, dissected, disinterred, photographed, missing, and found remains of the newly famous, renowned, legendary, royal, semi-mythic, and possibly divine. (Foltyn 2008: 162)

In accordance with Gorer's early thesis, Foltyn argues that the current fascination with the entertainment corpse (the result of an unnatural, violent death) is devoid of grief and mourning. With death as a natural experience marginalized, mediated portrayals of death are on the increase. Gorer's text was written before the availability of death images spread through the Internet and before the corpse was at the centre of media attention. Foltyn believes that Gorer would be shocked by the current media climate. Back when Gorer wrote his famous work, the camera did not linger over the dead body. "Bodies fell, the camera moved away, or if the camera focused on the dying or dead body at all, it was whole and appeared to be sleeping, not contorted in death agonies" (Foltyn 2008: 164).

Grizzly deaths and the corpse's gory details are now prevalent in entertainment. As Foltyn argues, death has not only supplanted sex as the cultural taboo, but has merged with it. The corpse has become eroticized (Foltyn 2008: 165). The archetypal cycle of sex, death, and birth bears a powerful imagery that comes forth in modern life through approaching the dead body. Icons of popular culture, for example Princess Diana, James Dean, and Marilyn Monroe, have an erotic aura that follows them into their caskets. As Foltyn argues, "The sexualized corpse can be both contradiction and fetish, and death imagery can be connected with other passive states such as sleep and sickness" (Foltyn 2008: 165). This is especially true in a time in which the culture of reinvention (Elliott 2013), with its obsessional relationship with bodily image, has a strong hold on the Western self. If the self can be continually reinvented, even death does not bring an end to the body but becomes instead a beautiful, erotic, and dissected corpse. Here, even DNA provides a new immortality strategy. Foltyn observes that the rise of the "beautiful female murder victim" points to a conflation of sorts:

As taboos about both sex and death have relaxed in contemporary Western culture, and pornography has been increasingly destigmatized in modern liberal culture ..., there's been a growing conflation of the two once forbidden bodies, the sex porn body and the dead porn body. (Foltyn 2008: 166)

She identifies a third kind of body, a fusion between Gorer's unmourned victim of violent death and the appallingly disfigured corpse of contemporary entertainment that is now sexualized. This sexuality plays out through the recurrence of television plots involving death through kinky, dangerous or perverted sexual practices. No longer confined to a fringe market catering to those enjoying splatter, "torture porn", or "gorno" movies, corpse porn has become a standard of popular television and film.

Foltyn argues there is a commonality between corpse porn and sex porn. They share the exploitation of the young and beautiful, close-ups, and an emphasis on bodily fluids, as well as the absence of socially appropriate emotions. She further observes a stereotypical construction of femininity in contemporary crime entertainment. Both corpse porn and sex porn stars are mostly female victims and the killers are mostly male. If a female killer is present, she is mostly driven by greed, revenge, and jealousy. As with the body of the porn star, the corpse is divorced from mourning, spirituality, and compassion. In the presence of the good-looking forensic team and criminal investigators, autopsy aligns with rape and curiosity about these aligns with necrophilia (Foltyn 2008: 167).

Foltyn further observes that the boundaries between socially and sexually acceptable contact between the dead and living have shifted. As I pointed out in Chapter 4, the classic necrophile lover pushes these boundaries further in following through with his/her attraction to the dead body. However, these blurred lines between death, violence, and sex have found their way out of the sexual fringes and into mainstream media in order to hold shock value, attract attention, and to make capital from it. Foltyn underscores Bataille's observation that death is an "'ecstasy of consumption', fit to stand by sex and eating" (Foltyn 2008: 169). The images of violence, sex, and death, as they are sold in contemporary media, are the obvious markers of the contemporary *jouissance* of a death-illiterate society. The monstrous, as Desilet understood it, involved the internalization of the struggle with sexuality and sexual identity. Corpse porn externalizes this struggle with its explicit messages. The monstrous is present in the narrativization of bizarre killings and of the perverted motives of murderers. Both versions are, however, infused in preposterous gore and violence, devoid of an emotional response. They are different versions of the same kind of death *jouissance*.

Pondering the question of what the interest in morbid imagery tells us about contemporary culture, Foltyn speculates that it could be a sign of emerging mortality awareness and of the baby boomer's attempt to bring death back into the community. It might be due to a distorted familiarization with the dead body (through obsession with celebrity death and morbid forensic shows), as she writes:

In secular societies, where uncertainty about what happens after we die is apparent, the fear of death is managed, to a degree, by extending control over the corpse through dissection [...] Perhaps the intensity of our hunger for scientific truth and certainty regarding the causes of death explored in forensic television and the mysteries of the demises of the dead famous, is related to our continued trepidation about death, a fear that arguably has increased as secularism pushes aside traditional religious convictions about the afterlife. (Foltyn 2008: 170)

However, there is another explanation for these hyper-real images of death and destruction that I wish to explore here.

Desilet argues that capitalism is a potent driver of such imagery. Capitalism not only devalues human relationships, but also people are viewed as an interchangeable, replaceable, sometimes useless and most certainly breakable commodity. Both material commodities and people are degraded through this attitude of vilification, and thus enter an existence that is viewed as distorted, polluted, and contemptible. Vilification falls into the category of the monstrous/evilness and hence becomes conflated with defilement. In this cultural paradigm violence serves as “intense religious or quasi-religious rituals of purification” because a “worn-out commodity is commonly discarded or recycled whereas something and someone suspected of being a pollution more likely elicits reactions consistent with mutilation, torture, and obsessive destruction” (Desilet 2006: 245–6).

Returning to Lacanian psychoanalysis, Lacan put forward the idea that truth has the structure of fiction and aimed to explain that the Symbolic Order fails to cope with a fundamental deadlock (sexual difference, class struggle, etc.). The violent melodrama or the horror fiction demonstrates a failure to cope with this deadlock, which then creates a “fantasmatic spectre” or a “spectral apparition”, not with the function of occluding social reality, but to bring forth that which has been primordially repressed in order to establish social reality. Žižek observes:

The spectral apparitions — these fantastic horrors, like the living dead, father's ghost in Hamlet, and so on — they are not of the order of the symbolic fiction, but quite the contrary ... This failure is then

posited in spectral apparitions, in ghosts, in living dead. They are always here, as the embodiment of what Lacan would have called a certain symbolic deadlock ... Something cannot be symbolized, and the spectral apparition emerges to fill up the gap of what cannot be symbolized. So, again, the spectre conceals not social reality but what must be primordially repressed in order for social reality to emerge. (Žižek 2010b: 100–1)

The real resists symbolization, and reality, therefore, will never be fully constituted, which is what ideological spectral fantasies try to frame.

On another note, Jennifer Rutherford (2013) analyses the notorious and extremely popular cultural meme of *Zombies* in her book of the same title. She observes the monstrosity of the zombie, as “disturbance of the symbolic rite” (Rutherford 2013: 15). *Zombies* represent many, often contradictory, meanings that defy systematizing. *Zombies* represent a “zero level of humanity” or the “inhuman/mechanical core of humanity”; they are “figures of the world’s unspeakableness” (Rutherford 2013: 15) and are plastic and amorphous in the way they capture the current imagination of contemporary horror: “A vision of an apocalyptic future they evoke the repressed memory of what was and what is unfolding” (Rutherford 2013: 17). The zombie, she argues, has become a generalized metaphor for contemporary struggles and dangers encompassing environments, political structures, social institutions, behaviours, and systems. *Zombie* implies a potent absence, an inner lack that has a negative impact on the individual, yet this impact can manifest in miscellaneous ways:

Zombie is both a property that can be possessed and a lack that is at the same time a mode of action. And zombies can be anything! *Zombies* are voters that lack acuity, institutions that refuse to dissolve and litigants that lack volition [...] *zombie* as metaphor condenses elements of the present that we most need, and are least able, to think about. (Rutherford 2013: 22–3)

The zombie meme is also highly commoditized by capitalism since it sells anything from cars to greeting cards. However, zombies also have the power to bring together disparate realities. Rutherford asserts:

Zombie as metaphor links opposites: death and life; passivity and aggressiveness; drive and enslavement; discontinuity and continuity; love and hate; consumption and revulsion; the individual and the mass; self and other; an apocalyptic future and the repressed past ... *Zombie* is a figure that empties meaning while proliferating it. It critiques, questions, interrogates the way things are while bleakly

laying out the impossibility of them being otherwise. (Rutherford 2013: 23)

Rutherford argues that one attraction of the non-human zombie might be its ambivalence towards emotions. They do not feel, yet hunger for brains, and thus, by extension, life. Zombies, in this sense, may be perceived as providing refuge from human existence that is tormented by conflicting emotions. Zombies are not dead. As she writes, the dead belong to us; our relationship to the dead continues, embodied in human forms of possession (ceremony, rituals, belief systems). Zombies, however, “do not evoke death as we know it, but incarnate death *as we wish to forget it*. They give continuity in visual and verbal forms to a death that representation would foreclose” (Rutherford 2013: 53). In this sense, zombies represent the potential for anonymous mass death that leaves the individual unmourned and easily forgotten. “When zombie fans seek immortality in the virtual world of images circling globally on the web, they lend their faces to this non-human death sweeping all in its path” (Rutherford 2013: 53). Death sits on our shoulders and has become a potent driver of how and what we consume for our casual entertainment. An obsession with monstrous and mutilated bodies has become ever-present while loss on a personal level remains a clandestine and private struggle. Historically and culturally, death has always surrounded us and there seems to be a need to keep it that way.

The historical evolution of violent death as entertainment

In the introduction to this thesis, I referred to Steven Pinker’s book *The better angels of our nature* (2011), in which he argues that human history is steeped in violence through large-scale wars, local civil wars, homicide, and so on, but that we are now living in the most peaceful era ever. It might be that, in this ostensibly peaceful time in the West (at least in relation to interpersonal violence), the absence of violence brings back generational memories of mass deaths, which are now represented in the monstrosity of contemporary entertainment violence. A group of Spanish natural scientists now claims to have established that humans do indeed have a natural predisposition to violence and that this lethal interpersonal violence might have been inherited from primates (Gómez, Verdú, González-Megías, and Méndez 2016). In their review of 600 studies that included Palaeolithic and Iron Age samples, they concluded that killing each other seems to have an evolutionary origin. The

evolutionary lineage from which humans descended shows higher-than-average levels of interpersonal violence compared to other mammals. While it remains unclear whether this is due to genetic or other factors, there is a tendency not only among humans, but primates in general, to murder each other. An estimated 2 per cent of human deaths among our distant ancestors are attributed to murder (Gómez et al. 2016: 233). Similarly, in tracking death in mammals, the researchers suggest there seems also to be a propensity towards deathly violence. José María Gómez, the leader of this study, explains in an interview with *ResearchGate*, a social networking website for researchers and scientists, that, while human lethal violence has an evolutionary origin, this can be altered by ecological and cultural factors. Yet lethal violence has an important phylogenetic component, which is not necessarily due to genetics but is much broader than that:

The main message of the study, from our point of view, is that no matter how violent or pacific we are in the origin [sic], we can modulate the level of interpersonal violence by changing our social environment. We can build a more pacific society if we wish. (Gómez in Rikken 2016)

Interpersonal lethal violence comes down to a variety of socio-cultural and environmental aspects. But death as enjoyment or, to be more precise, as *jouissance*, also stretches far back in time. Frances Larson observes in her book *Severed: a history of heads lost and heads found* (2014) that deathly violence as entertainment is culturally ingrained and has a long and eerily rich history of people gathering to watch public torture, executions, and beheadings. She claims “the lesson of history is that it is within our capacity as humans to witness decapitations and other forms of executions, and more than that, to enjoy them as popular public events” (Larson 2014: 85). In the past, the traits of execution viewers, she argues, seemingly included both a lack of mourning and enthusiasm regarding the event. Audiences seldom displayed disgust (and if they were disgusted they still came to watch). Beheadings and other forms of killings were often difficult to execute and hence made for gruesome spectacles. Larson tells many stories of botched executions for which the executioner often had to pay with their own life. In 1790, the guillotine was introduced for reasons of discretion, efficiency, and accuracy. The crowd, however, showed disappointment in the fast, clean, and efficient workings of this machinery of death. The audience longed for the drama that comes with torture, mutilation, and dragged out executions (Larson 2014: 97).

An execution day was more of a carnival than a solemn ceremony. While public executions in the West have become unthinkable, public sentiment against these gruesome spectacles is a recent phenomenon (Larson 2014: 99). Moreover, late-modern individuals still display behaviour indicating joy and pleasure regarding the public display of impending death. In the age of smart technology, selfies, videos, and photos of tragic scenes of death and carnage are posted all over the Internet. The popularity of beheading videos found on the Internet suggests that modern technology assembles a new kind of audience with parallels to the ancient gore-celebrating crowd. Larson gives the example of the beheadings of Westerners by terrorist groups. In 2002, a link to a video showing the beheading of a *Wall Street Journal* journalist by the Taliban was shared by the *Boston Phoenix* newspaper on their website. This received widespread criticism. However, just two years later, when Nick Berg was decapitated, Reuters made an unedited video available. All major United States television networks broadcast clips of this atrocity, although they stopped short of showing the beheading itself.

Nick Berg's video became one of the most searched-for items on the Internet. A website linked to al-Qaeda crashed due to the vast amount of traffic the beheading video generated (Larson 2014: 79). While it is difficult to figure out exact numbers of people watching these videos online, a study conducted by the Pew Research Center found that five months after Nick Berg's death, between May and June, 30 million people (24 per cent of all adult Internet users in the USA) had seen images of the war in Iraq deemed too grizzly to be shown in mainstream media while 28 per cent were actively seeking out these images and half of those who had seen them found they made a "good decision" in watching the graphic content (Fallows and Rainie 2004). As Larson states, "whether people thought it 'important' to see Berg's execution for themselves, or simply watched out of curiosity, there can be little doubt that 'the crowd' was taking control, or was out of control, depending on your perspective" (Larson 2014: 81). Tragically, the beheading of Berg spawned a surge of similar beheadings by militant Islamic groups, and the executions with the most media coverage drew the most attention from the public. In fact, the public showed outrage at the mainstream media's "censorship" of Berg's beheading while displaying pictures of the abuse by American soldiers in Abu Ghraib (Zelizer 2010: 289–90; Larson 2014: 80–1).

Social media makes gruesome pictures of death and carnage more accessible than ever. In addition, real-life-violence voyeurism and exhibitionism through and

within the digital environment keeps evolving. Recently, the Internet landscape again drastically changed with the advent of live-streaming services available on Facebook and Twitter, and applications for smartphones such as Beme, Meerkat, and Peach, all introduced between 2015 and 2016. Mark Zuckerberg, CEO and founder of Facebook, has hailed the new live-streaming feature as an exciting innovation, providing users with a new experience of raw and unedited authenticity (Honan 2016). According to *BuzzFeed News*, Zuckerberg exclaimed:

We built this big technology platform so we can go and support whatever the most personal and emotional and raw and visceral ways people want to communicate [...] Because it's live, there is no way it can be curated ... And because of that it frees people up to be themselves. It's live; it can't possibly be perfectly planned out ahead of time. Somewhat counterintuitively, it's a great medium for sharing raw and visceral content. (Honan 2016)

This raw and visceral experience “of the golden age of video”, however, also extends to the live broadcast of terror, rape, and killings. *Spiegel Online* points out that the militant terror group Islamic State and its sympathizers are proactive in using Twitter for spreading often professionally made propaganda clips, videos, and sometimes live streams of executions. The article further claims that research suggests terrorists themselves have been influenced by this sort of online proliferation of violence, as in the case of an Islamic terrorist who in June 2016 live streamed the killing of police officers in France (Stöcker 2016). But not only perpetrators use this new medium; victims also take advantage of it to make public the terror inflicted upon them. In June 2016, in a nightclub in Florida, the greatest mass shooting occurred in US history, killing 50 and wounding 53 in a homophobically motivated attack. During the incident, victims texted and (video) called their loved ones before their deaths (Scheer 2016).

Assaults recorded for the purpose of distribution on the Internet are also known as performance crimes in criminology, which includes the announcement of or bragging about one's crimes, as well as the broadcasting of a criminal act. These crimes often include violent attacks. The criminologist Ray Surette describes performance crimes as follows:

The core elements of contemporary performance crimes are that they are created for distribution via social media and involve both willing and unwilling performers. Performance crime can be of two types. The first is a sort of “informed consent” performance where the actors

are aware of the production (sometimes recording or filming it themselves) and at least tacitly support its subsequent distribution — in this sense a crime performer is “behaving for the camera” similar to an actor in a play. The second involves an uninformed, unwitting performance produced without performer knowledge or acquiescence — here a person is being recorded in a production similar to a nature documentary. Social media have caused performances of both types to explode. (Surette 2017)

He identifies that one of the biggest contributors to the rise of performance crimes is the shift from once-passive consumers to active producers and content creators thanks to ever-advancing technology. Whatever is created, be it benign or malicious, can be easily brought into circulation through the Internet and in particular through immensely popular social media websites (probably the most popular social media website, Facebook, alone has almost two billion users).

Another factor for the rise of performance crimes, Surette explains, is the contemporary celebrity culture that instills the desire for one’s own stardom and following audience (also called followers in the online world). Sadly, performance crime also often involves performance victimization, public humiliation, and shaming of the victim in order to give one’s online presence an extra boost. “It is better to get your performance out there and be known than to be unknown in a celebrity culture, even if criminality is required” (Surette 2017).

Be it the Charlie Hebdo attack, the November 2015 Paris attacks, the Brussels airport attack, the recurrent killings of African-Americans by police or the Dallas Police murders, incidents of live-streamed violence and terror are accumulating. The Internet has made the world’s violence more accessible to mass audiences. Perpetrators, witnesses, and victims are shaping a new space in which unedited graphic content is circulated and accessed, thanks to platforms such as Facebook. Facebook itself has experienced great difficulty in shutting down live streams with inappropriate content due to the sheer size of its network (Scheer 2016). These examples indicate the difficulty of dealing with the moral, emotional, and spiritual fallout of unedited graphic content found on the Internet.

The emotional response and responsibility of the viewer

In the previous section of this chapter, I suggested that classic journalism, as we knew it, has lost its strong footing. Susan Sontag suggested in her book *Regarding the pain of others* (2003) that humans are fascinated with images of violence and

suffering and that, compared to non-stop imagery (television, streaming videos, movies) photographic pictures have the potential to carry a “deeper bite” (Sontag 2003: 20). Similarly, Barbie Zelizer revisits the role of the journalistic image and the changing perception of its viewers in her book *About to die: how news images move the public* (2010). Zelizer argues that during the early twentieth century there was a collective eagerness to show graphic images of death and impending death (what Zelizer calls the about-to-die image), which validated the professionalization of news photographers and the immediacy of the news they provided. Especially the “about-to-die image invites a close consideration of the ‘as if’ of journalistic relay” (Zelizer 2010: 24) in which pictures of impending death come to symbolize condensed moments of difficult public events and personal fear and dread. She further explains that the about-to-die image is superior to images of death, which are often associated with voyeurism. Further, about-to-die images relay an, often involuntary, public duty that invites the viewer to empathize with the victim since it stimulates an emotional response. These pictures have the potential to establish an association with a depicted person’s vulnerability and mortality and thus can be a medium to facilitate grief and mourning. The about-to-die pictures have tremendous value, because they pull the viewer in, subjectively as well as emotionally. This sincere engagement with the news is tremendously important because, beyond merely processing an event intellectually, the emotional and compassionate engagement actually leads to deeper understanding. According to Zelizer, the about-to-die image

works beyond its compositional parameters. Presentationally, it draws attention through its generalizability, not specificity: the impending deaths from atrocities in Cambodia come to look like those in Iraq; assassinations in Guatemala resemble those in the United States. Giving journalists a way to show the unsettled events of the news while sidestepping the discomfort and ambivalence that throws people into disarray almost whenever they face death’s depiction, these images draw viewer involvement rather than introduce distance, as images of death tend to do when they seal viewing with the impossibility of engagement. (Zelizer 2010: 25)

One of the great changes, she observes, is that journalism has become less confident about showing pictures of the dying, yet new technologies make these pictures ever more accessible. From the middle of the twentieth century, photos were no longer thought to offer the same kind of cutting-edge documentation, even though faster film and lenses intensified the graphic character of death images. Wartime and political censorship became more prominent means of controlling images of death.

Conventions about showing and viewing death were increasingly driven by a public sentiment that death in the news should remain unseen and non-graphic. This seems to contradict the story of Nick Berg's beheading discussed earlier. Yet the motivations behind the viewers' demand to see pictures of Berg's death were politically motivated in that they were able to stir resentment towards the terrorist groups. The repeated discussion of American soldiers humiliating and torturing inmates of Abu Ghraib has been met with greater resentment. Likewise, ever since 9/11, viewers have voiced a deep unease about seeing about-to-die pictures of fellow citizens. Maybe having one's homeland under attack was too emotionally taxing for most American viewers, since pictures of people falling off the burning World Trade Center have come to be seen as voyeurism. Zelizer gives three reasons for this. Firstly, there is a new conservatism regarding pictures of impending death. Secondly, when photography was introduced into the daily journalistic trade, photos underscored stories by showing more of the world. Now the novelty of journalistic photography has worn off. Thirdly, nowadays journalism is eclipsed by the vast amount of graphic images distributed via the Internet. Journalists, thus, have lost their exclusive status as the publishers of news. The public has become an important driver of which pictures are considered news and which not. Zelizer observes:

All of this suggests that there may be a shift in public sentiment about what news images are for, facilitated by changes in the public appropriation of images of death, a diminishment of journalists' formerly exclusive and authoritative call on the images they show, and shifts toward a larger and more vocal public role in evaluating pictures. These later images hint too at a rise in the articulation of standards of decency, tastefulness, and propriety more than before, which increasingly sets the stage for determining which images appear. The about-to-die photo thus offers a prism through which to consider the shifting value of news images more generally. (Zelizer 2010: 52)

Now critical voices in the public judge that pictures that depict (impending) death are too frequent (Zelizer 2010: 52), showing there is a gap in public sentiment in connecting with the news on an emotional level. Watching (violent) death in fictional spaces, while being uncomfortable seeing death in the news, is not a surprise if we take a closer look at how we come to terms with death on a private level. Zelizer discusses this in an interview in *Slate Magazine*:

We're squeamish because news pictures of the dead and dying are of real people and real events. If a news image works, it penetrates,

lingers, forces our attention to the events involving death that it depicts. If a news image works, it doesn't disappear when we cast aside the newspaper, dim the TV or turn off the Internet. That may be more intrusion than most people are willing to allow. (Zelizer, in Shafer 2011)

The sentiments and attitudes of media consumers are diverse, complicated, and intensely contradictory. Some people are attracted by what others cannot stomach. Margaret Gibson describes the complicated relationship with death, media and the consumer as follows:

While the quality or subject matter of some death and grief stories can resonate with people for a long time after viewing, a great deal of popular culture has a short-term impact of psyche and emotions. Popular culture, with its fast flows of imagery, talk and sounds, creates bodies and psyches absorbing and deflecting stories and emotions within fractions of time. However, there is quite a different temporality between the experiences of death and grief as they are represented in popular culture and the real-life experiences of death and grief, which obviously have more sustained temporal, not to mention deeper levels of psychic and emotional, impact. (Gibson 2007: 418)

In her TED talk on why people are drawn to consume executions, Frances Larson (2015) points out that emotional detachment (the feeling that 'it has nothing to do with me') is a necessary condition, so that watching becomes a passive activity (in which curiosity about death pushes social boundaries). The consumer of these videos falls for a perverted intimacy, in which he/she gets a front row seat, with the contents available wherever, whenever, and in secrecy. In her talk, Larson argues that the sense of separation erodes the individual's moral ability, which is the key to the capacity to watch gruesome content. The quality of these grizzly online events is that they appear less real and the quality of anonymity and invisibility of these online views erodes one's accountability.

Similarly, such detachment is observable for entertainment media. Violent screen deaths do not have the same emotional and moral weight as photos of people about to die in the news media. Actors, after all, get up after the sequence is shot and receive a decent pay cheque, which makes it easier to treat such entertainment violence as a commodity. Yet encountering death through news outlets does not necessarily imply an existential engagement with this topic at all. Death is still kept at arm's length. While, in theory, Zelizer's appreciation of the about-to-die image

and its impact sounds plausible, I doubt that most media formats provide a platform for existential and compassionate engagement with these pictures. Susan Sontag warned of this, when she pointed out that the news has been converted into entertainment for consumers of violence as spectacle:

It assumes that everyone is a spectator. It suggests, perversely, unseriously, that there is no real suffering in the world. But it is absurd to identify the world with those zones in the well-off countries where people have the dubious privilege of being spectators, or of declining to be spectators, of other people's pain, just as it is absurd to generalize about the ability to respond to the sufferings of others on the basis of the mind-set of those consumers of news who know nothing at first hand about war and massive injustice and terror. There are hundreds of millions of television watchers who are far from inured to what they see on television. They do not have the luxury of patronizing reality ... Some people will do anything to keep themselves from being moved. How much easier, from one's chair, far from danger, to claim the position of superiority. In fact, deriding the efforts of those who have borne witness in war zones as "war tourism" is such a recurrent judgment that it has spilled over into the discussion of war photography as a profession. (Sontag 2003: 86–7)

Many about-to-die pictures, especially, are seen to violate standards of decency (Zelizer 2010: 52) and Zelizer tells stories of reporters who have been accused of failure to render assistance (Zelizer 2010: 168). This is an unfortunate squeamishness of the public, willing to lash out at witnesses, journalists, or perpetrators, instead of showing empathy for the victim or reflecting on the deeper implications of an image. It seems people in the late modern world are so detached from existential realities and from their own discomfort with death that blaming, looking away, and being apathetic is the logical, practical option.

In fact, studies have shown (British Psychological Society 2015) that prolonged engagement with a violent news event can have effects similar to post-traumatic stress disorder in individuals. Unease with pictures of impending death and dealing with the fallout of violent news also point towards a changing attitude about fear. This is important because fear will likely be experienced when engaging with death. With the change in the attitude towards fear, we observe a shift in the conception of the self — and therefore towards death itself. Behind these attitudes towards fear and the current death illiteracy of society is the threat of the dissolution of all meaning.

Frank Fuerdi has argued that the phrase "culture of fear" is now embedded in everyday language, indicating that fear is a "cultural metaphor for interpreting life"

and a “cultural idiom through which we signal a sense of growing unease about our place in the world” (Fuerdi 2007: vii). Fuerdi is not only speaking about alarmist media and news reports, which have a constant focus on past, present, and potential disasters of any scale. Fear, he suggests, is a common theme that is deployed by lobbyists of all kinds (climatologists, anti-vaxxers, religious groups) when trying to “raise awareness” for their cause. Such fear, however, is no longer informed by personal experience. Fear is now experienced passively and directed towards conceptual, fictional threats. Fuerdi notes: “Today we are simply encouraged to regard fear as our default response to life itself”; society is “haunted by ‘fear of the future, fear of losing, fear of others, fear of taking a risk, fear of solitude, fear of growing old’” (Fuerdi 2007: ix).

The act of fearing is culturally informed. Fuerdi argues that our current society shows great reluctance to positively engage with risk, since its negative consequences are exaggerated, hinting at an attitude people have towards not only death but life itself. Fear is equated with terror; it is a “raw fear” (Fuerdi 2007: 8). In the past, Fuerdi argues, people’s fears were concrete and based on a common cultural script. People feared death, illness, or God. Nowadays, fear is unhinged; the act of fearing has become in itself threatening (Fuerdi 2007: 1). The modern way of fearing also has a “free-floating dynamic” to it, in the sense that it frequently attaches itself to ever-changing subjects (the fear of terrorist attack, the fear of a zombie apocalypse, the fear of an Ebola pandemic) (Fuerdi 2007: 5). Fuerdi further argues that fear, in the past, was positively linked to an “expression of ‘respect’ and ‘reverence’, or ‘veneration’”. According to the sixteenth-century philosopher Hobbes, fear constituted an appropriate response to new events (Fuerdi 2007: 7). Fuerdi underscores the role of fear of an awe-inspiring event and warns of our inability to cope with this nameless existential threat in contemporary times:

“Respectful” and “raw” fear express very different relations to human experience. Parkin claims that respectful fear assumes “predictable response to behaviour”. It is a form of “knowable fear”. It is knowable because it is embedded in informal taken-for-granted and culturally sanctioned formal relations. In contrast “raw fear” has as its premise “an unpredictable aspect sustained by the victim”. This is a fear that is not rooted in folk culture, and not guided by a generally accepted narrative of meaning. Hence its unpredictability. (Fuerdi 2007: 8)

Fear is also incredibly isolating: “In the absence of a master-narrative that endows the threats we face with shared meaning, people’s response has acquired an

increasingly private and personalized character” (Fuerdi 2007: 9). The individual has no such anchors anymore. Yet death in the media is ubiquitous, and death as entertainment seems culturally ingrained. I suggest that the inability to deal with the existential consequences of real death, combined with the jouissance of death entertainment, results in a lullaby of carnage.

Conclusion: a lullaby of carnage

What the new necrophiliac represents is a certain fascination and predisposition for a darker, maybe morbid side within — undeadness. This is a place where one is, maybe not comfortable, yet morbidly fascinated with the abject. Larson’s example of people attracted by gruesome beheading videos exemplifies the characteristics of the necrophile self that watches these videos out of curiosity and with no “higher” purpose. She cites one anonymous Internet user:

You almost can’t believe that a group of people could be so pitiless as to carry out something so cruel and bestial, and you need to have it confirmed ... Watching them evokes a mixture of emotions — mainly distress at the obvious fear and suffering of the victim, but also revulsion at the gore, and anger against the perpetrators. (Larson 2014: 82)

Freud was right that the inclination towards destructiveness is a part of the human situation. But the interest in death, anger or other negative feelings is not evil, as Fromm assumed. His proposed way out of human misery is naïve, as is Marcuse’s idea of libidinal rationality. A human is not a spotless, unconditionally loving, peace-and-harmony-seeking being if only the outer circumstances are beneficial. There is this dark side within, which Lacanians attempt to theorize, since we are attracted and at the same time repulsed by the uncanny. However, our secularized society provides little means to handle the unsymbolized. A sincere engagement with death and dying is deeply challenged in the prevalent cultural climate ruled by capitalism.

On some level, one knows what lurks in the dark corners of the unconscious and hence draws death and violence back into life through popular mass media, maybe as a form of control complex. But rather than accomplishing some sort of completion by acknowledging the absence of an issue and the pain it creates, people revel in its excess, while fearing the angst it creates. Scared of one’s own anxiety, the consumption of sterile mass death is exciting, numbing, and safe enough to allow us

to drop contemplating life's essential questions with all their uncomfortable implications. It plays into the pocket of a necrophile self that cannot ponder death but celebrates excess and distraction in its all-encompassing hunger for more.

Herbert Marcuse made an observation about the modern use of erotica that can be applied to representations of death in the media. In his book *One dimensional man* (2007 [1964]), Marcuse stipulates that, in the modern cultural climate, erotica (in the form of erotic advertisements) is used as a stimulus for capitalistic purposes. This drains enough of the individual's libido to keep him/her complacent yet at the same time impairs finding the path to true emancipation. The repression of the individual and maintenance of the capitalistic standard is achieved through this marketability of sexuality. Marcuse writes:

For example, compare love-making in a meadow and in an automobile, on a lovers' walk outside the town walls and on a Manhattan street. In the former cases, the environment partakes of and invites libidinal cathexis and tends to be eroticized. Libido transcends beyond the immediate erotogenic zones — a process of nonrepressive sublimation. In contrast, a mechanized environment seems to block such self-transcendence of libido. Impelled in the striving to extend the field of erotic gratification, libido becomes less "polymorphous," less capable of eroticism beyond localized sexuality, and the latter is intensified.

Thus diminishing erotic and intensifying sexual energy, the technological reality limits the scope of sublimation. It also reduces the need for sublimation. In the mental apparatus, the tension between that which is desired and that which is permitted seems considerably lowered, and the Reality Principle no longer seems to require a sweeping and painful transformation of instinctual needs. The individual must adapt himself to a world which does not seem to demand the denial of his innermost needs — a world which is not essentially hostile. (Marcuse 2007: 77)

I suggest that, in the same way, one can look at hyper-violence in (entertainment) media, which creates intellectual awareness that death is part of human life. However, consuming death in this way denies the platform on which to ponder its personal and existential meaning. The new visibility of death in the media has by now far exceeded what Gorer once described as the pornification of death. The new visibility of death, because death in the media has become omnipresent, is both more explicit in its details and preposterously gory. This new visibility is at the heart of the necrophile self because it develops a distorted interest and relationship with (virtual) violence that can be obsessive, as well as displeasing, yet the engagement with death and mortality still remains vacuous.

In the next chapter I turn to death's visibility in contemporary art and exhibitions. Since the dawning of humanity, we have used art to address existential questions of birth, death, violence and the afterlife. However, the question I want to explore in this thesis is how artists and exhibitors approach death and dying in the current climate of death phobia.

Chapter 6

Death in art: the anatomical beauty and materiality of death

I have always looked upon decay as being just as wonderful and rich an expression of life as growth. (Miller 1960: 29)

I first became aware of life's brutality when I was 20 years old. I met my best friend, Sybille, when we were 17, and we immediately bonded over our favourite writer, Herman Hesse. Our relationship had all kinds of teenage ups and downs but, by the time we were twenty, Sybille was leaving our town to work in Japan. We decided to celebrate and seal our friendship with a vacation. Our plan was to fly to the island of Crete for a hitchhiking road trip. On the day before our departure, Sybille took me to visit her extended family to say her goodbyes as she would be leaving for Japan a week after our return. That night at her home, we went through her closet and playfully tried on clothes in preparation for our adventure ahead. She made two piles, those she loved and wanted to bring along for the trip and the ones she disliked. There was an ensemble, a twin-set combination that she particularly loathed. Garments like these, with their innocuous floral prints, were the epitome of the bourgeoisie to us. We, of course, thought of ourselves as rebellious in our hearts while wearing our bell-bottomed vintage jeans.

Less than a week after our return from Greece, Sybille was killed in a car accident. The mother of my boyfriend shook me awake at seven on a Sunday morning. Her face was hovering over mine, tears streaming down her cheeks: "Sybille is dead". Her car hit the curb at a weird angle and she lost control of the vehicle. Not wearing a seatbelt, she was flung through the windshield.

I remember the moment when I heard the news. There was a cut, a suspension of time when all the clutter in my head fell away, and I experienced myself as pure presence, held hostage by the reality of impermanence. There were no thoughts. Not even disbelief, not yet. It just did not make any sense to me. We were young; we could not just die.

Days of agony later, I walked into the funeral parlour in an attack of anxiety that would later re-visit me as a harbinger of other deaths. Caught in the aura of a heavy existential anxiety, death almost seemed seductive, albeit torturous. Sybille's was the first dead body I encountered. Her previously flushed cheeks, the rosininess of

her skin tanned by the Greek sun were gone. She had a massive cut on her head, and her skin was a lifeless greyish green. She had been done up by the morticians and they had dressed her in the disdained floral twin-set!

It was almost impossible for me to make sense of the absence of the person I loved and with whom I had been skinny-dipping in the Greek ocean under a moonlit night just two weeks earlier. Where had she gone? Death, in its brutal immediacy, demands the utmost presence of our being. In this chapter, I explore how contemporary artists, photographers, and anatomists come to terms with loss, death, decay, and violence. Two themes emerged as I examined how these creators engage with mortality. One motivation is to defy death and tinker with its materiality. The other is to openly assimilate death and confront its immediacy.

Art as a means to defy death: preservation as immortality strategy

Damien Hirst

The controversial British artist Damien Hirst is notorious for inciting divided opinions about his art. Hirst's art is evocative, confronting, and violent. He says of himself that he uses his art as a means to overcome his death anxiety. Will Self describes this in one of Hirst's catalogues, *Beyond belief*:

Hirst has often spoken about his fear of death, and at lunch he did so again: "I've always been afraid of it, always. When I was young I thought if I didn't get cancer you'd be alright, but then it was explained to me that you died of old age, and I thought, bummer." Since then, his fear of death, far from being supplanted by sexuality, has simply swelled and grown, becoming baroque, ever evolving more furbelows and frills. (Self 2008: 13)

Hirst's fascination with death is captured in his sculpture *The physical impossibility of death in the mind of someone living* (1991), where a shark is suspended in a tank of formaldehyde, a work that catapulted Hirst to success in the international art scene. For me, the title evokes my experience of losing my best friend, the sheer impossibility of imagining a living being ceasing to exist and the brutal realization of this in the encounter with her corpse. Hirst elaborates on this experience in a Channel 4 documentary *Damien Hirst — The first look* (2012), where he likens the fear of sharks with people's fear of death. Death is unimaginable, Hirst suggests, hence the use of euphemisms such as to 'lose' somebody, implying the possibility of a return or

reunion. In this sense, one keeps looking for the dead. In contrast, the shark, an icon of savagery, connotes violence and the brutal immediacy of death, capable of taking life at any age, at any place, and at any moment. Like the shark, the potential of death forever looms with its uncanny omnipresence.

Hirst has created many variations of animals suspended in formaldehyde. For some of these works, cutting or dismembering the animal plays an important role. Unlike the predatory shark, a placeholder for death's violence, in other works Hirst and his team have literally cut up animals. Such works are highly illustrative of how people can be drawn to violence in order to make sense of life. The installation *Mother and child divided* (1993), for example — for which Hirst won the Turner Prize in 1995 — consists of a cow and a calf cut in half by a chainsaw with each piece preserved in a tank of formaldehyde and exhibited together. This installation references both the violence of death and the laborious and gory moments of birth. While I doubt Hirst had Lacan in mind while cutting the animals up, one could speculate that the work evokes the Lacanian idea of ego formation, in which a child first moves through the mirror stage and assumes a self, and then later becomes integrated into the Symbolic Order through mapping out the lack in the (m)Other. In this reading, the opening up of the body serves as an allegory of the inner working of the psyche and the display of the animal's insides as its map. When asked about this particular work in the documentary, Hirst again raises the impossibility of catching or understanding death (*Damien Hirst — The first look* 2012). The more you try to approximate it, he suggests, the more it escapes you. He also points out the longevity of unanimated bodies in formaldehyde abeyance — which makes it possible for the preserved artefact to outlive its maker. In this sense, the work suggests a defeat of death, or at least of decay, through preservation.

Objects found in museums of natural history have often inspired Hirst's art, as one could see at an exhibition dedicated to his key works at the Tate Modern. For example the installation *In and out of love* (1991–2012) occupied two rooms: in one room, dead butterflies were pinned onto colourful backdrops, while in the other room butterflies were born, fed and mated while getting drunk on fermented fruit. The work evokes the natural art of the cycle of life and death — as well as the magnetism of the excess of the insect kingdom. Hirst remarks that what he loves about dead butterflies is how alive and colourful they look. While the body of the insects dry out, the wings are made of chitin, a long-chain polysaccharide extremely resistant to decay. He explains:

It's about love and realism, dreams, ideals, symbols, life and death. I worked out many possible trajectories for these things, like the way the real butterfly can destroy the ideal (birthday-card) kind of love; the symbol exists apart from the real thing. Or the butterflies still being beautiful even when dead. All these things are completely thrown off balance by a comparison I tried to make between art and life, in the upstairs and downstairs installations, a crazy thing to do when in the end it's all art. (Jopling 1991)

Hirst's installation was later heavily criticized by animal rights activists, who alleged that over 9000 butterflies perished in the 23-week-long Tate exhibition (Brooks 2012).

Hirst's fascination with the cycle of life and the alchemy of preservation has also led him to produce sculptures that are inspired by anatomical medical models. One of these works is a bronze statue, *Saint Bartholomew, exquisite pain* (2006), that depicts the religious martyr skinned with his muscles exposed and his flayed skin draped over his arm while he is holding a scalpel in its left raised hand, but he also carries a pair of scissors in his right hand. Hirst explains:

He holds his own skin over his arm and he holds a scalpel and a pair of scissors in his hands so that his exposure and pain are seemingly self-inflicted. It's beautiful yet tragic, and like Saint Sebastian his face shows no pain. I added the scissors because I thought Edward Scissorhands was in a similarly tragic yet difficult position — it has a feel of a rape of the innocents about it. (Hirst, quoted in Chatsworth House 2006)

So according to its creator, this sculpture of the martyr does reference death as self-inflicted violence, which is the tool of a seductive and tragic death instinct. The popular fictional character Edward Scissorhands is an artificially created man who has long sharp instruments instead of hands. The tragedy is that, while he yearns for closeness, his embrace is deadly.

Another work of Hirst that evokes death and violence is a giant bronze statue of a pregnant woman, *Verity* (2003–2012). This work had a controversial reception in the English harbour town Ilfracombe, when it was erected to grace the shoreline in October 2012. The work is described as an allegory of truth and justice. Inspired by Edgar Degas's *Little dancer of fourteen years* (c. 1881), an anatomical cross-section of the woman's head and body discloses a developing foetus. In her upstretched arm, she holds a sword while she hides an off-balance scale behind her back. "Without the

perfect equilibrium enacted by the scales, the sword becomes a dangerous instrument of power, rather than justice” (Hirst and Science Ltd 2012).

Verity is based on the Roman goddess of justice. In ancient Rome, Lady Justice or Justitia was the female personification of justice, often depicted with a double-edged sword, a blindfold and a scale. The blindfold represents impartiality, the scale represents the evaluation of the support for and opposition to a case, and the double-edged sword symbolizes the power of reason and justice. Hirst depicts Justitia with the face of a pregnant, dissected teenager and holding an off-balance scale behind her back. I interpret this sculpture as expressing the idea that, once justice is pregnant with power, reason will succumb to the lure of the death instinct. This reading is reinforced by Hirst’s comment that *Verity* is a further development of another larger-than-life torso sculpture, *Hymn* (1999–2005), inspired by anatomical models used in schools, made of bronze and covered in car paint.⁵ Hirst explains: “It’ll decay. So, eventually, what you’ll be left with is this solid bronze man with bits of paint hanging off it. In a way, it’s like what happens to your body. I liked it for that reason” (Hirst and Burn 2001: 147). Hirst evokes decay through the gradual vanishing of glossy paint as if, after our death, the skin will melt off our flesh to expose another world underneath, capable of withstanding any transformation. The change is only superficial; the structure will withstand decay.

In regards to taming decay and mortality in our death-phobic culture, Damien Hirst’s possibly most controversial, certainly most expensive, piece of art *For the love of God* (2007), has explicitly been praised as “victory over decay” (Fuchs 2008: 16). Damien Hirst and his team purchased a human skull from a London taxidermist and cast it into platinum. The platinum skull has been adorned with approximately 8600 diamonds weighing 1106.18 carats (Self 2008: 14). In order to create the most expensive piece of art to date, he allegedly relied on “the tactics and habits, as well as the camaraderie, of hedge fund speculators” (Silverman 2011: 399).

For the love of God combines imagery of the classic *memento mori* with a distinct Aztec and Mexican aesthetic influence. The diamond-clad skull is meant to act as a reminder of our transient existence. The large stone at the centre of the head was inspired by the comic *2000 AD* and represents the god-like power to control the universe. Nevertheless, death is still approached as something unbearable, something that must be disguised. The skull’s connection to mundane materialism is obvious, as

⁵ Apparently after business magnate and art collector Charles Saatchi bought the sculpture for £1 m, Hirst was sued for infringing copyright because *Hymn* resembled an £14.99 anatomical toy. Settlement was reached out of court (Dyer 2000).

Hirst himself explains: “You don’t like it, so you disguise it or you decorate it to make it look like something bearable — to such an extent that it becomes something else” (Hirst and Science Ltd 2017). Materialism, corporate greed, and the fascination with death are at the centre of this work. This becomes particularly obvious in this statement:

Alongside their dazzling brilliance and “Eucharistic” beauty, Hirst’s fascination with diamonds results partly from the mutterings and uncertainty surrounding their inherent worth. In the face of the industry’s ability to establish their irreplaceable value, it becomes necessary to question whether they are “just a bit of glass, with accumulated metaphorical significance? Or [whether they] are genuine objects of supreme beauty connected with life.” The cutthroat nature of the diamond industry, and the capitalist society which supports it, is central to the work’s concept. Hirst explains that the stones “bring out the best and the worst in people ... people kill for diamonds, they kill each other”. (Hirst and Science Ltd 2017)

Diamonds last forever, so they say, and in this case, diamonds are a stand-in for the contemporary pursuit of immortality, brilliantly visualized by Hirst. The diamond-covered skull is beautiful, sleek, shiny, and absolute in its suspension of death anxiety. The wealth that diamonds represent becomes the glossy veil behind which death as master signifier vanishes: “the skull is a tangible exclamation mark at the end of this era of excess ... It’s his enactment of the extreme and specialised ritual of money” (Self 2008: 15). According to Reuters, the skull was bought for \$100 million by an anonymous investment group, of which Hirst is part (Lovell 2007).

Damien Hirst mastered walking this tightrope between art as manifestation of capitalistic greed and its aggressive stance towards life with his diamond-covered skull. He says about himself: “it’s the maximum I can throw against death; perhaps that’s crass, to pit money against death, but it all depends on what it does visually” (Self 2008: 14). As Deborah Silverman observes, Hirst’s skull “belongs to a different symbolic universe and cultural economy: the skull as an imagery of piracy, poison and triumphant money lust” (Silverman 2011: 404). This connection between money, desire, excess, and commodification is typical of the necrophile, death-illiterate self. And the success of Hirst’s art shows that the necrophile self has become a cultural force that gloats over shock values and the brazen display of one’s status.

Silverman interprets Hirst’s “shockaholic” art as “marketing Thanatos” or as expressing “forms of cultural pathology” (Silverman 2011: 391). Silverman is highly

critical of Hirst's art as well as his persona. She identifies three main propellants of Hirst's success:

A hedge fund economy of greed and speculative fever; a politics of contempt for rules, corruption and impunity; and a society marked by perpetual war, permissible torture and violence at a distance. I consider Hirst's as what I call "hazmat art in an era of cultural dysregulation" and emphasize the character of the work as physical poison and cultural toxin. (Silverman 2011: 392)

Silverman underscores the lack of scrutiny and objective distance that allow looking beyond Hirst's clever marketing strategies in order to identify the impact of his art on the collective consciousness. She links his art to the trajectory of the Belgian Art Nouveau "chryselephantine" sculptures of the 1890s that were sponsored by King Leopold II. The aesthetics of these sculptures, made of ivory tusk, concealed the violence and brutal history of their place of origin. Silverman likens Hirst to Mr Kurtz, the ivory hunter in Joseph Conrad's book *Heart of darkness*:

Hirst and Kurtz are both artists, butterfly collectors, and shamanic characters who flourish in a world of rapacity and greed, facilitated by international accommodation. Hirst's diamond-clad skull, hailed as a global "cultural icon," bears some eerie echoes to the posted skulls marking the flowerbeds in Kurtz's Congo garden. (Silverman 2011: 397)

Body worlds

Hirst's bronze sculptures bear a striking resemblance to the works of Gunther von Hagens, showcased in his extremely successful exhibition *Body worlds*. Von Hagens is not recognized as an artist, although his work is sometimes likened to art (Pesch 2007: 382; Redman 2016). *Body worlds* plays with the suspension and transformation of the abject through the exhibition of plastinated bodies utilizing a process von Hagens developed to preserve real humans by replacing their body fluids with a form of plastic. Through this method, the original physical form of the body is preserved while it retains its durability and stability. The process of decay is stopped and the preserved body can be used as an object for exhibition. Von Hagens writes: "Plastinates show the inner workings of the body and the striking whole-body specimens show the human body in real-life poses, like never seen before" (Bodyworlds 2012). Von Hagens' aim is to overcome the disgust and fear evinced by

the human corpse through an aesthetic representation of the body. Showing plastinates in active everyday positions creates an illusion of vitality, which reduces the distance between the plastinate and the spectator. In von Hagens' words: "The beautiful plastinate, frozen between dying and decay, offers the possibility of a new sensual experience" (Pesch 2007: 375). Von Hagens' aim is to make the plastinate appear as real as possible, freed from the taint of revulsion and, above all, disconnected from all mourning experiences. He sees himself as an educator, as somebody who is increasing the possibilities of research for science and contributing to the education of a broad audience. The primary aim of *Body worlds* is health education, targeting the layperson. The creator hopes to raise people's awareness of the body as "naturally fragile in a mechanized world ... and to recognize the individuality and anatomical beauty inside of them" (Bodyworlds 2017).

The plastinates are made anonymous by removing the face to avoid recognition from family or friends. Von Hagens hopes that this anonymity helps the audience to focus on the beauty of the physical world inside the body, its "inner face" (Bodyworlds 2005). Although von Hagens refers to his work as education for the lay masses, he does not hesitate to make a connection with the Christian tradition of the *memento mori*, the public exhibition of the body parts of saints as reminders of mortality. Interestingly, he has used the *memento mori* analogy as a strategy to legitimate exhibiting corpses in legal confrontations that have arisen. The German section of the International Society of Human Rights, for example, regards von Hagens' show as "business with the dead" (Pesch 2007: 381) and disregards its alleged scientific worth. According to them, it violates the dignity of the dead as well as indirectly violating human dignity.

This sentiment is not too surprising if one takes a closer look at how these bodies are represented, and the manner in which Gunter von Hagens represents himself as an artist of the macabre. He has been accused of creating effects of thrill and lust by including the exhibition of plastinated gorillas and a full-sized bolting horse with rider. I visited a *Body worlds* exhibition at the age of 16 and I remember that one of the bodies was cut and prepared in a way that resembled a dresser. The body had drawers carved into it, that, when pulled out, gave a glimpse into the physical workings of its insides. I, too, was struck by people's fascination with the plastination of a real baby nestled inside its mother's womb. There is a striking similarity between Hirst's *Verity* and von Hagens' plastinated pregnant corpse. Both men address the power of recreation and the mystery of anatomy, and both juggle

with the theme of life and death and the overcoming of decay. The mother's stomach was opened wide like a door, an open gate for those curious about how human life comes into being in a close-up of flesh and blood, yet without the gore, without the touch of skin, without the smell, and without animation. I remember vividly how I struggled with the fact that the plastinated doll in front of me had been a real mother-to-be and that she probably left behind a grieving family. I also remember the reactions of people around me. One mother pointed out the pregnant plastinate to her toddler and commented: "Look, once you were in my belly, too. Just like that." What sounded like a lovely introduction to an educational elaboration on the cycle of life, concluded to my surprise with: "That was the reason I had to barf so much."

From this personal experience, I wonder how educational such exhibitions really are to the layperson. They may simply provide sensational thrills without unsettling side effects, similar to entertainment offered by a violent media offering. However, von Hagens' plastinated bodies are not meant to convey the experience of an encounter with a dead person, a corpse. Von Hagen was explicit about this when he defended his plastinates from the charge of violating German funeral legislation. In his argument, plastinates lose the status of a corpse because bodily liquids are replaced with plastic. The physicality of the plastinates evoke a different experience from that of an organic body. There are no smells, no discharge nor liquefaction. The plastinates resemble life-sized anatomical dolls. This is a deliberate attempt to remove the fear and revulsion surrounding the corpse and to offer the spectator an "aesthetic" presentation of the body (Pesch 2007: 374). I suggest that this suspension of the abject behind the veil of aestheticism sustains death illiteracy. Through the depiction of full body plastinates in active poses, von Hagens enables identification with the body without alienation from the corpse (von Hagens does enjoy presenting himself as an artist of the macabre whether his work is morally legitimate or considered a work of art in the eyes of the viewer). His success provides him with a certain degree of sanction and enables him to reject criticism regarding the legitimacy and ethical integrity of his work. As Pesch writes:

As the architect of this experience, and as its tireless proponent, von Hagens has refigured death for modern sensibilities. A plastinated corpse isn't pickled, like a body in a casket. It doesn't stink, like cadavers at the morgue. It doesn't rot or bloat or moulder. To see one doesn't make you sad or sick; it doesn't fill you with anxiety. The experience is something else instead — an encounter with a *memento mori* that's both dry and durable and can be split and peeled without

disgust. It's death denuded of its most gruesome elements, the body as a finely engineered machine. (Pesch 2007: 387, my translation)

Another important aspect of von Hagens' *Body world* empire is its body donation program, without which the enterprise could not function. The motivation of the different donors, Pesch observes, varies from the idea of being useful after death, of serving modern science through donating the body in the hope of a post-mortal existence, to the hope of outlasting death. The individual donor often longs to be recognized in his or her individuality, despite the fact that *Body worlds'* policy emphasizes the need for anonymity in order to let the "anatomical beauty" of the organic body shine through. Most donors wish to remain in this world by preserving their full and intact bodies, by being exhibited together with their partners, or by preserving their individual markers such as tattoos. The body donors' motives show that they long for comfort and hope that is lost in a profane world in which religious promises no longer draw on the faith of the individual, but mortality remains the unsolved riddle of each and every existence (Pesch 2007: 386).

In this sense body donations can be interpreted as a secular substitution for religion, offering the hope that some recognizable aspect of a person's self will remain preserved after death. In von Hagens' catalogue from 2000, he describes the full body plastinate as "a new form of self-determined post-mortal existence" (Pesch 2007: 389). This evokes hope for the individual donor, but stands in stark contrast to von Hagens' juristic argument that a preserved body is mainly plastic and thus a specimen or object. To legitimize his work, von Hagens introduced the paradox of a commoditized corpse as a hopeful strategy towards one's immortality. Pesch argues that von Hagens' advertisement of a post-mortal bodily existence could be an attempt to reconcile with death and thus claim a religious position in addressing the human aspiration for immortality, which in the past was monopolized by the church. He identifies three key promises in the *Body worlds* literature to make people feel more empowered in the face of death, and therefore more likely to become donors. First, in favour of public education, people forgo a traditional funeral. Second, the emancipation of the body as a whole is made possible through the representation of the fascinating interior of the body. A new path to anatomical self-esteem emerges. *Body worlds* cultivates a fascination with bodies and a culture that recognizes the uniqueness of the body (an alternative to the traditionally body-hostile approach of Christianity). Third, the full-body plastinates give a new face to death, allowing death to lose its horror and be integrated into reality more easily (Pesch 2007: 390).

Anatomical self-esteem, avoidance of expensive and upsetting funerals, and the sanitation of death are all part of an immortality strategy projecting towards the future, yet still grappling with the present cultural death illiteracy.

The inability to be in the presence of death may also occlude one's ability to realize the historic context of these exhibitions, as well as the bodies themselves. There is a danger that the public could mistake von Hagens' plastinates as art. The historian Samuel Redman raises concerns about Gunther von Hagens' *Body worlds* exhibition in a recent article in *The Conversation*:

People are very often unsettled by seeing what were once living, breathing, human beings — people with emotions and families — turned into scientific specimens intended for public consumption. Despite whatever discomfort emerges, however, the curious appeal of medicalized body displays at public museums lingers, enough so to make them consistently appealing as fodder for popular exhibitions. ... But while charged emotional responses have the potential to heighten curiosity, they can also inhibit learning. While museum administrators voiced concern that visitors would be horrified viewing actual human bodies on exhibit, the public has instead proven to have an almost insatiable thirst for seeing scientized dead. (Redman 2016)

Redman remarks that early exhibitions of human bodies have always been fuelled by academic and scientific curiosity. Additionally, there seems to be a historic fascination with death and the human body, evidenced by the large audiences drawn to museums and exhibitions showcasing preserved human bodies. In the past, the acquisition of bodies was underscored by racism, human trafficking, and robbery from both the battlefield and the graveyard. Exhibitors have moved away from such practices and from exhibiting human remains, especially since the proliferation of medical illustrations. Yet a large proportion of the contemporary population, attracted to these kinds of exhibitions of preserved corpses, may be unaware of the ethically problematic history of the dehumanization of the body — or what Redman calls “troubling transition[s] from person to specimen” (Redman 2016). This is also true for von Hagens' practices of obtaining cadavers for his business — not all bodies are donors. A 2006 NPR report states that von Hagens' sources for bodies are questionable. But von Hagen's insists that all bodies — many of them unclaimed bodies from Chinese medical schools — are ethically acquired. In the past von Hagens received bodies from a Russian medical examiner, who eventually was convicted of illegally selling the bodies of homeless people, prisoners, and unclaimed hospital patients. Von Hagens' present deal with Chinese medical schools remains

controversial, because of China's human rights violations and the potential for receiving executed political prisoners. Further, the article states that no clear paper trail can be established between the displayed plastinate and donor forms (Ulaby 2006).

This handling of donor bodies literally shows that sanitized death (which also includes Hirst's notorious art) masks the source and history of the preserved or adorned remains. When a corpse no longer decays and is renamed as a specimen or plastinate, the context of these exhibitions and artworks is lost and with it an appreciation of and gratitude for their origin. Redman urges exhibitors to emphasize the greater historical context of the plastinates to visitors: "Without it, visitors might mistake artfully posed cadavers as art pieces, which they most assuredly are not" (Redman 2016).

Marketing Thanatos

Marketing death is another symptom of our contemporary death illiteracy. Over the last decade, skulls have become a common theme in fashion and retail. In 2006, before Hirst introduced his notorious diamond skull, David Coleman lamented in the *New York Times* that the once "clever and stylish" imagery of the skull had shifted "into overdrive, if not overkill" (Colman 2006). The skull — once imbued with respect for its rich history of mortality contemplation — is now rendered meaningless through its heavy commercialization. Hirst jumped on the bandwagon of popularizing skull imagery with his merchandizing and manufacturing business "Science" (Silverman 2011: 401). Michael C. Kearl observed that commodification dissolves the symbolic essence:

Despite its long-term associations with humanity's existential fate, danger and political injustice and savagery, this potent symbol was not immune to alternative meanings of mass media and the marketplace. As words become drained of their symbolic content when endlessly repeated, so ubiquitous alternative framings of the skull were to render its visage, if not meaningless, then at least largely void of its connotations of mortality and horror. (Kearl 2015: 7)

Death has become merely a new commodity; death imagery can be marketed to inspire the very ideal of cultural necrophilia. Contemporary necrophilic culture has managed to extract the organic body from death. A corpse no longer decays, and the possibility of life changing and transforming is stifled. Instead this culture

sensationalizes the doings of a world replete with cultural and social pathologies. As a result of the modern sense of entitlement to bend and shape the world to our own human interest, we are now adept at draining the planet's resources, in the process tipping life towards extinction. The West has accumulated wealth and abundance through transforming the planet's resources into shiny and glossy commodities that symbolize Western ideals of status and riches. While various body ideals and the marketing of prestigious lifestyles distract the consumer, the repressed problems of grief and mortality slowly writhe their way into our consciousness.

Hirst's and von Hagens' anatomical statues share an attitude to death that does not ultimately make us confront our deepest fear but rather represents a strategy to circumvent it. In this sense, it is no surprise that von Hagens is squeamish about his own mortality. In an interview with *Wired Magazine*, he revealed the many times he was confronted with the limits of the human body. In his childhood he was diagnosed with a dangerous bleeding disorder. This, however, did not prevent him from becoming a surgeon and later a plastinator, working with sharp tools on a daily basis. In his twenties, he was wrongly diagnosed with a rare heart disorder. He now has Parkinson's disease, which makes it almost impossible to pursue his work. His future looks bleak at a time when his international plastinate imperium faces declining audiences and severe financial struggles. Von Hagens has always paid utmost attention to the efficiency of his work (Engber 2013) but, undermined by illness, he must now face financial loss and his own death. His wish is to be plastinated by his wife, to be cut into different parts and to be exhibited in his various institutions. His discussion with his wife about his last wishes reveals the struggle they both face in accepting his life-limiting condition:

His voice grows weak — from disease or emotion, it's hard to tell. He's been talking coolly about what it means to die and what might happen to his corpse, but it's the topic of his dog that chokes him up. "She can always sit beside me," he sputters, and then pinches the bridge of his nose between his fingers and begins to weep. We sit in silence while his shoulders shake.

For von Hagens, grief and sorrow are no different from any other defect of the human body that should be amenable to fixing. When his tears subside, he blames them on his disease — a condition I later learn is called pseudobulbar affect, or the involuntary and inappropriate expression of feeling. It was even worse a few years ago, he tells me, before he started treatment: "I was very upset at my uncontrolled emotions. I could not even go to the cinema." He takes off his hat and shows the lumps on his scalp where the leads from brain-stimulating electrodes have irritated the skin. It's the only time

I've seen his naked head. He says that he's been better since the treatment. "Just now is the first time for the last week that I cried. So I'm nearly normal now." (Engber 2013)

Both von Hagens and Hirst push the boundaries to remind us of the reality of death. However, intellectually dealing with the reality of death is not the same as reflecting upon mortality and then bearing the weight of sorrow that comes with integrating loss. What is the difference? Well, in Hirst's instance, reflecting on death has a tragic, nihilistic and almost cynical quality to it. At its core is a profound unease. In his butterfly installation, for example, Hirst lets the insects run their own life course. According to Hirst, the beauty in the room of dead butterflies resides in the fact that they retain their colourfulness after they have perished. The room of the perished butterflies is more colourful than the room where they were born and fed. Hirst's art celebrates the extinction of decay. As Silverman writes: "Here extravagance and brutalism combined, exemplifying the distinctiveness of the thanatal style of our Hirstian culture: the shift from conspicuous consumption to conspicuous destruction" (Silverman 2011: 406).

I argue that Hirst's art is the manifestation of the necrophile self, and his popularity can only thrive in an environment in which the death drive operates hidden under the blanket of consumer capitalism. But I disagree with Silverman's assessment that Hirst's art has a purely negative impact on people. In her assessment:

Hirst's art and its commercialisation, unleashed in a decade of war and reckless capitalism, suggest that visual culture now offers stylistic displacements of distant, but always encroaching, violence ... I consider Hirst's global reach and toxic spread in the world of museums, galleries, and merchandizing as cultural IED's, improvised explosive devices that blast our conscience and character. (Silverman 2011: 417)

I agree that Hirst's work does not engage with existential themes such as loss, grief, sorrow, and decay that arise when confronting death. However, I propose that Silverman misses the point that his work emerges *because* of this cultural creed of brutality and materialism. He would not be the world's richest artist without the prevalence of social death illiteracy. His role is not that of a perpetrator as such, but of a participator (maybe unconsciously), and a materializer and broadcaster of these subliminal cultural sentiments. While it is true that the necrophile self is also always a perpetrator, his art does not inject more toxicity into the world but rather extracts from it. It magnifies our struggle to come to terms with death and our cultural

disposition towards certain immortality strategies: Destruction is preferred over decay; materialism over materiality.

The immediacy and materiality of death: decay and courage

Photographers in the morgue

Hirst and von Hagens are not the only contemporary exhibitors concerned with death and the abject. Unlike Hirst and von Hagens, however, the artists I now turn to have created work that contextualizes the (de-)materialization of the body. Often controversial, their works have a cathartic potential. Instead of suspending the process of decay through modern modes of preservation and representation, these artists attempt the gradual removal of taboos around the immediacy and materiality of death by working creatively with dying subjects, the dead body, and its soft tissue.

As the history of Victorian post-mortem photography shows (Linkman 2006), the dead have been documented since the dawn of photography. The invention of the camera made family portraits more accessible and affordable for the masses. Photography came to play an interesting role for bereaved people. Photos (daguerreotypes) became precious keepsakes, often made after the death of the family member. These images (seemingly bizarre today) of corpses, sometimes situated alone or propped up next to the living, were often the only image a family had of the person who had passed away. One peculiarity of the time was that the dead were sometimes represented as still alive, but sleeping. These photos were in line with the old tradition of post-mortem paintings, but the daguerreotype introduced a new element of comfort for the grieving. Audrey Linkman suggests that, “By suppressing evidence of the unpleasant aspects of death and by suggesting a more familiar state of being, post-mortem portraits were intended to ease the pain of loss and bring solace and comfort to the bereaved” (Linkman 2006: 309).

Post-mortem images changed after the turn of the century, as more emphasis was put on the funeral and less on the deceased (Ruby 1984: 212–13). The proximity of the camera to the dead widened, indicative, I suspect, of a cultural shift reflecting increased social discomfort with death. However, these eerie post-mortem pictures are not only comfort for the living. Their impact has a broader psychological

functioning. Film studies researcher Aténe Mendelyté interprets the significance of the post-mortem photo as follows:

They show something through absence. They trap the unconscious by this visual trick, by the constant perceptual vacillation of the image. In this sense post-mortems are the perfect aesthetic images as for Lacan such is the function of Beauty — to open our sight to the Real. The picture's true gaze affects us because it is the gaze of the ultimate jouissance in all its horror, exposing the subject as always already dead. (Mendelyté 2012: 89)

Photographers confront death and go beyond the safety of the social order into the realm of the Thing. In 1992, controversial artist Andres Serrano published a series of photos called *The morgue* (1992). He was one of the first modern artists who entered this taboo space in order to reveal it to the public. In this tradition Danish photographer Cathrine Ertmann entered the morgue in order to document the stages and processes after a person has died. In *About dying* (2014), she tried to capture the spaces, practices, and moments hidden from the public eye: the uninviting cold rooms and hallways in which the dead are kept; the morgue, the crematorium, and the chapel. Her photos show the sometimes sombre and sterile environment in which corpses are examined and prepared for their last rite of passage. Her photos are eerie and confronting, like the autopsy scar lacing the chest of an elderly woman. Yet, although she took close-ups of corpses, like the stiffening neck of an elderly man, foreheads or feet, her photos are never too visually explicit and she appears to protect the identity of the dead. On her website, Ertmann provided an explanation of some of the photos. With an almost educational tone she writes:

Muscular stiffening begins between four and twelve hours after death. It starts in the neck and makes movement of the limbs impossible. When it reaches the scalp, it can make the dead body's hair rise. Like goose bumps on the living.

In the crematory, the coffins are burned. Flowers are removed, but drawings, cards and pictures are included in the big oven and are burned at 850 degrees Fahrenheit. It takes about an hour and a half to transform into ashes. If there are bone fragments, they are crushed, and the ashes put in an urn. Afterwards, the urn is laid in the ground, or maybe the ashes are scattered over the sea.

Some plan what clothes they want to have on when they are laid in the coffin, but more often it is the family who chooses. If no decision has been made, the chapel provides a shirt for the dead. The garment is cut in the back and behind the arms, so it is easier to dress the deceased in it. Sometimes the wish is expressed that the deceased should be naked. (Ertmann 2017)

Close-ups of hands are a recurring theme in Ertmann's work, whether of the dead lying in a coffin or the mortician's hands grooming the dead for their last public appearance. One strikingly odd picture portrays a wine-red tie placed around the neck of a dead man, dressing him as if for a wedding party. However, those nice garments are cut down the back and the dead are made to look alive by applying make up to their faces. This is kept hidden — I did not know this information for a long time. While my friend Sybille would rather have been buried naked than wearing the floral twin-set, I feel strangely relieved that at least the terrible ensemble was cut in the back. For some unknown reason, this now decreases my sense of absurdity at seeing my dead friend in a coffin in the despised clothing.

Another photographer, Sue Fox, also visits morgues. However, she is more confrontational in her approach. Her work attempts to overcome the barriers between our curiosity about, and shock at, observing the intimate aspects of decay. Fox takes close-ups of corpses from shameless proximity. She does not shy away from portraying dead bodies slit open, latex gloved hands manipulating organs, or decay spilling out of corpses' orifices. She says that in viewing the dead she exposes herself to one of the greatest fears, the fear of self-destruction, and that by absorbing these realities she attempts to extend her consciousness in order to attain a new perspective on life (Fox 2007: 105). These close-up images capture the horror of soft tissue liquefying and transforming into putrid gases. Despite our daily exposure to the horrifying pictures broadcast on our screens, these photos have the ability to confront and sicken the viewer in a way that sterile, blurry, glossy, or artificial media pictures do not.

Fox calls her art a "spiritual praxis" (Fox 2007: 105). She writes about overcoming her angst during her first encounter with the dead:

As if standing at a deep abyss from which she stared into a cave filled with the dead of endless epochs, she felt that life was always on the side of the loser. Her physical rejection of the sickening stench of the corpse, her examination of its decaying tissues, and its containment in the language of photography, enabled her eventually to feel that what she created in the face of decay helped to refine the chaotic energy of death. Art held out the possibility of creating a space to welcome death consciously as well as unconsciously, a space to appropriate death. (Fox 2007: 107–8)

In contrast, in contemporary society the aging, dysfunctional, and dying and their dead bodies are removed from day-to-day experience. The experience of disablement, dysfunctionality, and dying reappears via representation in the media. We imagine that the humans of the twenty-first-century Western world have seen everything horrific — dead children and their torn-up bodies, humiliated prisoners, brutal rapes, dead dictators, flesh-hungry zombies, and blood-thirsty vampires. However screens act as a filter, not only because of the distance they create between the viewer and the image, or because one has the possibility of zapping from death into a less controversial televised “elsewhere” at will. Entertainment media puts a shiny gloss on dead tissue and eliminates the putrid stench of decay, enabling the viewer to be close but never too close. One could argue that photographs, too, are second-hand experiences that fail to relay the “real thing”. But for Sue Fox, her work acts as a magnifying lens seeking proximity to the dead and thus underscoring the immediacy of death.

Discerning social commentary and existential courage

Fox and Ertmann display existential courage in facing the abject in the morgue and provide an eye for the curious who are unable to enter into the spaces reserved for the dead. However, the Mexican artist Teresa Margolles developed an even more compelling approach. Trained in forensic science, Margolles spent more than a decade working in morgues, first as a photographer, and later as an artist. Margolles uses waste materials from the mortuary and the street to tell the stories of the dead. Passionate about giving Latin-American victims of violent crime a voice and raising awareness of the poverty and desperation of survivors of crime, she does not shy away from using fluids collected from the washing of the dead, shrouds, or even the tongue of a murdered drug addict in *Lengua* (2000).

Margolles has been accused by contemporary art critics and spectators of having a necrophile temperament, and of vilifying the dead (Macho 2007: 353). Interestingly, however, Margolles’ works are well received in Austria, Germany, and Switzerland despite her art being so deeply unsettling. She is aware of Western countries’ death taboo, especially regarding the murdered body, and sees her work as an opportunity to break the silence in the European context. She says that her platform is the museological/art space where she puts the corpse at the centre of the discussion. A conversation, she hopes, that is focused around the person murdered,

the right to live and to take life — or what she calls the “realities of life” (global:artfair TV 2016). Engaging with her art and the philosophy behind it involves recognizing that deadness is as much a process as dying itself.

In working with corpses in their different states, she closely observes the enfolding of the organic within the tissue of the dead. For example, in order not to show the tortured and mutilated bodies of crime victims, Margolles shows objects found around the corpse at the crime scene. This includes the soil the corpse touched and the sand that mixed with the body’s blood. Margolles is acutely aware that the blood dried into dust can be carried away by the wind and thus the dead are brought back into the communities and the lungs of those living. She remarked in an interview for the 7th Berlin Biennale in 2012 that “we are being filled by our fellow citizens” (solidarityaction 2012). Here the abject, that von Hagens and Hirst deem to be something to overcome, is conceived as already in our midst in the most innocuous form as dust. According to Margolles, social violence and the violence of the life cycle is inescapable; what is already present only needs to be revealed to the willing perceiver.

For the 7th Berlin Biennale in 2012, Margolles exhibited her work *PM 2010* (2010) which is a collection of the front pages of the Mexican tabloid *PM*, published in Ciudad Juárez, one of the most dangerous border cities in Mexico. The Berlin Biennale curators, Artur Żmijewski and Joanna Warsza, write about her work:

The newspaper is not available on the Internet and is only on sale in the city from Monday to Saturday at 1 pm. In this work, Margolles brings all 313 covers from 2010 — the most violent year in the entire history of drug trafficking in Mexico — to the audience. Each front page of the paper presents an image of one of the city’s victims of the drug war, who were shot, stabbed, or tortured in the most horrific ways. Hundreds of bodies were never found; probably most of them were dissolved in containers with acid. Liquid remains were put into the soil. These daily images from a tabloid reflect the routine experience of violence and death in a society which is collapsing under the pressure of organized drug crime. Poverty, crime, and the bloody rivalries of paramilitary gangs are always the day’s most important populist news items, next to recurring erotic advertisements. The paper turns each scene into a kind of obscure death porn, which is normalized through its constant repetition. (Żmijewski and Warsza 2017)

In this sense Margolles’ artwork becomes social commentary and, although she has been working with dead bodies for more than two decades, she uses the morgue as a daily thermometer of what is happening in the streets. The research in the morgue

thus becomes social. The Hispanic art researcher Julia Banwell underscores the impact of Margolles' work on the audience:

Her works are confrontational, urging the spectator to reflect upon the social milieu within which Mexico City's morgue is situated, as it is represented by the unclaimed corpses whose names we never learn. This serves to place the artist's subject matter within the public sphere, thus forcing viewers to contemplate a reality they may rather deny. Non-Mexican viewers may be unfamiliar ... and unaware of its social problems. In this case, Teresa Margolles' art works operate as social commentary on two levels: firstly, to raise awareness of a situation that exists within an environment with which they had previously had little or no contact, and secondly in the way mentioned above, as a direct confrontation of the viewer with an uncomfortable social reality. (Banwell 2009: 58)

The everyday triteness of tabloid magazines is infused with human suffering, although the format of the tabloid press does not allow for in-depth engagement (as discussed in Chapter 5). In fact, Margolles' work is in stark contrast to what is served up by the entertainment industries. The dematerialization of the dead and the alienating reality of their physicality are approached differently in Margolles' art than in the frequent modern representations of the dead on TV or elsewhere in media portraits. Margolles manages to reveal the true tragedy of crime through the accumulation of mere information by presenting this collection in a space where contemplation can potentially be achieved.

Conclusion: reflections on life

Margolles, Ertmann, Fox, von Hagens, and Hirst all work with existential themes of death and life, yet their approaches to those themes could not be more different. The art of Margolles, Fox, and Ertmann directly approaches the border between the living and the dead, representing the dead body not as dead matter, but as an organic form of transformation that serves as *memento mori* for every body. From this perspective, the necrophile self can be seen as a state of perception that lacks a means of engagement with a mortal reality rendered opaque in our secular, materialistic cultural climate. Artists approach death and dying through a variety of lenses, but existential anxiety is always within us, hence the religious and cultural scripts that emerged historically in order to deal with our mortality awareness. I have so far argued that there is not a master signifier in contemporary society to help people

come to terms with mortality. Nonetheless, this does not imply it is impossible to individually come to a deeper understanding and integration of death.

Margolles' work is an example of this. Framing a lethal social death drive through its devastating impact on Mexican societies has required from her to confront the abject. Her work in the morgue shows that she is very capable of looking at what is present, the extremely violent killings of young people in the streets of Mexico. Her artwork, however, acts as a screen that protects the viewer from looking at the severity of the mutilated bodies, without occluding the truth of a bleak social reality — the fear, trauma, grief, and desperation inflicted by a ravaging war of drugs produced for consumption by a death-illiterate West. Letting the brutal truth of Mexican reality penetrate without inflicting too much of this violence upon the viewer, she avoids a pornographic representation of death while realizing the truth of loss. Margolles, Fox, and Ertmann want us to look at the reality, materiality and confronting immediacy of death and the social context in which death and deadness happen.

The magic of the living body is made painfully obvious in death's presence, where it becomes clear that life itself enacts violence, both in the act of being born into the world and the act of leaving it. A good death might be when life's violence is suspended in a field of social grace, an environment of people who express caring attitudes, and engage in rituals to accompany the last hours of a person's life. To explore this further, I want to introduce one last artist, Claudia Biçen, who engages with the perspective of those who are dying. This British-American artist developed a project, "Thoughts in Passing", aimed at giving the dying a chance to reflect upon their lives and exploring what they can teach us. At a hospice in the San Francisco Bay area, Biçen created life-sized pencil portraits of some of the residents, accompanied by audio-clips in which they contemplate life and death. The musings of the dying are written in tiny words and sentences on their clothing as "a metaphor for how we carry our stories with us" (Bahrapour 2016). In an interview with Tara Bahrapour in *The Washington Post* (2016), Biçen shares the reasoning behind her work. As Bahrapour writes:

It is also, she hopes, a way to slow people down. "You see artwork and you take a snapshot and move on. I thought, 'how can I draw people in?' When you're up close to the piece you have kind of an intimate experience." ... "I wanted to create a feeling of compassion and empathy, of seeing yourself in that person," Biçen said. "We put the elderly and the dying away, we shut them away. We've kind of

given up on them. They're no longer productive... Particularly in American culture, productivity is so much at the core of what we value in people." (Bahrapour 2016)

There were three criteria for residents to participate in this project: no dementia, adequate health to sustain engagement, and willingness to deal with the often-painful truth of their mortality. Being diagnosed with a terminal illness does not guarantee a fast track to death acceptance and existential musings. Biçen talks about this experience in the hospice:

"Most people are not right for this project because most people are not going to be able to go there," she said. Some people in [sic] hospice are still in denial about what that means, and even those who accept it may not be ready to talk about it with a stranger or have their portrait done when they are so ill. "It was a big ask of people. I was very aware that it's a huge ask." (Biçen, quoted in Bahrapour 2016)

When faced with a terminal illness that was not too rapidly progressing, the dying gained an opportunity to reflect upon life. Project participants had the opportunity to allow death to become a master signifier in their life through which they could re-evaluate the past and present. What became acutely clear to Biçen was that the participants preferred a state of immediacy in relation to life. They expressed a need to be present in the given moment and to live on a day-to-day basis with little patience for the "small stuff". Existential questions that in the past might have quietly bubbled in the background of a person's consciousness were now magnified and took priority. For Biçen the project has been life affirming:

Even though they were dying they were almost living more deeply than they had before. People talk about moving into the now. Having the future stripped away really pulls you into the now. They would sit and look at the beauty of a tree. One man, Harlan, would leave his window open 24 hours a day so he could see the sunrise because it meant he had made it to another day. (Biçen, quoted in Bahrapour 2016)

Regret was a strong theme that came up repeatedly in Biçen's work. People either wished they had not worked so hard or prevented themselves from living life more fully. After the life-limiting diagnosis, some started to live life more lucidly as a result of finding a peace unknown previously. "There is so much this world has to offer and I barely skimmed it" (Bahrapour 2016). This statement reflects a common sentiment expressed by the dying, and one which can be approached from

two perspectives — either that of regret or that of reconciliation, sometimes at the same time. Dying is a very humbling experience that has the potential to amend life. Biçen came to understand this after a few of the participants died before their portrait had been finished. Not only the dying and the artist were affected, but also the family of the dying were deeply moved by and appreciative of these portraits and their accompanying audio-clips. Biçen’s work invites her viewers to stop and listen to the invisible members of our society. Biçen herself found that she now thinks less obsessively about dying:

“I went into this thinking that every person was going to provide me with some kind of wisdom,” ... “But people just die as themselves. We die as ourselves. There isn’t going to necessarily be some kind of revelation or change — this is it.” ... “This anxiety about my mortality, I feel like now it has gone away.” She laughed. “I mean, I’m sure it’ll come back. But hey, you know what? You have everything now, so just be with it. Tomorrow is not promised. When you hear that from people who are standing on the edge, you listen.” (Biçen, quoted in Bahrapour 2016)

People die like they lived. I came across this sentence over and over again both in my research on the dying and palliative care as well as while volunteering in palliative care. The importance of this statement, how death illiteracy is expressed and measured, and how it actually diminishes our quality of life, is discussed in the last, concluding chapter of this thesis.

Chapter 7

The emotional and physical costs of death and grief illiteracy

Dirty Thursday

I found myself sitting in a bus heading towards town one cold sunny morning in February. Immersed in a clandestine tragedy, I needed to purchase new music to mark this moment in my life and to shore up a protective barrier around my vulnerable self. It was not a time for silence nor self-awareness. I held myself together by escaping and moving, numb and disconnected from the life around me.

Konstanz, a historic town on the German shores of Lake Constance, is exceptional at this time of the year. It was Dirty Thursday in Fasnet (dialect for Fastnacht), the German carnival, a day in February or March in which all foolishness culminates. Traditionally, fasting begins on the day after Dirty Thursday in preparation for Easter, and thus an excess of food, especially easily perishable things like eggs, fats and meat, is consumed. In modern times this also means an excessive consumption of alcohol alongside the traditional fat-loaded recipes.

As I found my way into the city centre of Konstanz, people were in the streets celebrating and drinking. Many Germans, who fondly call this time of the year the fifth season, were desperately looking forward to breaking with normal conventions and creeds. At carnival, the serious and diligent German citizens turn into celebrating Narren (or in English 'fools').⁶ Some were in their local club attire dedicated to preserving the medieval pagan and Catholic traditions of chasing out the winter, and deadly diseases, others to anticipating Christ's resurrection. However, most were welcoming the celebration with excess unhinged from its traditional roots.

My mother died on Dirty Thursday. The call came in the early morning hours. As I lay in bed, confused by the meaning of the words I had just heard, I felt myself slip into a quavering idle. I was a fool thinking that I could protect myself from pain by assuming that, having already experienced the loss of two friends and seen old age and death close-up while working in a nursing home, I knew what death was

⁶ The commonly used language for people participating in the German carnival is Narre or Narr, which describes a comedian or people participating in comedic acts. Narre is also associated with silliness, immaturity, ignorance, clumsiness and madness. Narr translated in English is jester or fool.

all about. Nothing prepared me for the loss of my mother. In addition, our complicated relationship made my grief all the more difficult. Due to my denial of the severity of her illness and the non-communication about all things existential in my family, I had missed my mother's deathbed. The emotional and existential gravity of this profound loss created a *tacenda* in which the internal dimension of the experience had no external space to surface in my life. I was at a loss.

Sitting in the bus on that Dirty Thursday, my inner saturnine landscape and the merry outer world could not have clashed more violently. I did not understand the impact that my foolish assumptions would have upon me — yet. Fellow fools of the cheerful kind filled the bus, some already inebriated by alcohol. One yelled in good old Fasnet tradition their battle cry “*ho narro*” right into my face, leaving traces of spit on my salty cheeks.

The time of carnival is a season of lawlessness, in which normal, sober citizens turn into fools. Carnival can be understood as a mode of understanding in the sense that it provides a perspective that challenges the cultural status quo (Stallybrass and White 1986: 6). In this sense we can understand carnival as opening up a relation to the Lacanian Real, since it pushes us to reveal what is usually excluded from the cultural sphere (Stallybrass and White 1986: 10). Carnival allows for a reversal of hierarchies and a connection of terminal endpoints like birth and death or youth and age. The set of symbolic practices that make up carnival express behaviours that can be described as symbolic inversions; they contradict, abrogate, and potentially represent an alternative to the common dictates of the ruling class (Stallybrass and White 1986: 17). The opportunity is brief, however, and quickly followed by a time of fasting and abstinence as the dominating institutional structures are re-established. Carnival might be often disconnected from its strong traditional meaning, yet its ritualized spectacle and opportunity for transgressing cultural norms prevails.

The role of fool is central here. The fool has many meanings and a rich cultural history. Traditionally, the fool occupies a paradoxical position in which he/she is understood to be below the human standard and to be an outlaw and yet strongly dependent upon a social group. Traditionally, fools enjoyed an extraordinary position in society (Welsford 1961: xi–xii), having the leeway to mention things normal folk would not dare to point their finger at. Fools were not only the entertainers, performers, and storytellers at royal or noble courts, they also enjoyed the privilege of criticizing their masters, mistresses, and ordinary people with an analytic sharpness. They were fools by decree and their special ability was to point out that

which could not be represented in the social order. Because a fool does not focus, but rather dissolves, events, they are equally at home in reality and the imagination.

While carnival has the potential to be a celebration of creativity, it has also become a form of narcosis. There is nothing awe-inspiring about the late modern inebriated fool with his unhinged tendency towards *jouissance*, celebrating in a culture devoid of death awareness and filled with the vacuity of materialism.

That day, I developed a deep disdain for German carnival. Life felt like a bad joke with the power to wipe the smile off my face, and distort it into a rueful grimace. A heart that once beat by my side had stopped while my heart kept pounding and the world turning as if nothing had happened. For me this boozing, spitting fool will forever be the representative of death and our foolish blindness to it. But I am thankful for this fool who ignited my disdain, and with it initiated a realization that would slowly unfold in the years to come about my own and the world's death illiteracy and its toxic impact on life.

Our collective death illiteracy comes at a great cost for those experiencing loss, illness and the last stages of life. In a death-phobic culture death illiteracy further isolates and traumatizes people. This concluding chapter of this thesis addresses the manifestations and impact of our personal, cultural, and institutional death illiteracy.

Personal death illiteracy

Grief illiteracy comes hand in hand with death illiteracy and surfaces in the event of a terrifying illness. As we saw in Chapter 1, Kellehear's concept of stigmatization and shame reveals that the sick and the dead are culturally perceived to be interruptions of the social flow, its conventions and norms. Havi Carel's book *Illness* (2008) further extends the understanding of how stigma functions in a death-illiterate society. Carel suffered a debilitating lung disease that gave her a life prognosis of ten years from the onset of symptoms. With her life turned upside-down she turned to philosophy to make sense of her diagnosis and its impact. She points out that, once faced with illness, the current belief that "body and perception" is the "seat of personhood, or subjectivity" (Carel 2008: 20) becomes painfully clear. *To be* means having a body. That body is in dialogue with the environment and "embodiment is the background condition for a realm of subjectivity to exist" (Carel 2008: 23). In its ideal form the body is actively engaged in intelligent, meaningful interactions with the environment (Carel 2008: 25). Illness, however, is an "abrupt and violent way of

revealing the intimately bodily nature of our being” (Carel 2008: 27). A rift opens between the biological and lived body. Hence, for the ill and dying, the breakdown of friendships with people who lack the ability to deal with death anxiety is inevitable.

The social architecture of illness is such that healthy people will experience great discomfort in the company of the sick. One is forbidden to discuss the messy truth about one’s illness or how one experiences it. The Parsonian “sick role”, so Carel writes, is only validated by society if one conforms to social expectations. Being a “good sick person” means conforming to expectations that the healthy must not be offended or polluted by illness:

When you begin to get praise for your behavior, then you know you have achieved the status of a conformist. A sick conformist. An ill conformist conforming to the demands of the healthy majority, who cannot, will not, will not to see the fate that awaits us all. (Carel 2008: 56)

Carel laments that there is a sheer “inability of healthy people to conceive the lives of others” (2008: 46). Instead, the sick and dying must ready themselves to combat the stigmatization of a culture which does not want to know. Inevitably, isolation and loneliness ensues. The sick and dying are reminders of the abject, which I discussed in chapters 3 and 4; it is the terror that must be avoided at all cost.

A time will come in people’s lives when this denial or cultural blindness catches up with them, to their own detriment. Atul Gawande’s influential book *Being mortal: medicine and what matters in the end* (2014) raises awareness of the all too common story of life prolonged due to medical intervention, yet without bettering the quality of life (especially in old age). Likewise, the Dan Krauss *Netflix* documentary *Extremis* (2016) follows palliative care specialist Dr Jessica Zitter and her team at the Intensive Care Unit at Highland Hospital in Oakland, California, helping patients and their families prepare for death. This short documentary shows the heartbreak of families caught off-hand, who are forced to make decisions about life and death on behalf of a sick relative. The focus of Zitter’s work lies in helping families understand that there is no chance of recovery, yet she has to combat the appeal of exhausting all experts, machines, and treatments before approaching an end-of-life discussion. Zitter (2017) writes about the dangers of medical technologies that keep people alive despite their wishes. These protracted deaths are the consequence of inadequate communication between doctors and patients regarding treatment options. She stresses that, if people understood the impact of these technologies on life

quality, most would think twice before accepting such treatment. Those who are informed do indeed prefer less technological treatment. However, both the general public and doctors have to become more active and daring in acknowledging and planning for the end-of-life phase.

The issue of how death and grief illiteracy has a snowballing effect on a culture's ability to mourn (Devine 2017b; Klass, Silverman, and Nickman 1996) is beyond the scope of this thesis. Yet it is important to point out, as many have argued, that the social clumsiness and prejudices that surround illness, death, and loss often contribute to the severe isolation of the bereaved and add unnecessary pain (Kübler-Ross 1976; Elias 1985; Carel 2008; Kellehear 2007; Tick 2014; Gawande 2014; Jenkinson 2015). Denial can be a very logical step in a death-illiterate society for those faced with the death of a loved one. However, denial contributes negatively to the inevitable pain of loss. Therefore, as discussed in Chapter 1, grief operates in the shadow of contemporary death illiteracy and is aligned with the idea that death needs to be tamed, and loss needs to be rationalized and worked through in order to get on with life (Silverman and Klass 1996: 3). In this climate, grief remains an ongoing, clandestine struggle.

Cultural death illiteracy: terror management theory

In a death-phobic society a terminal diagnosis and death awareness do not go hand in hand. I discovered this during seven years of working in aged care for the Red Cross in Germany and while working as a volunteer in the palliative care ward of the Queen Elizabeth Hospital in Adelaide. During this time I learnt that entering the last phase of life does not necessarily bring forth a change in attitude or a lucid realization that life is at an end, nor does it necessarily invoke a longing for peace with death. During my time in these roles I talked to numerous (hospice) nurses and palliative care doctors, many of whom shared the view that, for most of the dying, death awareness is something that comes very late, if at all. I heard many stories of people who only recognized in their very last days: "It's me. It is actually me who is dying now." As a palliative care volunteer, I spent a few hours weekly with patients, offering my company and the comfort of foot massages. In my observation, older single men were the most apprehensive about talking to me. Older women often happily took up my offer of going for little walk or having a massage. Death was never part of our conversation. Sometimes they shared a little of their lives but I was,

after all, just a friendly stranger. Becoming trusted, especially in such a vulnerable phase of life, takes time. What was clear, however, was that exposure to death and illness can undermine or, at the very least, challenge the concepts one has about oneself, the world, and others, and this in turn leads to death anxiety. Lehto and Stein (2009) have demonstrated that death anxiety is negatively related to perceptions of life satisfaction, meaning, and purpose. People have developed defence mechanisms to ward off death anxiety. For instance, high self-esteem, which has been associated with cultural belongingness, can be an effective buffer against death anxiety if it acts as a mechanism for reinforcing cultural beliefs rather than succumbing to challenges that require a transformation of those beliefs (Lehto and Stein 2009: 27).

Terror management theory is another strand of empirical research within death scholarship that focuses exclusively on the impact of (unconscious) death anxiety in everyday life. The central thesis of terror management theory (TMT) is the idea that becoming aware of death has consequences for people (Darell and Pyszczynski 2016: 2). TMT developed in the mid-eighties and is based on the work of cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker, discussed in Chapter 1. It draws its primary inspiration from Becker's book *The denial of death* (1973) and pursues Becker's idea that people are caught up in the inherent human paradox of being preoccupied with death, due to the species' unique cognitive development of the ability to anticipate the future, through language and self-awareness. Paradoxically, the consequence of mortality awareness is an ever-present fear of death that needs to be kept at bay in order to maintain a productive and functioning world. Culture-building Eros has to keep Thanatos in reign. In Becker's thinking, as adopted by TMT, cultures and societies are manifestations of the belief that human existence is meaningful, significant, and unending (Darell and Pyszczynski 2016: 2). By living up to the standards that society provides, one's existence gains value because it connects the individual to something grander — Becker's hero system theory — which is also a theory of self-esteem. As we saw in Chapter 1, Becker understands society as a codified system of ideological justification of one's self worth. Since societies are heterogeneous there are many systems, which are defined as “the shared illusion of permanence and immortality among members of all cultures that gives the social myth its power” (Darell and Pyszczynski 2016: 2–3).

TMT integrates Becker's key ideas with contemporary social psychology in order to develop empirically testable hypotheses. The original concept of TMT addresses self-esteem, how it is acquired and maintained, and why it is needed. TMT

also incorporates research on self-esteem in order to better understand the importance of it for its own hypotheses. Becker understands the hero as a symbolic ideal, or symbolic standard, a representation of “cultural values condensed into an ideal form of humanity” (Darell and Pyszczynski 2016: 3). This archetypal role of the hero sets the measure (standards of shared social values and beliefs) against which an individual can compare him/herself. The closer one comes towards the hero archetype, the greater the level of self-esteem, which translates into individual feelings of emotional security strong enough to buffer existential fear, anxiety, or terror.

According to TMT (Darell and Pyszczynski 2016), cultural perceptions provide a shared lens for viewing life and reality in a way that gives meaning and significance. These particular perceptions become permanent and enduring over time, thus establishing standards of value for individuals. Such solidified world views can provide some hope of immortality, yet these perceptions need to be sheltered from critique in order to assert the correctness and superiority of one’s view. What follows is that the individual will distance him/herself from others with different views, but seek out people with similar attitudes and cultural norms (Stillman and Harvell 2016: 80).

Assessing the empirical evidence of twenty years’ research, with 500 experiments conducted in over 30 countries (Darell and Pyszczynski 2016: 6), TMT research comes to the conclusion that close relationships, self-esteem, and world views play an important role as an anxiety buffer in the mortality-aware human. Thus, death awareness and anxiety enhances the commitment to romantic relationships, because close relationships work as a buffer against death anxiety (Lehto and Stein 2009: 34). Yet death is the Thing, the invisible elephant in the room. Darell and Pyszczynski argue:

At its heart, TMT posits that people are consistently, and unconsciously, motivated to maintain faith in their cultural worldviews, self-esteem, and close relationships to protect themselves from the anxiety produced by the awareness that death is inescapable. (Darell and Pyszczynski 2016: 6)

One of the major lines of evidence that supports TMT is the mortality salience hypothesis. If cultural world views provide a buffer against the fear of death, then explicitly reminding people of death should increase the defence of world views, self-esteem, and attachment. This is called mortality’s salience. Darell and

Pyszczynski (2016: 6) argue that TMT has generated plenty of evidence that, when death is brought to the forefront of awareness, the psychological structures of cultural world view, self-esteem, and close relationship act as a barrier against death awareness. By extension, TMT has found that, if psychological structures shield against existential anxiety, strengthening these structures makes the individual less susceptible to death anxiety and anxiety in general. They call this the anxiety buffer hypothesis (Darell and Pyszczynski 2016: 10).

Reverse logic suggests that challenges to cultural world views, self-esteem, and close attachments increase the accessibility of death-related thoughts. In TMT this is called the death-thought accessibility hypothesis and it shows that, with under-perceived cultural threats, the subversion of one's self-esteem, and especially the threat of separation from a close relationship, death-related thoughts are more accessible (Darell and Pyszczynski 2016: 9). (However, this does not increase other negative and adverse thoughts that are not related to death.)

Marketing, money and mortality

Throughout this thesis I have argued that capitalism's seductive materialism throws a wrench into death awareness. Somewhat similarly Stephen Jenkinson, death educator and former director of the palliative care unit at Mount Sinai Hospital of Toronto, Canada, argues that embedded in current manifestations of death phobia is an addiction to unrestrained and untethered growth, progress, and anything that supports this ideology. Life is often misunderstood as a staging area for one's genius (embedded in what Anthony Elliott (2013) has called narcissistic reinvention culture). As discussed in Chapter 4, narcissism is informed by elevating one's self-worth through affirming one's status through material goods, health, and a polished outer appearance. The spirit of capitalism is that of endless inwards-engagement of the self in order to validate one's worthiness through self-optimisation. This anxious self is in part an outcome of the emergence of Calvinism, which left people with a fundamental angst regarding their existential worth. Incorporating this into a Lacanian framework, consumer culture attempts to fill the emotional gap at the centre of our psyche by stimulation our desires in never-ending ways with never-ending innovations and inventions that lose their appeal shortly after their purchase date. A narcissistic reflexivity is, therefore, the consequence of a self that needs to keep one's appearance up to date. Mortality contemplation would be the opposite of

this maintained and defended narcissistic self. Jenkinson, too, identifies this link between narcissism, defence against death, and consumerism:

Fear of death stalks hospital hallways, of course, but lifestyle advertising is rife with it, parenting carries it along, the fitness workout industry is carried by it, and so too the insurance business. It is usually unspoken, but the fear of death is traded on and counted on. (Jenkinson 2015: 220)

Anxiety researchers Lehto and Stein conclude that conscious death anxiety leads to active defences in the form of distractions specifically designed to lower conscious death anxiety, albeit useless to manage unconscious death anxiety (Lehto and Stein 2009: 27). It is not surprising that consumerism provides a bastion of meaning that strengthens social ties, reinforces the feeling of belonging, and enhances perceptions of self-worth and status (Lehto and Stein 2009: 34). There is empirical evidence that shows that people with mortality awareness prioritize wealth and luxurious brands, especially if they have a materialistic attitude (Stillman and Harvell 2016: 81–2).

The TMT researchers Tyler Stillman and Lindsey Harvell argue that death awareness can explain consumer spending and marketing (Stillman and Harvell 2016: 79). This echoes Žižek's critique of a seductive yet aggressive capitalism as the backdrop against which everything relates (Žižek 2000b: 320–1). Capitalism presents itself as a form of freedom tied to the repetition and compulsion of consumption, leading to jouissance. The death-illiterate consumer seeks control and security through, as TMT researchers would say, materialism as world-view defence. Research on the link between materialism and well-being shows that materialists have diminished life satisfaction and greater neuroticism and depression (Rindfleisch and Burroughs 2004: 221). In the case of stressful and traumatizing experiences, highly materialistic people also tend towards greater levels of post-traumatic stress, compulsive consumption, and impulsive buying than less materialistic individuals. This suggests that materialists have lower levels of self-esteem which weakens their coping mechanisms (Ruvio, Somer, and Rindfleisch 2014: 90). However, there are so-called "happy materialists" who are not negatively affected by their consumer habits. These "happy materialists" are more likely to be highly educated men who place extra value in power, achievement, hedonism, stimulation, and security (Rindfleisch and Burroughs 2004: 221). In my words, these are the people on the top of the social pyramid who already benefit from the privilege and opportunities given to them due to socio-historic circumstances. These people already have high self-

esteem, thus world-view defence does not increase through death awareness (yet they still prefer luxury goods) (Stillman and Harvell 2016: 83).

Brands are a “culturally sanctioned symbolic testimony to one’s values” (Stillman and Harvell 2016: 83). Seeking out luxurious brands in order to communicate information about the self, as discussed in Chapter 4, helps to rebuild or showcase self-esteem within a social order that knows how to decipher the code of luxury brands. Self-esteem is built in the context of culture and what culture holds valuable and, since culture is not homogenous, the many diverse cultural values provide miscellaneous sources for different kinds of self-esteem. For instance, mortality salience prompts donations and product affinity only when consistent with people’s base values, and having these values confirmed provides a self-esteem boost, which alleviates death anxiety (Stillman and Harvell 2016: 84). Money can also be seen as an immortality strategy in which symbolic immortality is gained by having one’s accumulated wealth affect people even after death. In this sense, money provides a sense of continuity and ongoing connection to others (one’s children and so on). The feeling of having such high symbolic immortality also lessens the fear of death (Stillman and Harvell 2016: 84). Materialism therefore quenches one’s symbolic needs and desires rather than real needs. As TMT research suggests, archiving symbolic immortality is not innate but orchestrated by culture — hence Becker’s claim that culture is an immortality formula (Stillman and Harvell 2016: 85).

If this current culture of immortality fails to address existential worries, how can we deal with the legitimate fear of death? Stephen Jenkinson doubts that the fear of death comes from “the ability to understand finality or that it comes from any ability. ... It might be that you have to *learn* to be afraid to die” (2015: 221). Exposure to death is minimal in our modern society and, therefore, the awareness of death is, and remains, minimal (Jenkinson 2015: 222). According to Jenkinson, what has gone wrong is a lack of culture:

No, death phobia is an elephant in the hands of the blind man as long as we keep saying that it is an attribute of North American Culture, or any culture. It is truer to say that death phobia happens when culture doesn’t happen, or when it is imperiled in a fundamental way. Death phobia, I am asking you to consider, is not culture. It is anti-culture. It multiplies whenever culture is under attack, especially when it is failing from within. *Death phobia begins to metastasize whenever our ability to make culture, to be deeply at home in our skin and in the world, has gone missing.* (2015: 223, original emphasis)

In this sense, I would suggest that what is in play is the death drive itself, and its anti-cultural flow, manifesting within the modern individual in the shape of death illiteracy and consumer escapism. As I argued in Chapter 4, it is no surprise that the dominant contemporary relationship to desire is instant gratification in the form of consumer goods or experiences. The pleasure principle now trumps the reality principle. However, this anti-culture of death illiteracy does not only express itself through the individual; it externalizes itself on an institutional level as well.

Institutionalized death illiteracy

A private person facing illness and death may struggle with isolation and the inability of others to address grief. At a collective level the impact of a death-phobic culture strains our social relationships. Sick people's needs are shattered by institutionalized defensive mechanisms against death anxiety. Havi Carel describes breaking down crying at one of her many medical appointments and being met by the sternness of an uncaring nurse. During the course of her illness, she realized that only a few staff members were empathetic enough to care about their patients. In her words:

I know I failed the unwritten law of the medical world, where everything is impersonal, where news of deterioration and terminal illness are to be met with dry eyes and a steady gaze. And within this world, my human failure will be held against me, while her failure to be human doesn't even have a name. (Carel 2008: 39)

Fear and anxiety are not spoken about within the medical setting, and the language doctors use is sanitized. Havi Carel's experiences with her illness are examples of a death-phobic culture manifesting in crude and impersonal encounters with institutions that dehumanize the most intimate of experiences, just as Elisabeth Kübler-Ross (1976) noted forty years ago. Christopher Hitchens describes in his last book, *Mortality* (2012), the medicalised language he encountered during his end-of-life struggle:

The country has a language of its own — a lingua franca that manages to be both dull and difficult and that contains names like ondansetron, for anti-nausea medication — as well as some unsettling gestures that require a bit of getting used to. (Hitchens 2012: 3)

The patient is not allowed just to have cancer but is instead swept up in the language of “battling cancer”. Family, friends, well-wishers, and obituaries all tap into this lingua, where the image of struggle equals the bravery and strength of the ill. Hitchens reminds us, however, of the dreadful reality of going through medical treatment: “the image of the ardent soldier or revolutionary is the very last one that will occur to you. You feel swamped with passivity and impotence: dissolving in powerlessness like a sugar lump in water” (Hitchens 2012: 7). Grief, and death illiteracy, require the sick and dying to put on another persona, to not fall out of the social confines.

Increasingly, articles, films, and blogs address these human and institutional shortcomings in understanding and helping the dying. There are individuals that offer consultancy, courses, and support such as Tim Lawrence (www.timjlawrence.com), Kristie West (kristiewest.com), Megan Devine (www.refugeingrief.com) and Stephen Jenkinson (orphanwisdom.com). The young mortician Caitlin Doughty has become quite a force in the world of “death-positive” activism. She gained popularity through her YouTube series “Ask a mortician” in which she blithely discusses topics around death and decay. Her bestseller *Smoke gets in your eyes & other lessons from the crematory* (2015) addresses her work in the morgue and gives an insider view into the mainstream death industry that is surprisingly death illiterate as well. She also founded a web forum called the “The order of the good death” (www.orderofthegooddeath.com) in which like-minded advocates such as academics, professionals, artists, and writers bring a death-positive message to a broader audience. More practical websites offer useful ways to make end-of-life discussions and planning easier (e.g. www.finalfling.com, <http://theconversationproject.org> and www.gyst.com). Websites such as impermanenceatwork.org, whatsyourgrief.com and modernloss.com discuss grief, isolation, and the shortcomings of culture in these areas.

A common theme in this growing body of work is that death illiteracy is multiplied and intensified by a reciprocal reinforcement of death phobia through institutions designed to neglect addressing existential questions. Often patients and doctors alike dance around the elephant in the room with a language that is devoid of acknowledging human mortality and the existential Pandora’s box that opens up with it. In the case of disease the accurate prognosis of incurable cancer is crucial in end-of-life decision making. A study by Sarguni Singh and her team (2017) analysed 64 doctor–patient conversations and concluded that both patients and doctors tend to

avoid end-of-life discussions, even when patients have a terminal diagnosis. Further, these conversations follow the usual pattern of symptom discussion, revelation of scan results, and discussion of treatment. What is missing in most doctor–patient conversations is what the results actually mean. Prognosis conversations happen very rarely, and when they do they are often hastened without room for the patient to process the diagnosis. Singh et al. write:

Oncologists and patients are complicit in constructing the typical encounter. Oncologists spend little time discussing scan results and the prognostic implications in favor of treatment-related talk. Conversational devices routinely help transition from scan-talk to detailed discussions about treatment options. We observed an opportunity to create prognosis-talk after scan-talk with a new conversational device, the question “Would you like to talk about what this means?” as the oncologist seeks permission to disclose prognostic information while ceding control to the patient. (Singh et al. 2017: e231)

Both patient and doctor are often death illiterate. Atul Gawande experienced this quandary in his work as an oncologist and noted that there is a painful limit to language that would help navigate the anxiety-evoking meetings between doctors and patients. For instance, Gawande recalled upsetting patients with the terminology “to prolong life” (2014: 181). These words were too confronting but unfortunately such squeamishness often has dire consequences for patients. Although the majority of people want to die at home, only a small number actually do so. Furthermore, the effort to prolong life beyond what is sustainable brings extra anguish to families and extra pain to the dying. So much so that even advanced care directives, carefully put in place before old age and before illness is in its late stage, are often ignored. Ann Brenoff (2017), a columnist for the *Huffington Post*, describes the heartbreak following a course of exaggerated medical treatment for her husband. She describes how her husband’s advanced care directives were ignored by what she calls a “death defying culture” unable to talk about or acknowledge death. She remarks:

We simply had no clue that dying and medicine, as it is commonly practiced, exist at cross purposes. And in my husband’s case, the engine of life-prolonging medicine decisively won. ... I am bereft. I am grieving. And I am working hard to understand why medical teams feel they must chase life so relentlessly. ... Medical good intentions notwithstanding, prolonging death is not the same as extending life. Death isn’t the boogeyman; turning the dying process into a torturous

experience is. And yet the medical establishment just can't seem to help itself when it comes to dying. (Brenoff 2017)

Stephen Jenkinson describes the end-of-life struggle that is enmeshed in this death illiteracy as almost amateurish; health institutions and language use are set up as if death does not exist. This unfortunately includes palliative care. Brenoff observes that even the “compassionate care team” (another label for the medical team that manages end-of-life treatment) convoluted the reality of mortality with words:

Nobody wants to use the “D” word. When my husband and I met with the “compassionate care” team in his nursing home days before his death, I was corrected when I called it a “hospice” meeting. Besides, I was told, hospice is the “treatment plan” you choose when your “health care goal” is to accept that you will not recover and you merely want to be kept comfortable and emotionally supported. I rolled my eyes. (Brenoff 2017)

To palliate, taking the word literally, is not the same as supporting a person in an existential crisis. On a personal note, my friend Sam remembers the last days of her father's life in a palliative care ward in an Adelaide hospital. Dying of untreatable heart failure, he showed signs of agitation and was given palliative sedation, a decision that his wife felt pressured into making hastily — she did not want her husband to suffer more. The nurses simply assumed that anyone would want to die unconscious, and thereby relieve everybody concerned of a difficult end-of-life struggle. And, one can surmise, provide an easier workflow for the hospital staff. Sam and her sister, who were both experienced nurses themselves, were upset. They felt that their father, witty and outspoken his entire life and unafraid of pain, was robbed of his last conscious moments. Despite all odds, he kept living for days. Sam, probably a little more comfortable with death than the average person, pondered for days why he would cling to life. She decided she needed to give him the permission to leave and after assuring him that his wife (her mother) was cared for, he died minutes later. These anecdotal stories might sound fantastic but they are not unheard of in end-of-life care. The hospital did its best, that is, in as much as contemporary institutional care realizes the parameters of its death literacy. And yet, Sam's mother is haunted by her decision to allow palliative sedation, which she now feels was against her husband's wishes. No doctor talked to them about the consequences of this treatment.

Death anxiety and its institutionalized defence mechanisms

Isabel Menzies' research paper "A case-study in the functioning of social systems as a defence against anxiety" (1960) gives a brilliant analysis of death anxiety and its social defence systems operating within a general hospital's nursing service. Her research revealed the strategies that denied the nurses deeper engagement with patients and, in turn, left both patients and nurses in distress. Menzies follows the work of Freud, particularly as it was developed and elaborated by Melanie Klein. She describes how a nurse is exposed to a number of distressing tasks while taking care of her patients, such as end of life issues, conflicting feelings towards the patient and/or their relatives, and difficulties with colleagues and in the work situation. These encounters evoke feelings of anxiety and, due to the nature of the work, death anxiety in the nurse. Menzies sees infantile phantasies at the root of death anxiety. In her words:

The objective situation confronting the nurse bears a striking resemblance to the phantasy situations that exist in every individual in the deepest and most primitive levels of mind. The intensity and complexity of the nurse's anxieties are to be attributed primarily to the peculiar capacity of the objective features of the work to stimulate afresh these early situations and their accompanying emotions.
(Menzies 1960: 98)

To recap Klein's death drive theory, in her theorization, the inner life of an infant is ruled by the inner tension of the life instinct (or the libidinal force) and the death instinct or aggressive impulses that deal with the matter of survival. These feelings are attributed to inner experiences as well as to other people. The infant's experiences of the object reality are tightly interwoven with his/her own physical and psychical experiences, his/her mood, feelings, wishes, phantasies, and anxieties. Through this psychic experience the infant creates an inner world dominated by the self and the object of their feelings and impulses; the form and conditions of this inner world content are largely determined by phantasies. In the inner world of the infant many damaged, injured, or dead objects are to be found which constitute an experience of deathliness and destruction, which is indeed anxiety provoking. The constant fear of the self's aggressive forces as well as those of others make for a very threatening world experience.

According to Menzies, death anxiety is constantly provoked in nurses, through the nature of their work. Furthermore, a nurse does not only deal with his or her own anxieties, but also the anxieties of his/her patients and relatives, who are often hesitant in acknowledging and taking on the responsibilities of the difficult situation. Menzies comments on a common method of dealing with this array of anxieties:

The nurse projected infantile phantasy-situations into current work-situations and experienced the objective situations as a mixture of objective reality and phantasy. She then re-experienced painfully and vividly in relation to current objective reality many of the feelings appropriate to the phantasies. In thus projecting her phantasy-situations into objective reality, the nurse is using an important and universal technique for mastering anxiety and modifying the phantasy-situations. Through the projection, the individual sees elements of the phantasy-situation in the objective situations that come to symbolize the phantasy situation. Successful mastery of the objective situations gives reassurance about the mastery of phantasy-situations. (Menzies 1960: 99–100)

If the objective situation becomes equated with the phantasy situation, greater anxiety ensues and the symbol can no longer perform its role in containing and modifying anxiety (Menzies 1960: 100). Menzies turns her focus on the adaptive and defensive techniques within the nursing service, which serve as an externalization of death anxiety in the shape of (often unconsciously) socially constructed defence mechanisms. In order to contain the struggle against anxiety the development of socially constructed defence mechanisms “which appear as elements in the structure, culture and mode of functioning of the organization” emerge (Menzies 1960: 101). These socially constructed defence mechanisms become an aspect of external reality in the form of regulations. Regulations such as splitting up the nurse–patient relationships with shift work and rotations, depersonalizing care through categorization, and denial of the significance of the feelings that emerge during the service and redistribution of responsibilities are integrated mechanisms of health institutions used to shelter their nurses and workers from their anxieties. The health care personnel and the patients are ensnared in a system that makes it hard to connect personally.

Dull medical language serves to avoid the spiritual, emotional, and physical needs of patient and personnel. Atul Gawande remembers how, as a young doctor, he saw people die for the first time in his life. This was a huge shock to him and not

because he was forced to face his own mortality; this truth was as yet concealed from him. He struggled with imagining himself in the shoes of one of his patients:

I had a white coat on; they had a hospital gown. I couldn't quite picture it the other way around. ... the shock to me was seeing medicine *not* pull people through. I knew theoretically that my patients could die, of course, but every actual instance seemed like a violation, as if the rules I thought we were playing by were broken. I don't know what game I thought it was, but in it, we always won. (Gawande 2014: 7)

When I worked in a nursing home, I too experienced a strict patient–nurse divide. Back then there was a weekly set schedule: Mondays: hairdresser; Wednesdays: activities; Tuesdays and Fridays: “lax-day” (short for laxative). On these days most people were given a laxative and put on a toilet after breakfast and left there while we rushed to other duties. The personnel were hard at work because on those days all beds were given fresh sheets, many people had to be assisted with showers and wounds had to be freshly bandaged while the halls filled with the stench of faeces. It was easier to administer an institutional day of “purging” than individually assisting the needs of the residents. Many of these suffered from dementia and presented their own challenges to this regime. The nursing home was chronically understaffed and the employers were pressured into checking things off the to-do list instead of tuning in to the individual needs of residents or questioning the status quo. In my experience, nursing homes can be inflexible, depressing places that contain ageism as well as prejudice towards illness.

Still, most people I have met who worked in the health system have genuinely chosen this profession to help people. Unfortunately, the way these institutions are often set up does not wholly support the needs of either the patient or the caregiver, and thus they contribute to a culture of death and grief literacy. To protect against anxiety, guilt, and doubt, there is a resistance towards changing the given structures, as Menzies writes:

Change is inevitably to some extent an excursion into the unknown. It implies a commitment to future events that are not entirely predictable and to their consequences, and inevitably provokes doubt and anxiety. Any significant change within a social system implies changes in existing social relationships and in social structure. It follows that any significant social change implies a change in the operation of the social system as a defence system. While this change is proceeding, i.e. while social defences are being restructured, anxiety is likely to be

more open and intense. ... resistance to social change can be better understood if it is seen as the resistance of groups of people unconsciously clinging to existing institutions because changes threaten existing social defences against deep and intense anxieties. (Menziés 1960: 108)

Hence, a culture of avoidance is created in which change can only be initiated at the pinnacle of a real crisis, despite the fact that this social defence system was established to help the individual avoid negative feelings such as conscious experience of guilt, doubt, and above all death anxiety. In Menziés' reading, the psychic defence mechanisms operating within the institution are mostly based on the primitive psychic defence mechanisms typical of an infant. Thus, there is a risk that, once confronted with a triggering situation, individuals might regress to immature ways of dealing with extreme anxiety (Menziés 1960: 109). This is an important implication of the psychological interaction between the institution and the individual's defensive mechanisms.

To put this in Lacanian terms, the master signifier circulating in medical institutions might be "repair" or "mending" and, as Gawande's experience testifies, this activates a game that cannot be won because the master signifier death is absent. Every time existential questions arise, as is regularly the case in the health-care system, one is sparring with the Thing. End-of-life care has fallen into medical hands and it causes a surplus of unnecessary suffering, as Gawande observes about the medical community:

If your problem is fixable, we know just what to do. But if it's not? The fact that we have had no adequate answers to this question is troubling and has caused callousness, inhumanity, and extraordinary suffering.

This experiment of making mortality a medical experience is just decades old. It is young. And the evidence is it is failing. (Gawande 2014: 8–9)

As long as a death-phobic culture prevails, most people are likely to face death and illness unprepared and run the risk of suffering avoidable anguish. But there are signs that this is changing.

Conclusion: becoming death literate

Lisa Bonchek Adams, a woman who died of breast cancer in 2015, wrote a blog entitled “The stupid things people say to those with cancer & their families”.

Examples of foolish utterances include:

“When will your cancer be gone?” (to a stage IV)

“But you don’t look sick.”

“Lance Armstrong cured his stage IV cancer. You can too.”

“All you need to do is think positive.”

“Now that you’ve been through this you’re due for some good things to happen.”

“I’m sure it’s fine/I’m sure it’s nothing.”

“When my mother was diagnosed with breast cancer, I was a wreck. My (now ex) husband got tired of it really fast and made a rule to confine my sadness to one day per week: ‘you are only allowed to cry about this on Fridays’. If I felt like I absolutely had to cry Sat–Thur, I had to do it in private.”

“People choose their sicknesses. He chose to have cancer by not managing his negative energy and he chose to die by not fighting.”

(Adams 2013)

Statements like these demonstrate how people avoid engagement with the sick and dying. Having had similar encounters like these in his last months, Christopher Hitchens saw a need for a “short handbook of cancer etiquette” (2012: 39) to combat painful statements like the above. He saw a “growing need for ground rules that prevent us from inflicting ourselves upon another” (Hitchens 2012: 44). He described his interaction with one friend who did not shy from pointing out that he was dying and would have to “let go” soon. Unsettled by this shocking bluntness he asked who *should* approach such a harsh reality (Hitchens 2012: 42). In my training as a palliative care volunteer, as well as in a special course I undertook on the spiritual needs of the dying, I was instructed repeatedly not to tear down the walls of hope, denial, or protection the patient and family have erected. You cannot force somebody to face death, and as a volunteer I was taught that this behaviour would be cruel, and a violation of my role. Indeed, as Hitchens observed: “But again there was the unreasonable urge to have a kind of monopoly on, or a sort of veto over, what was actually sayable. Cancer victimhood contains a permanent temptation to be self-centered and even solipsistic” (Hitchens 2012: 42).

Gawande recommends palliative care specialist Susan Block’s advice, namely take time to establish good communication with a patient, focus on helping people

with their many overwhelming anxieties, and learn what is most important to them. Taking time for patients, cultivating the skill of listening, and learning a language that helps establish rapport between doctor and patient is crucial for a death-literate doctor (Gawande 2014: 182). Since grief and death illiteracy is anchored in the pathologizing of death and grief, one can find a growing number of voices, such as those of Atul Gawande, Jessica Zitter and Stephen Jenkinson, to only name a few current death activists, calling for a different approach to death and grief, and an open discussion of people's experiences. Megan Devine for example, widow and author of the website refugeingrief.com, urges people to acknowledge grief and halt the need to try to fix mourners and their emotions: "Some things in life cannot be fixed. They can only be carried" (Devine 2017b). The goal of moving on, through and away from loss is false: "Living alongside grief, caring for yourself inside grief — those are the real challenges to your heart and mind. Instead of talking about how to get out of grief, we need to be in here with grief. Not turn away" (Devine 2017a).

Despite being surrounded by a death-illiterate community, people who have experienced the loss of a loved one claim certain ways to express their feelings and to make space for mourning. The Internet offers refuge for many bereaved people to exhibit their feelings sincerely. Young people, especially, value informal exchange via social media (Gibson 2016: 632). Margaret Gibson's research on "YouTube as a site of public grieving" (2016: 633) reveals that this social media site (as well as many others) have become a primary social space that is used to connect with strangers even in the early days of loss. She observes:

YouTube bereavement vlogs and response posts are channels of emotional supply on their own terms and not necessarily functioning to supplement emotional connections offline. Going online and on YouTube is not a delayed emotional process or last resort but part of an everyday space of media sociality where many and diverse platforms are spaces for announcing a death and discoursing about bereavement ... YouTube, unlike other socially mediated mourning, creates a visually intimate scene of grief story-telling where vloggers, sometimes to their own surprise, trigger, mostly through unscripted speech, the flow of tears in themselves and others. These embodied emotions punctate the narrative, framing an intimacy of grief shared between strangers. (Gibson 2016: 642–3)

These intimate spaces of mourning shared by strangers are not exclusively found online. Gibson observes how roadside memorials support individual lives and deaths. Unlike public memorials that stress the heroic past of an individual and the

“memorialization of collective loss” (Gibson 2011: 155), roadside memorials render heroicness obsolete but stress the randomness and fleetingness of life. They create a “memoryscape” not only for the bereaved in relation to this place of death but for all travellers: “The roadside memorial is not just an external form of memory, it has the potential to encrypt the memories that drivers have of the roads they come to know” (Gibson 2011: 159).

Grief, of all things, might be an antidote to relentless and mindless capitalism. For this, one has to understand grief as form of perception and not as an unwelcome intrusion. Silverman and Klass observe:

When we discuss the nature of the resolution of grief, we are at the core of the most basic questions about what it means to be human, for the meaning of the resolution of grief is tied to the meanings of bonds with significant people in our lives, the meaning of our membership in family and community, and the meaning we ascribe to our individual lives in the face of absolute proof of our own mortality. (Silverman and Klass 1996: 22)

Jenkinson underscores that grief is a capacity that makes us human; however, it is a skill that needs to be obtained. Grief is not an intrusion into the flow of life that needs to be shaken off in order to return to an imagined life of uninterrupted striving. Grief is not something that happens to you but something that you practise. Grief is a deep recognition of the natural order of things and therefore it cannot be a temporary situation. It is a state that has the potential to deeply inform each of us and affect our decisions, because it forces one to reconsider the meaning of central roles and relationships. In this view, grief becomes a capacity rather than a disability because it shapes the lens through which one views the world (Jenkinson 2015: 366).

Informed by what he witnessed in the years accompanying and counselling people with terminal illnesses and their friends and relatives, Jenkinson argues that the real terror people face is of being conscious while knowing that they are dying (Jenkinson 2015: 33). Likewise, no one, no spouse, parent, daughter, mother, father would not be pained witnessing the death of somebody so significant to their bodies, lives, well-being, and, of course, the subject of their love. Herein lies the terror. Attached to it is the sadness of all that will be and now is lost to life. Yet this realization is blanketed by the quest for more time (often in the form of invasive treatments). But even more time cannot allay this:

[T]he More Time almost never looks or feels or goes the way people imagine it will when they are bargaining for it. More Time bears no resemblance to anything most people have lived. More time is a fantasy of the resumption of a life interrupted. But More Time, when it finally kicks in, is the rest of a dying person's life, and the rest of that life will be lived in the never-before-known shadow of the inevitability of their dying. (Jenkinson 2015: 35)

Strategies of immortality, which rise out of this agony, are then actually feelings of intense loneliness, isolation, sadness, and abandonment. Jenkinson instead advocates getting to the bottom of grief. According to him, grief is not an inner feeling or a conglomeration of inner feelings; in fact, grief is not a felt thing at all — and this distinguishes grief from feelings like sorrow and depression:

Grief doesn't come from nowhere, an intrusion in the natural order of things. It *is* the natural order of things. Grief is a recognition of how it is and must be, how it can be if we stay our hand long enough to let it be so. Grief: A sign of life stirring towards itself. ... Grieving is being willing to see now what has become of us, what we have been and done. Grieving is understanding. It is knowledge. It isn't how you feel about what you know. It is being a faithful witness to the story of how it has been with us and crafting a language that does it justice, and testifying occasionally. (Jenkinson 2015: 367–8)

A life lived fully demands an honest examination of one's own fears and reality. This does not mean that one has to dwell on death and grief in a nihilistic or fatalistic way. Interestingly, people who are terminally ill who have worked toward an acceptance of their fate have a relatively low death anxiety (Lehto and Stein 2009: 33). This is grief as capacity — or, if we extend a Lacanian understanding, death becomes a master signifier with the aura of the Real. Death always points to the horrors of what cannot be signified, cannot be known in culture. In this understanding there is no getting to the other side of the affliction, but grief has made a claim upon the self, a call to awaken from the slumber of living life as if death is not a part of it. For that, one must know how to navigate hope in the light of a terminal diagnosis. Hope, so Jenkinson suggests, is equal to a mortgage because one is constantly betting for a future that will not come, is caught in a past that has been, yet without the tools to face death as the present demands. “In a death-phobic culture ... *knowing you are dying is not as healthy as hoping you aren't dying while you are*” (Jenkinson 2015: 132, original emphasis). That is, it is safer in our culture to pretend death does not exist than to face isolation and the potential of extra pain through acknowledgement

of one's end. From this rises the language of battle and survival, since in times of death hope without death literacy is, to Jenkinson, an obscenity, "an anesthetic of the spirit" (2015: 133). In Jenkinson's experience people are fearful of speaking of dying "at the wrong time" as if it could disarm people at the very time they are supposed to be fighting for life, and as if this could be seen as approving of their death. But this, so Jenkinson argues, is one of the ultimate failures of our death-phobic times. Dying, or accepting death and grief, is a skill that needs to be learned but it has the potential to enrich one's life. Yet these death-illiterate mechanisms delay the realization of one's mortality (Jenkinson 2015: 134). Learning about how to grieve and how to die under the burden of a terminal illness is an almost impossible undertaking. Yet this happens frequently in our health care system.

Concluding words: a future of renewed death awareness?

The fact is the world is ageing rapidly, especially in Europe and South-East Asia. The Pew Research Center (2014) estimates that the global population of people aged 65 and older will triple to 1.5 billion by mid-century. Japan, South Korea, China and Germany will be most strongly affected by this development and research shows that people have some awareness of the looming economic and social stresses this will bring (Stokes 2014). Americans are less worried about their ageing population, however, probably because the population of the USA will grow older at a slower rate, and thus, “they may not fully appreciate their aging challenge” (Stokes 2014). Despite this and shockingly, America is also the only country in the developed world where life expectancy is going backwards, due to a serious opioid crisis (Case and Deaton 2017).

Most ageing countries have yet to find creative solutions that will support every member of society. With more reports coming out about the dire situation of nursing homes and elder abuse (United Nations for Ageing 2017), people continue to search for alternate ways of experiencing the end of their lives. An ageing society brings with it a rise in caregivers. In a private discussion with palliative care expert David Currow, Chief Cancer Officer of NSW and Chief Executive Officer of the Cancer Institute NSW, Australia, he pointed out that caregivers are an often overlooked segment of society that is terribly isolated and often traumatized. Narcissistic materialistic consumerism will bring little respite to this hardworking and under-appreciated segment of society. I anticipate we will hear many more stories of elder abuse and caregiver burnout, while the aged care and end-of-life care industry will have to redefine itself in the decades to come. If this new industry wants to be successful in serving people, working on death illiteracy is unavoidable while the current cultural necrophile traits are detrimental to its success.

In summation, in this thesis I have asked how the individual approaches death and how the contemporary self is intertwined with and affected by death. Critical voices have long pointed out that contemporary Western civilization has a twisted relationship with death. Many scholars agree that we are living in a culture of death denial, death phobia and death illiteracy. Death has the gravity to break the cultural hypnosis of living a life without limits, thus it plays a central cultural role in meaning-making and identity-forming processes. However, in this thesis I have explored why the argument that a death-phobic culture has removed death from

everyday life is not wholly accurate. At the same time that physical death has been removed from everyday life, representations of death have become pervasive in contemporary culture with seemingly endless depictions of graphic violence and death. I have explored how this proliferation of images of death in the media brings into question the consensus over death denial as a central cultural attitude. Our relationship with death and violence and their interplay points to a schism between the private and public handling of death.

I have argued that psychoanalytic theories of the death drive — or Thanatos — first introduced by Sigmund Freud and then further developed by scholars such as Herbert Marcuse and Jacques Lacan, offer an explanatory framework for understanding the ambivalent role of death and violence in contemporary Western society and provide insight into how this cultural framework shapes identity. Building on the psychoanalytic theory of the death drive, I argued that this schism in our relationship with death produces a trait within the individual that is constituted by our inability to think about death, coupled with an obsessional relationship with violent death and an excessive materialism. The constant reciprocity of the anxious individual and a death-phobic society creates a status quo in which the absence of mortality contemplation accelerates selves that yearn to generate meaning through materialism and yet are unable to meet the existential limits of life and environment. I have argued that consumerism is the prevalent death drive in contemporary culture and that it entails marginalizing authentic awareness of mortality for the sake of symbolic immortality. As Erich Fromm has suggested, the death drive is a character trait of malignant aggression, or what he calls necrophilia. In this thesis I have put forward the idea of the necrophile self — a cultural trait of death phobia within the individual — and argued that the sense of self in late capitalist society is constituted by the very thing we deny and most fear; death (deadness) becomes us. The necrophile self has fused reality with pleasure in the call to enjoy life in excess — *jouissance*. It is an attempt at obsessive meaning making anchored in capitalism but its unconscious drive is the achievement of cultural immortality. And yet, this very drive leaves the individual struggling to deal with death, mortality, and its implications, leading to negative effects ranging from unpreparedness in end-of-life decision making to an unsustainable consumption of global resources.

In Chapter 1 I explored the classic literature of scholars who established the view that death, once seen as commonplace, has been replaced by a culture of death denial. Philippe Ariès and Allan Kellehear described the historic shifts that removed

the custody of the dying from the community and pushed death to the fringes of cultural awareness. After the Industrial Revolution a new anxiety and fear of death emerged, which, combined with the rise in life expectancy, led to the attitude that death had to be (medically) controlled and institutionalized. I then turned to Alan Kellehear's argument that these historic developments generated stigma surrounding death and illness, which led to an erosion of death awareness. Death is seen as an interruption of the social flow, norms, and conventions. Yet for the ill, dying, and bereaved a chasm opens between a cold social response and painful personal experience. I then followed Zygmunt Bauman's understanding of immortality strategies that aim to appease the terror death evokes. They also contain the hope of leaving behind one's legacy in order to extend one's life beyond the limits of mortal constraints. Culture as a factory of permanence brings with it the need to anchor one's self in a wider field of meaning. Ernest Becker called this the hero system, in which individuals palliate their death anxiety through generating self-esteem by aspiring after seemingly meaningful ideologies.

In Chapter 2 I shifted the attention from the exterior, cultural habits of death denial to the inner workings of the individual, namely the death drive, a concept established by Sigmund Freud. Freud's argument is important here, not only because it sheds light on how death evokes existential questions and fears that have an impact on the psyche, but also because he addressed the human destructive potential. He first assumed that the inner drives of the individual constantly aim for satisfaction or pleasure, stifled by reality. After World War One he came to the conclusion that there must be an innate death drive aiming at destruction and violence. I then discussed Melanie Klein who conceived of the death drive as already innate in infancy, and Otto Kernberg who understood the death drive as a pathological, secondary phenomenon linked to malignant narcissism. I then moved the discussion to Herbert Marcuse who claimed that the death drive (or Thanatos), is not just a psychic impulse but imprints itself in the social arena through manipulating people's desires and access to pleasure. In both his and Erich Fromm's understanding, it is the socio-historic and economic environment that influences the individual (character) and either nurtures constructive (life-affirming) or necrophilic (destructive and narcissistic) traits within.

In Chapter 3 I further underscored the concept of the death drive with Lacanian psychoanalysis by exploring desire as the underlying motor of the individual. In Lacan's understanding desire is always defined through the concept of lack. The

genesis of the individual demands individuating away from unity with one's primary caregiver and brings with it a loss that forever propels one's yearning for something more than oneself. This primal desire cannot be symbolized within the social order, but can be attached to empirical objects that seduce with an impossible promise of satisfaction. The Lacanian death drive manifests in the repetitive urge to reach beyond the pleasure principle towards something that cannot enter the Symbolic Order, the Thing. This leads to *jouissance*, the Lacanian term for the pursuit and manifestation of desire beyond the point of moderation towards excess. *Jouissance* is ambiguous because it contains enjoyment and pleasure yet the obsessive pursuit of pleasure leads to suffering. *Jouissance* strives for the impossible, irrespective of its dire consequences.

In Chapter 4 I argued that contemporary materialism is based on the fusion of the pleasure and reality principles, witnessed by the transformation of attitudes towards desire. I understood the pursuit of desire as a push towards immortality; a socially coordinated narcissistic orchestration of cravings, passion, looks, status, and other means of building self-esteem. This capitalistic net fosters fantasies of self-expression that are constantly tweaked and "updated" with an ever-evolving range of products, experiences, and their incumbent promises. With a Sisyphus-like dedication, people go from one materialistic distraction to the other only to remain with the same emptiness and the same impossibility of fulfillment. This is *jouissance*, a cultural excess, that acts in utter disregard for environmental and personal consequences. It is the death drive at its most voracious acting through the individual in pursuit of manifold objects of desire. I characterized this trait as a culture of the necrophile and argued that it manifested a cultural blindness to, and ignorance of, the impact and long-term consequences of unchecked desire, a culture steeped in excess and tragically short-sighted in its capacity to negotiate existential matters.

It is hard to envision a way out of this capitalist machinery. As TMT researchers speculate, as long that there is death anxiety, there will be "lavish spending" (Stillman and Harvell 2016: 85). Yet, at the same time, once people are privately confronted with such existential and formerly unsignified issues such as illness and death, they are challenged to let death become a master signifier that has the potential to restructure all their former beliefs and assumptions. All too often encounters with the ill and dying self and others are undermined by this lack of understanding.

In Chapter 5 I then turned to the mediatisation of violent death and its perpetuation by consumer visual cultures. One way death is represented, or has gained a new visibility, is on screens in the form of increasingly graphic violent death. I argued that the necrophile self is expressed in the uncanny imperturbability in which people consume screen deaths by the hundreds a night while having little idea of how to be around somebody who is actually experiencing death and loss. I discussed death literacy advocates Stephen Jenkinson (2015), Atul Gawande (2014), and Jessica Zitter (2017) who argue that, once personally faced with illness and loss, people will waste precious time at the end of life clinging to a world that still has little to offer to support mourning and a good death. The necrophile media culture that hails hyper-real violence and makes depictions of grossly exaggerated violence accessible to mainstream viewers, I argued, is a symptom of a necrophilic culture. In arguing this, I did not mean to imply that people who enjoy gory entertainment are morally vacuous. Rather, what strikes me most (and this has been an underlying driver of this inquiry) is that there is a phlegmatic and apathetic public response to the widespread and increasing imagery of violent media while at the same time there is little acknowledgement of, and little preparation for, facing mortality in the private realm. Perhaps there is a deep-running need to have death represented in any form because it has had a special ritualized place in society since the dawn of civilization. Contemporary screen deaths might be the only reminders that are allowed to emerge within the parameters of a death-phobic society. It is worth pondering whether an increase in death literacy might lessen the current obsession with (and the apathy regarding) violent imagery in mainstream media.

In Chapter 6 I then turned to different perceptions of death, and our rapport with it, in the work of a number of artists. I read Teresa Margolles' art as a courageous confrontation and representation of the immediacy of death which evokes an encounter for its audience with the register of the Real that Lacan has named the Thing, and which I have understood here as death in the place of the Real. I argued that Margolles creates a space of contemplation in which the emotional integrity of both the audience and the human objects of her work are preserved.

Photographers Sue Fox and Cathrine Ertmann provided an exemplification of art bearing witness to death through entering the tabooed space of the morgue. Claudia Biçen's portraits of the dying, similarly, give intimate insights into the last days of the dying and of their perceptions of the world they soon will leave. In bringing their work to the public these artists re-introduce death as a signifier into the

social order. In contrast, Damien Hirst and the anatomist Gunther von Hagens create work that masks the abjectness of death while retaining and articulating an obsession with the theme of death. Both Hirst and von Hagens have gained huge commercial success by stripping life of decay and disavowing grief; a sign, I suggested, of a necrophilic, death-illiterate culture.

While there are extreme examples of the necrophile self, such as Otto Kernberg's malignant narcissist with his/her preference for luxury goods, power and a concomitant disdain for life, traits of cultural necrophilia can be seen in the inability of most of us to escape the consumerist machine, or to work towards death literacy *before* tragedy strikes. Too many people today experience a surplus of unnecessary suffering when confronted with illness and death. But to conclude this thesis on a brighter note, if capitalism has not weakened our collective ability to approach existential anxieties entirely we might well be on the brink of a death revolution, the seeds of which are already germinating. As I have argued in this thesis, raising death awareness has the potential to reshape our collective relationship to desire and to bring into question the validity of a culture driven by consumerism. Seldom does a life remain untouched by loss and death and thus we need to learn to meet grief in a sincere way that allows us to develop a practised understanding of life as fleeting, decaying, and impermanent. If this is done in a non-nihilistic, dignified way, grief can become a lens through which to review our lives and goals. This will perforce require re-setting cultural and personal priorities. I doubt that being a fool for the latest materialistic craze will provide an ideal to aspire to nor provide a sustainable and compassionate future for us, the generations to come and the planet.

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