



THE REPRESENTATION OF DEATH IN MODERN SOCIETY



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The representation of death in modern society

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“Don’t think of death as an ending.
Think of it as a really effective way
of cutting down your expenses”
Woody Allen

Death represents one of those few experiences that every society throughout history faces. It has been defined as the marginal situation par excellence (Berger, 1969). Since it cannot be known concretely, it exists at the margins of every symbolic system, of any solid structure of meaning that a society can possess.

Conceiving one’s own mortality and coping with the death of loved ones bears a threat to the typical way of understanding and defining the social world. The awareness of death is difficult to handle, since it sheds light on the whole existence of those who must cope with it. Therefore, every group as well as every individual, faced with the end of human life, the loss and the mourning process, must also ask oneself about the sense and the meaning of death in order to face its scope.

Every era has its own commonly established ways of dealing with the burden of death through a wealth of symbols, prevailing ideas, as well as more or less widespread individual and collective strategies. Analysing this symbolic repertory of the ways in which death is represented and perceived, but also resisting or novel ways, means to decipher aspects of entire social consortia.

Death and its representations highlight below the surface various connected social issues, from religious phenomena to the stratification that the dominant meanings can support, from social conflicts to the characteristics of everyday life etc. This results in the ability to assert that death must be considered as one of those fundamental indicators that enable the investigation of collective behaviour, as well as one of the central themes to analyse the imagery of an era. Through transformations in death representations it is possible to identify cultural transformations.

The approach towards death can be divided into two views. The first one considers death as a definitive end, and precisely by virtue of this belief, it shapes the meaning of one’s own existence. Per contra, the other view is in search for immortality, believing that a life without the victory over death is a meaningless life.

If death is the traumatizing reality par excellence, it is no coincidence that a typical element of most pre-modern or modern cultures has been its negation, and often its replacement with a false certainty: the one of immortality. This has been modulated in different ways.

Denial, after all, is a form of defence. This is similar to what Sigmund Freud meant by the

term *Verleugnung*, which consists in the refusal to recognize a too traumatic reality. Denial exists in many forms, and the most common, as it is the most effective, consists precisely of replacing the unwelcome awareness with a false certainty.

From a historical point of view, at least in the Western World, only one culture accepts death as a real, natural fact – the Greek. This is a culture that accepted finitude, and therefore had no need for forms of denial.

Instead, the system and the culture of the so-called traditional societies, as well as those of modern society, all employ a collective denial of death. The pre-modern cultures, and the mythical-religious cultures in the first place, have developed more effective models of legitimization, but remained in substantial denial.

Historically, the creation of different immortality myths, the most consistent form of denial, has often been the most widespread response to the burden of death. It is not by chance that in many cultures, mourning and the relationship with the dead – or with death – were based on symbols and signs linked to an afterlife.

This form of delusion was based on a magical-religious pattern, with its representational tools, with its rites and the reference to a sacred and transcendent universe. It presupposes human beings who are well integrated in their community and respectful of the prescriptions linked to the transcendent world. Thus, man can think of going beyond his own end because death is only corporeal, while human nature, as anyone endowed with faith or appropriate awareness knows, is immortal. An approach that is capable of justifying, and to some extent mitigating, the collective impact of death was possible in such societies (Ariès, 1975).

The Western Christian world, for example has been characterized by a culture pervaded by a religious nature in which the awareness of death and its inevitability was completely denied. The extraordinary success of Christianity was based on the fear of death, on the one hand, and on the promise of immortality, on the other.

It must be assumed that men throughout all historical periods lived with the nightmare of death. Due to this reason they were inclined to embrace any magical-religious solution to such terrifying problem. And what is a promise of immortality if not a substantial “denial of death”? In the Christian world fear, denial and faith were, and still are, connected. This belief has been so strong and so in tune with the widespread desires to encourage the majority of the population not only to make it their own, that is to internalize it, but to also accept the domination of a religious-political elite based on this assumption and the ideology to shape all its legitimacy.

Moreover, Christianity has left a heavy legacy: the belief that a life without immortality is a meaningless life (Cavicchia Scalamonti, 2015). Even though the value of religious guidelines has lost its hegemony, modern man has often continued to project himself into the hereafter. From this perspective, as a matter of fact, the notion that life without a prolongation after death is a wasted life is such a deep-rooted and so comforting idea, that it is very difficult to renounce. And this notion is still alive in many current orientations and beliefs about death, even if in a disguised form.

At least in Western modernity, the prevailing way to comply with the desperate yearning of immortality is of rational-scientific nature. This search has primarily placed its trust in medicine, which sooner or later shall be able to eradicate all diseases and defeat death. If it is true that, from a self-aware point of view based on reason, we acknowledge that men must die, it is also true that we rely on the ideology of scientific progress, towards which we maintain an attitude based on a form of faith. We rely on scientific skills and knowledge, especially

medicine, which insinuates itself into every aspect of everyday life.

Complying with this trust in science, we believe we can prolong human life more and more, postponing death indefinitely. Death is believed to be rather caused by unexpected events, accidents or diseases that science will have to defeat sooner or later. If people die, it is due to some specific fault, an accident or a momentary lack of scientific knowledge. However, in principle, scientific and medical achievements have the power to postpone death to the threshold of some form of eternity. This idea is part of the so-called medicalization of death in Western society, evidenced by the persistence of public debate on the topic of health. In fact, it is no coincidence that medical topics in radio-television programs or in the press are prevalent. The request for information, advice and medical assistance is incessant.

This phenomenon is accompanied by an increasingly widespread cult of youth, expressed through the enhancement of body, health and dominant aesthetic models. All this reveals the widespread obsession of old age, the fear of disease and finitude that the biological degeneration of the body and physical suffering displays.

Thus, the medicalization configures a technical relationship with death and disease, which defines a second mode of denial or concealment. The patient is relegated to technologically equipped facilities, and left in the hands of experts in order to receive adequate treatment (Cavicchia Scalamonti, 1991; Bauman, 1995). In the hospital, rather than in the domestic environment, he faces the end. The doctor becomes part of a "thanatocracy", an exponent of an idealized expert system, which provides faithfully followed, scientific prescriptions and with which people entrust their hopes. He stands between the sick and the dead, he allows us to avoid facing death directly and, above all, he represents the aspiration to immortality.

Death and disease, concealed inside medical institutions, are often hidden from the public eye, resulting in isolation of the dying (Elias, 1985). In contrast to pre-modern times (Ariès, 1975), the dying retires from public life and is surrounded by a silent society that is fearful of the image of him, which was created as a mean of protection.

Anthony Giddens (1991) precisely defined the "sequestration of experience" as the distancing of day-to-day life from potential shocking and traumatic experiences such as suffering and death. By concealing them from general view, sickness and death are rendered inoffensive. Thus, death is an individual rather than a collective experience. This is why, in modern society it is more difficult to find a symbolic embrace and a sense of community accompanying death and dying. Traditional collective coping strategies for death, whether religious or secular, like appealing to the continuity of values such as nation or family, have less force.

Modern death, in Geoffrey Gorer's opinion (1955), is a taboo. Speaking about it is considered unseemly, especially in the presence of children, who can be spared from participating in funerals, while mourning is privatized and reduced, since relatives are expected to mourn for a short time. This kind of segregation and separation is also related to the increasing infrequency in which we encounter death, by virtue of the improved hygienic-sanitary conditions and of a certain social pacification. Consider, for example, the decline of child mortality or the reduction – at least in the West – of epidemics, famines, wars, etc.

However, at least in contemporary times, the denial of death in the public sphere coexists with the profusion of images in all the media. Death becomes visible, producing new modes of representation, rituality, commemoration and narration. Of course, exhibited and mediated death is distinct from an experience close to real death, the ability to prepare for mourning or one's own end. It is possible that they remain distant experiences, since the mediation of death

could be tied to the fascination with the violation of the boundaries between public and private (Gibson, 2007), rather than an exhibition of shared meanings, symbols and rituals.

In any case, meaning remains the fundamental problem, since in modern society meaning seems lost or problematic (Mellor & Shilling, 1993). In every historical epoch, every society has endeavored to build cultural tools that provide a plausible legitimization to death, a legitimization that, all in all, is essential to make the whole existence meaningful. Thus, every culture in every past socio-historical context has elaborated a vast and articulated system of ideas, beliefs, rituals, techniques to elaborate mourning in order to deal with grief and separation, and to keep anguish under control. These sophisticated tools clearly indicated how to manage the social presence of the dead, their final resting place and how to separate their world from the world of the living. This benefits those who remain.

Instead modernity, and even more so contemporaneity, seems incapable to represent death symbolically, nor to construct a symbolic system that can support grief and a collective understanding of death (Cavicchia Scalamonti, 2007). The representations of death are numerous and often contradictory, especially in the individualized Western society (Pecchinenda, 2017). Here, death is inscribed in a broader narrative that directly concerns the individual and his personal ability to take charge of it (Seale, 1998). Moreover, the existential dimension of death, which calls religious and transcendent aspects into question, faces completely practical aspects of the ability to transform its deepest representations and symbolic meanings (Thomas, 1975).

Religious institutions are making one last attempt, which Peter Berger (1967) has defined as a process of adaptation to the new intercultural scenarios. The religious pluralism to which we are exposed has combined the new beliefs with the old traditional systems, while the old systems of thought have been modernized. However, if despite adaptations, such systems are no longer able to provide meaningful and effective coping mechanisms for dealing with death, they lose their appeal. Consequently, the search for new views and religions, which are able to provide new sense and meaning to life and death, spreads.

Referring to scientific backgrounds in order to develop new theories about life after death seems, as we have seen, an effective alternative. Science shapes the idea of a prolongation of existence that can supposedly be endless. Thus, the reassuring idea remains: in order to be significant, life needs to be prolonged after death.

Traditionally, as mentioned before, myths and stories embodied the curious darkness surrounding death. Almost all the ancient myths and religions provide symbolic representations of death. In this way, instead of remaining amorphous and chaotically threatening, death is made concrete and visible by our creative imagination.

This construction of images takes place at all levels of consciousness, in all cultures and throughout time (Guthke, 1999). The representations can be different and change over time. In many myths and narratives, death is symbolically represented as a messenger from a mysterious afterlife. In others, it can be portrayed in completely unconventional ways: ranging from a bad person in black and white to a complex, morally ambiguous and strongly humanized character.

If myths and narratives have always represented death through a multitude of symbolic features influencing and contaminating the productions of collective imaginary, then in modern times the new media are the preferential place for the “*mises en scène*” of this phenomenon. The press first and, then the electronic media and finally the digital media, seem to provide a new relationship with death and the dead. Thus, the invasion of corpses, zombies and symbolic characters embodying death in the media takes on a multitude of perspectives and

representations. On the one hand, they are perceived as an incentive to overcome the fear of death. On the other hand, they seem to signal a symbolic regeneration and an advanced form of its metabolization that goes beyond, and blurs the lines between the worlds of the living and the dead.

However, if death imagery presented in the media provided new means of bridging the gap between the living and the dead, then the emergence and the spread of new digital media provide new and unique opportunities to observe and represent death, as well as to deal with grief.

In recent years, the World Wide Web is turning more and more into a place of death. The term “digital death” has been coined in order to describe this phenomenon. It is a kind of death that would be combined and added to the well-known idea of physical death. The notion of digital death on the Internet has changed, or more simply is added to the way in which one has always thought about the transitional moment from the physical world to the afterlife. The rituals dedicated to the commemoration of the deceased are also increasingly delegated to digital tools that remove them from the urban area and physical proximity to the dead, displacing them not only in a private space, but also in a mobile and digital space (Duteil-Ogata, 2012). Nowadays it is impossible to gain an understanding of the social and cultural significance of death without considering the influence of digital culture has on the way we live in this world. In these mobile societies (Urry, 2000; 2007), the practises related to death are a hybrid between the physical and the digital reality. Because technology is continuously available, it produces symbolic and emotional representations of death and commemoration, which foster innovative forms of genuine belonging. Nonetheless, their effectiveness will have to be analysed in depth.

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Death, After-Life and Rebirth: Cultural Transfusion of Ideas

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Abstract

On the basis of a cross-cultural comparative analysis this paper studies the ideas of death and rebirth in two cultures – India and Bulgaria. The results of the empirical research show that there is a significant shift in the perception of religion in the two countries. In Hinduism the phenomenon of death is tightly intertwined with the concepts of karma and reincarnation. Although it has been an ancient tradition in India there are many people nowadays who do not share the belief in reincarnation. While in Bulgaria, where the Christian church has officially denied the existence of rebirth, this concept is not so unusual. Thus, in postmodernity there is a process of cultural transfusion of ideas, in which new beliefs are incorporated into old traditional systems. In this way, the old systems of thought are rejuvenated, so that individuals gain sense, meaning and purpose in their lives. The paper also investigates the interrelation between the concepts of fate/karma, on the one hand, and death, on the other. In outlining the postmodern thinking, the paper also introduces the concept of “cultural transfusion”, designating with this term the incorporation of new ideas into old belief systems without the latter to undergo significant or major transformations.

Keywords: after-life, rebirth, Bulgaria, India, cross-cultural study

Life-after-Death: Concepts and Ideas

What happens during and after death? For thousands of years philosophers and scientists have been pondering on this question. While even at present times they have not found a definite answer, all religious ideologies teach that during the process of death the core of the being, or the soul, does not die. According to the religions it is only the body that dies but the spirit continues to exist. After death the soul starts its journey into the unknown and vast universe of the non-material existence. However, while the narrative about life-after-death is universal, there are some differences in different cultures about what this after-life might be. In the traditional Christianity and Islam the after-life is depicted as “heaven” or “hell”, where the soul is paid off for its good deeds and punished for its sins. Thus, the belief in retribution becomes a central concept in both Christianity and Islam. Similar is the concept of karma in Hinduism and Buddhism. Life after death and next reincarnations are determined by the deeds of the individual. Whether good or bad acts, he is paid for all of them. In Hinduism and Buddhism reincarnation is one of the most important concepts. According to the belief in reincarnation after death the soul enters into a new body. The time spent without body between lives is usually not specified and depends mostly on the particular karma of the individual. In such a way, in Hinduism and Buddhism it is believed that every person has lived numerous lives.

The idea of rebirth is not unknown in the doctrines of Christianity and Islam. The Book of Revelation, also known as the Apocalypse of John, promises that at end times all the dead

bodies will be restored into life in the same way as Jesus Christ was resurrected to heaven. The concept of resurrection has, thus, become a central belief in Christianity. In one form or another, the idea of rebirth exists in all religious doctrines. Many scientists, too, have studied the process of dying and the possible existence of after-life. The psychologist Raymond Moody (1975) is one of the first scholars who investigate near-death experiences. On the basis of many interviews conducted he concludes that almost all people who have experienced clinical death report about life in a different time and space dimension. In fact the idea of life-after-death is one of the universal narratives from the antiquity to the present times and it does not depend on any racial, ethnic or cultural differences.

Spirituality and religious beliefs have not lost any significance today. On the contrary, there is a revival of the spiritual and religious consciousness. Despite the existing secularization in the Western countries, the empirical results of Norris and Inglehart (2004) show that the world as a whole has not become less religious. In contrast to the modernist European value of secularization, in the postmodern world there are more people with traditional religious views than ever before and they constitute a growing proportion of the world's population. The demographic thesis of Norris and Inglehart (2004) has been confirmed by many other studies (Diener, Tay and Myers 2011). Hayward and Kemmelmeier (2011), find out, too, that nations and states with more difficult life conditions are more likely to be highly religious, while in societies with more favorable circumstances religiosity is less prevalent. According to these studies the strength of religiousness depends on the social demographic characteristics of society as well as on its economic development.

Other studies focus on the psychological processes of adaptation and show that the adoption of religious or spiritual beliefs might be a response to the prevailing multiculturalism in society (Sarouglu 2010). In studying Turkish-Belgian adolescents, for example, Gungor, Bornstein and Phalet (2012) observe that they reaffirm their religion in the process of their acculturation to the new homeland. Moreover, Turkish-Belgian adolescents often put stronger accent on their religiousness than their counterparts in Turkey. For the young Turks in Belgium reaffirmation of their religiousness is equal to establishing individual and ethnic identity. The religious ideas are, thus, used as a tool in forging their unique personality. While traditionalism might be a response to multiculturalism, other individuals, in accommodating with the new cultural environment, develop totally new identities. This is a process of "creolization" (Hannerz 1992) or "hybridization" (Hall 1993, Pieterse 2004), in which migrants accept new concepts and beliefs, which intermingle with their old values to the point of a creation of a totally new cultural construct.

The revival of spiritual ideas, such as life-after-death and rebirth, is a part of the individuals' quest for sense and meaning in the postmodern world. In this respect the Western interest in Hinduism and Buddhism has always been acute. Traditional Hinduism teaches that life and death are predestined. In Vedic astrology (Jyotish) the particular sequences of the events in one's life can be judged by the individual's kundli, or natal birth chart (horoscope). Even nowadays it is believed in India that a good astrologer can predict with accuracy the exact time of one's death on the basis of their kundli and the current planetary transits. It is believed also that knowledgeable astrologers can provide information about past lives of individuals. Not just the time and conditions of death are prefixed according to the Hindu thought. In the traditional Indian culture life is measured by the number of breaths one can take. It is believed that an individual cannot live even a single breath or a second longer than what is predestined for them. In other words, nobody can choose the time or the conditions of their death. This is

valid for all the cases of death except for the suicide, which in Hinduism and Buddhism, as well as in Christianity, is considered a violation of God's or nature's laws and is condemned as one of the biggest sins.

The techniques of Vedic astrology (Jyotish) and the concept of karma have attracted many Western scientists to do research and ponder on them. Scholars, such as Max Muller, K.G. Jung, and David Frawley, have studied the Hindu thought and spiritual ideas in details. The meeting of K.G. Jung during his trip to India with one of the most famous Indian astrologers of the 20th century, B.V. Raman, is memorable for both of them. It is followed by an intense correspondence between the two. K.G. Jung writes about the meeting with Raman in his "Autobiography". Later, the astrological knowledge acquired in India is used by Jung as a foundation of his theory of synchronicity (Jung 1960, 2018). B.V. Raman (1991), too, mentions the meeting with K.G. Jung in his book "How to Judge Horoscope" as an evidence of the Western interest in Vedic astrology.

Contemporary research data show that a significant minority of Westerners believe in reincarnation. According to the European Values Survey (EVS, 4th Wave 2008) a growing number of Europeans profess the idea of physical rebirth. For example, more than ¼ of the population of the UK (27,8%) believes in reincarnation. If this tendency can easily be explained with the huge Hindu minority living on the territory of the UK, in the other European countries the reasons for the adoption of this belief are not so obvious. Thus, according to the EVS 28,8% of the people in Austria, 23,1% in Spain, 19,2% in Italy, 28% in Switzerland, 31% in Portugal, 18,4% in Germany and 22,6% in France believe in reincarnation. In countries, such as Latvia (41%), Lithuania (37,4%), Ukraine (37,1%) and Iceland (36,2%) the belief in physical rebirth is shared by a significant number of the population. Another representative study, ALLBUS, conducted only in Germany (from 1981 – to the present), has found out, too, that 22% of the contemporary Germans believe in reincarnation. Thus, the results received by the EVS and ALLBUS opinion polls raise many questions. If the European population is predominately Christian and the Christian church officially denies the phenomenon of physical rebirth, why are so many individuals attached to this concept?

There might be different hypotheses for the growing number of Europeans who accept the idea of reincarnation. The first one relates to the demographic characteristics of the Old continent. Europe becomes a melting pot of people with different ethnicities, religions and cultures and migrants already constitute a big minority. The second hypothesis relates to the principle of acculturation. There is a significant number of Europeans who follow ideologies other than the traditional Christian, such as the New Age, for example. This means that the process of acculturation is two-sided and mutual. Not only the migrants accommodate themselves to their new European homelands but the Europeans, too, broaden their vision and accept new teachings and beliefs. The third hypothesis underlines the importance of religious beliefs for the psychological well-being of individuals. In studying the reincarnation beliefs in the UK, Walter (2001) finds out that narratives about physical rebirth are used by individuals as a postmodern play and as a means to forge their personal identity. In the postmodern play of identity one can easily pretend or truly believe that they have been a historical figure from the past. In certain cases the border between true beliefs and pretensions are not clearly visible, which, in fact, is in full accordance with the ethics of postmodernism.

Whether a postmodern play or a play of consciousness, the belief in reincarnation has a strong impact on the individuals' self-concepts. Even in the cases when someone claims that they have been Cleopatra, Jeanne D'Arc or Queen Victoria the play of consciousness, and of

identities, is used as a technique for self-enhancement. With it the individuals underline their importance, uniqueness and prestige. The identification with somebody important from the historical past might thus serve as a tool to overcome the inferiority complex. However, in most of the other cases the idea of physical rebirth underlines an image of the true self that is eternal continuum beyond time, material destruction and death. In such a way, the belief in reincarnation refers, too, to multiple identities – the past selves merge into the present self that in turn will melt into the future selves of individuals. Moreover, this pluralism of identities relates to the universal principle of creation, as it is believed that one has lived many lives in different bodies, sexes, races and ethnicities and even in different living forms and entities.

Despite the varieties of the reincarnation narratives, their social psychological significance can be observed on two different levels: on the level of separate individuals and on the level of culture. Both on the individual and collective levels the belief in reincarnation may function as an ideological and psychological tool to deal with the fear of death and its consequences. Thus, this paper launches a fourth hypothesis about the significant rise of the reincarnation beliefs in contemporary European cultures. It states that there is a process of cultural transfusion of ideas, in which, in the same way as in the blood transfusion, new ideas or elements, taken from donor cultures are being incorporated into old systems of beliefs, so that the recipient culture regains its life and vitality. Moreover, in this process of cultural transfusion the old belief systems do not undergo major transformations or significant changes but they maintain their basic structure and organization. Thus, the new ideas implanted revive life and give new existence and viability to the old philosophies and worldviews.

The paper will further study the importance of life-after-death and rebirth in the cultures of India and Bulgaria. It will dwell on concepts, such as karma /destiny and free will that are tightly intertwined with the idea of death and rebirth. The cross-cultural comparison will also demonstrate the mechanisms of the cultural transfusion of ideas and its significance for both individuals and societies in contemporary times.

Death and Rebirth in Two Cultures: a Comparative Study

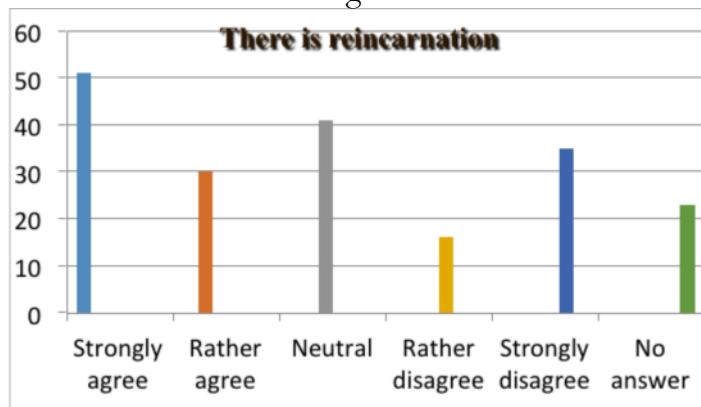
In India an empirical research with a written questionnaire was conducted in Food Corporation of India, a governmental company, where only top level managers and officers were interviewed. The survey included 196 Indian respondents coming from the sphere of businesses. This study cannot be representative of all the people in India. Rather, it represents only individuals from the intellectual and economic elite of the Asian country. The research in Bulgaria comprised 400 students from Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridsky” and Plovdiv University “Paisiy Hilendarsky”. Similarly, this study cannot represent the people in Bulgaria, because it focuses mostly on younger and more educated individuals.

In the two countries questionnaires with different questions were used, which makes the task of the cross-cultural comparison a challenging one. Some of the questions in the Indian questionnaire are not relevant for the Bulgarian respondents and vice versa. For example, questions about predictions in Vedic astrology would not be understood by most of the Bulgarian respondents and questions about some beliefs, typical of the Bulgarian culture, might not be clear for the Indian interviewees. Thus, in the two studies different questions have been asked and the data received is only used here to track the contemporary dynamics of ideas, spiritual beliefs and practices in the two countries.

The preliminary hypothesis of this study is that beliefs in karma and reincarnation would be so prevalent in India that (almost) everyone would adhere to them. However, this turns out not to be the case of India. Rather, such a supposition reflects the researcher's stereotypical assumptions about the country. In reality in the study in India the majority of the people who believe in karma and reincarnation belong to the cultural traditions of Hinduism. Informants, who determine themselves as "Christian" or "Muslim", claim that they do not profess these beliefs.

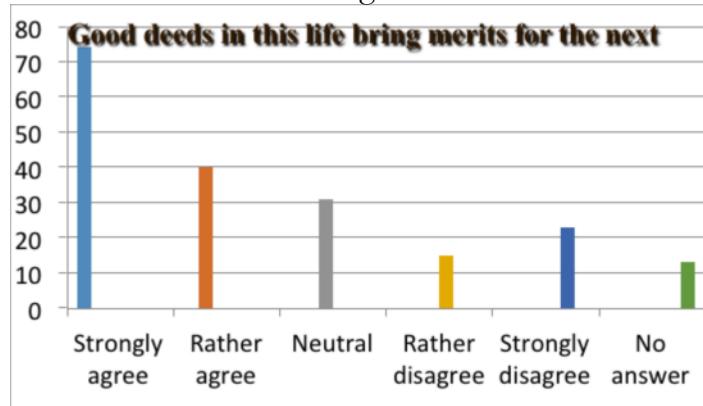
The questionnaire in India is structured as statements and answers using a Likert-type scale, and the respondents have to choose the answer that is the most appropriate for them. The questions are constructed according to some beliefs that have been found to be prevalent in the traditional Hindu culture. Question one states: "There is reincarnation and we have lived many times before". Out of 196 people 51 (26%) strongly agree with this statement, 30 (15,3%) agree to a certain extent, 41 (20,9%) choose the option "neutral", 16 (8,1%) rather disagree and 35 (17,8) strongly disagree. A considerable number of people, 23 (11,7%) have not left any response to this question (Fig.1).

Fig. 1



The results received from the answers to this question are a real surprise for the researcher. Less than 50% of the interviewed Indians claim that they believe in reincarnation. However, in the answers to the following questions some paradoxes can be outlined. The next statement is "Good deeds in this life-time bring merits for the next". 74 (37,7%) informants strongly agree with it, 40 (20,4%) rather agree, 31 (15,8%) have ticked the option "neutral", 15 (7,6%) rather disagree, 23 (11,7%) strongly disagree and 13 (6,6%) have not answered this question (Fig.2).

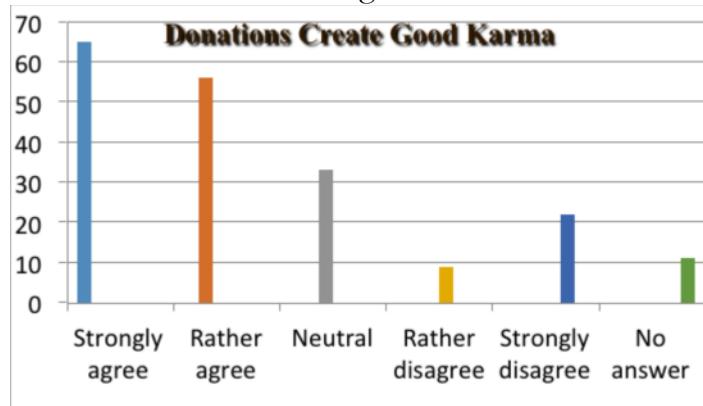
Fig.2



The answers to this question indicate that while a considerable number of the interviewed Indians explicitly disagree with the concept of reincarnation, many of them simultaneously agree with it implicitly. The answers to the next question, too, are a proof of this tendency in the Indian study.

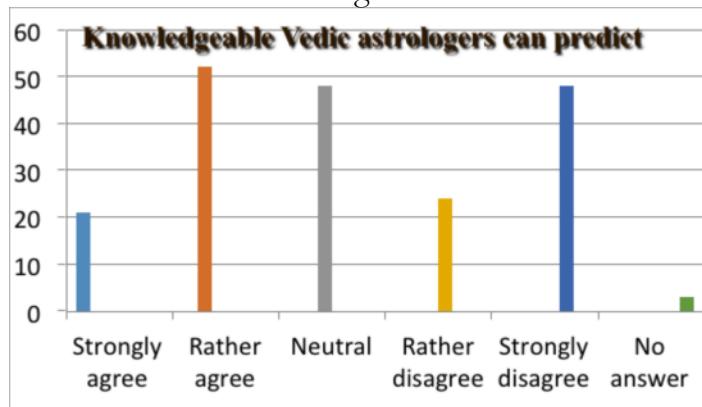
The next statement is: "Donations create good karma". 65 (33,2%) respondents strongly agree with this statement, 56 (28,5%) rather agree, 33 (16,8%) have chosen "neutral", 9 (4,5%) disagree and 22 (11,2%) strongly disagree. 11 (5,6%) respondents have not answered this question. Thus, the results show that the majority of the interviewed Indians believe, at least to some extent, in the concept of karma. (Fig.3)

Fig.3



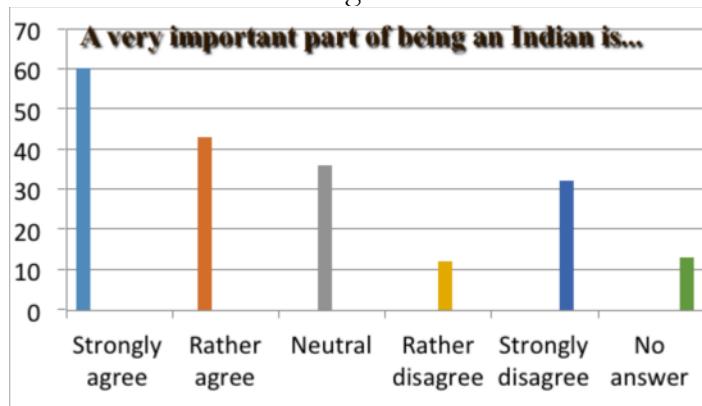
The following question tests to what extent Indians believe that life and death are predestined. It states "Knowledgeable Vedic astrologers can predict events accurately". Only 21 (10,7%) informants strongly agree, 52 (26,5%) rather agree, 48 (24,4%) are neutral, 24 (12,2%) rather disagree and 48 (24,4%) strongly disagree. 3 (1,5%) informants have not left any answer to this question. The results show that a considerable number of respondents express doubt in the prediction of events. However, from the answers to only this question it does not become clear whether the informants place their doubt on the ideas of fate and prediction or on the abilities of the astrologers to foresee future events (Fig.4)

Fig.4



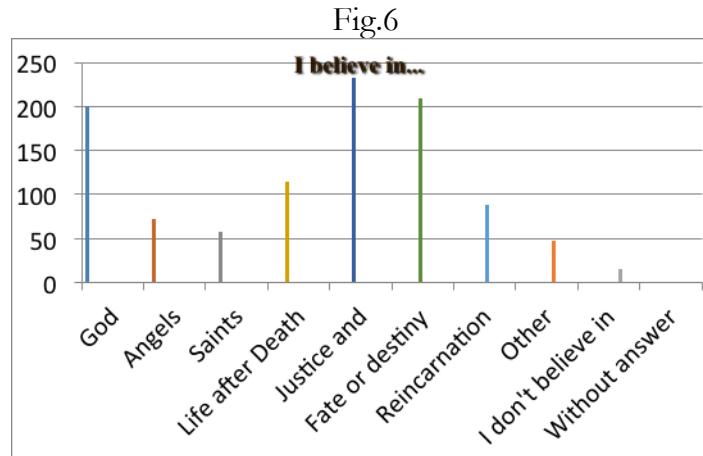
The next statement in the Indian questionnaire is: “A very important part of being an Indian is following one’s own religion. 60 (30,6%) respondents strongly agree with this statement, 43 (21,9%) rather agree, 36 (18,3%) have checked the “neutral” option, 12 (6,1%) rather disagree and 32 (16,3%) strongly disagree. 13 (6,6%) informants have not left any answer to this question. Thus, only about half of the Indian informants think that following the religious traditions is an essential element of the Indian culture (Fig. 5)

Fig. 5

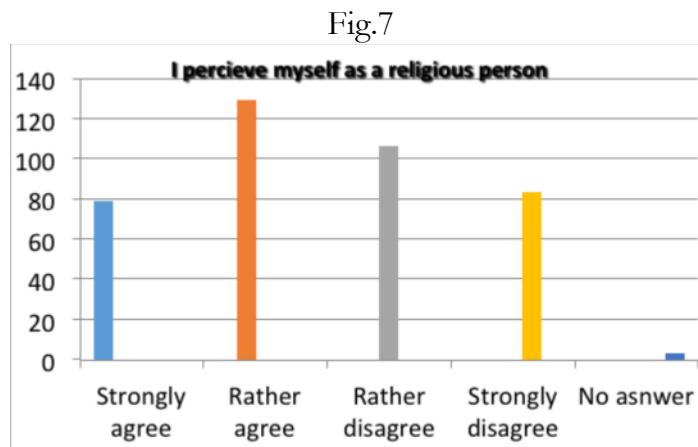


If the results in India are surprising, the received data in Bulgaria do not correspond to the preliminary expectations either. While a considerable number of Indian informants express explicit doubt in reincarnation, it turns out that it is not so unusual for Bulgarians to profess this belief. In the Bulgarian questionnaire the informants are asked what they personally believe in. The question is structured and the respondents have to choose between different options. Out of the 400 respondents 200 (50%) claim that they believe in God, 72 (18 %) believe in angels, 52 (13%) in the saints and 115 (28,7%) in life after death. A considerable majority – 233 (58,2%) claims that they believe in justice and retribution and 209 (52,2%) have chosen the option “fate or destiny”. 89 (22,2%) respondents also state that they believe in reincarnation. Only 16 informants (4%) claim that they do not believe in anything. 1 person (0,2%) has not answered this question and 47 (11,7%) have chosen the option “other”. They have also written they believe in: “oneself”, “energy”, “the Universe”, “nature” or “the supernatural”, “love”,

“the extra-terrestrials”, etc. The total sum of answers is more than 100% because many informants have chosen two or even three options (Fig.6).

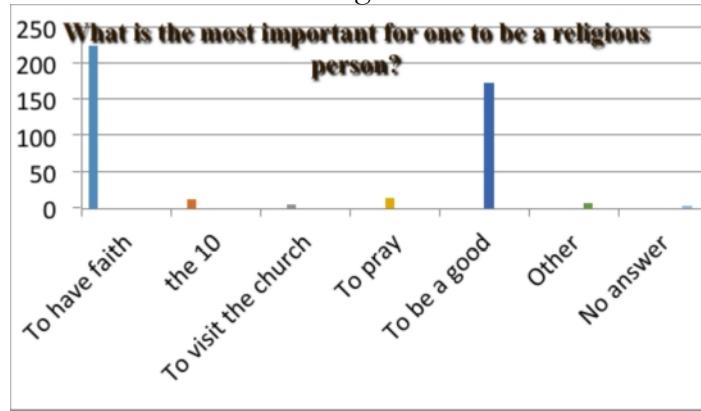


The next question in the Bulgarian questionnaire asks whether the respondent would agree with the statement that they are a religious person. 79 (19,7%) informants strongly agree with it, 129 (32,2%) rather agree, 106 (26,5%) rather disagree and 83 (20,7%) strongly disagree. 3 informants have not answered this question. This means that half of the Bulgarian respondents perceive themselves as religious persons. (Fig. 7).



The following question asks what is the most important for one to be a truly religious person. 223 (55,7%) respondents claim that for them to have faith is the most important and 172 (43%) informants state that the most important for them is to be a good person. 11 (2,7%) have chosen “to follow the 10 commandments”, and 14 (3,5%) – “to pray”. Only 5 (1,2%) people think that it is important to regularly visit the church. The respondents who have chosen the option “other” have written in the questionnaire that the most important for them is to “read the Bible”, to “believe in Jesus Christ”, “to be baptized”, etc. (Fig.8).

Fig.8



The last question that will be discussed here is included in both the Bulgarian and the Indian questionnaires. It consists of several statements and the informants have to choose which one of the statements is the most correct for them. This question aims to find out what the locus of control of the Indian and Bulgarian informants is. “Locus of control” is used as a term in psychology to indicate to what extent individuals believe they can control the events in their life. Strong interior locus of control corresponds to individuals’ conviction that their life depends entirely on them. In the opposite, strong exterior locus of control relates to the tendency of individuals to place the control outside of them and to think that there are other factors that mould their life.

In Bulgaria out of the 400 respondents 145 (36,2%) believe that they are fully responsible for all the successes and failures in their life. 136 (34%) have ticked the option “The majority of my successes and failures are due to me but there is some fate too”. 111 (27,7%) informants perceive their life as an equal mixture of efforts and fate and only 5 (1,2%) people believe that they have very little control on the events in their life. 3 (0,7%) respondents have not answered this question (Fig 9).

Out of the 196 informants in India 78 (39,7%) think that they are fully responsible for their successes and failures. 54 (27,5%) have chosen the statement “The majority of my successes and failures are due to me but there is some fate too”, 54 (27,5%) also claim that their life is an equal blend of efforts and fate and 18 (9,1%) state that everything that happens in their life is beyond their control (Fig.10).

Fig. 9

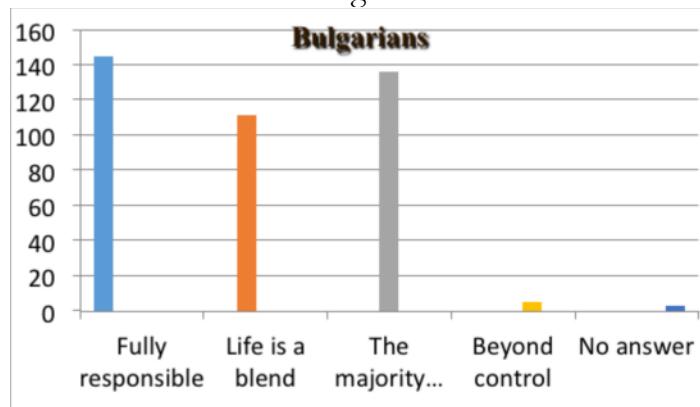
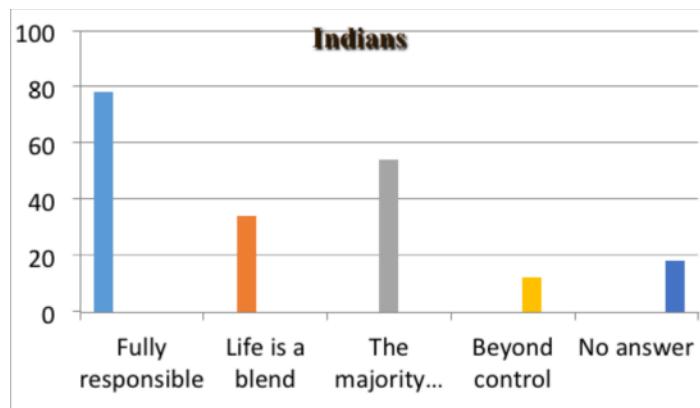


Fig.10



From the answers to this question it is evident that the majority of the Bulgarian and Indian respondents demonstrate interior locus of control that varies from strong interior to moderately interior. Simultaneously, in the two countries a significant number of people also think that fate or destiny has a certain role to play in their life.

Discussion

Although the results received in India and Bulgaria seem to be contradictory, in reality it is not so. Together with the individuals who stick to the traditional beliefs in the two countries, there is a bigger group of people who accept religion as cultural traditions and heritage, rather than as an attachment to a particular ideology or doctrine. Only about half of the Indian respondents state that following one's own religion is an essential part of the Indian culture. Similarly, half of the Bulgarian informants perceive themselves as religious, the other half claim that they are not religiously inclined. Also, the majority of the Bulgarian informants share the belief in justice and retribution. The latter might be taken as a concept from the Bible but in the context of the Bulgarian culture it functions mostly as a general guiding principle of ethics. At the same time very few Bulgarians claim that they do not believe in anything.

The data collected in Bulgaria shows interesting tendencies. While 50% of the Bulgarian respondents profess the Christian idea of God, the rest might perceive God as a kind of energy, power or supernatural presence, rather than as a religious figure or personality. So, together with those who cherish the traditional doctrine of the Orthodox church, there is another group of individuals who are open to different ideas. A proof of this tendency is the fact that among the Bulgarians more people believe in reincarnation than in saints or angels. This also means that some religious concepts of the church might have significantly eroded and that there are loopholes in the traditional system of belief that need to be filled with new ideas. This is how the process of cultural transfusion develops. An indication of this process is also the fact that in the Bulgarian study very few people state that it is important for them to regularly visit the church. According to the informants the most important factor for one to be religious is to have faith or to be a good person. In fact this is a serious sign of the decline of the trust in the traditional religious institutions. Thus, nowadays religion is perceived by individuals more as a cultural attitude, personal psychological experience or ethical code, rather than as particular rituals or ideological doctrines to follow.

The Indian respondents share similar convictions. In the study in India a considerable number of people express doubt in the traditional concept of reincarnation. Simultaneously, the majority of the respondents agree with statements, such as: "Good deeds in this life bring merits for the next" and "Donations create good karma." This means that while some informants can doubt in the existence of reincarnation or even deny it, they accept the idea as a broader cultural context, in which individuals express and communicate their spiritual or religious feelings. This is why also, these informants might associate concepts, such as "reincarnation" and "karma", with a cultural behaviour or an ethical principle, rather than with a particular ideology. However, it should be underlined once again here that the two studies are not representative of all the people in Bulgaria and India. In the rural areas or remote parts of India the majority of individuals might still relate to their religious traditions and follow the patriarchal customs.

So, in the comparison between the Bulgarian and Indian data it can be observed that a considerable number of people in the two countries do not share the traditional religious convictions. In Bulgaria there might be several reasons for this phenomenon. First, as it was already mentioned above, there is a significant decline of the trust in the Orthodox church. Second, after the collapse of socialism in Bulgaria there is a revival of the esoteric doctrines or philosophies that were forbidden during the time of socialism. In fact the idea of reincarnation is not a new one for the Bulgarians. The White Brotherhood of the Bulgarian philosopher and spiritual teacher Petar Deunov (2005), known also with the name Beinsa Douno (1864-1944), has professed the idea of reincarnation. With the establishment of democracy after 1989 his followers have significantly increased. So, the traditions of the occult have always been strong in the South Eastern European country except during the time of socialism. And third, there might be some contemporary influences too that come from new ideologies, such as the New Age.

In order to understand the role of religion in individuals' lives in India, one has to take in consideration the existence of huge religious minorities, such as the Muslims and Christians. In this respect it is not occasional that in the Indian questionnaire almost all the informants who "totally disagree" with the concept of reincarnation have determined themselves as "Christian" and one respondent has written that he is a "Muslim". Many informants also who claim that they are "Hindu" have chosen the options "neutral" or "rather disagree". However, those who manifest open resistance and strongly disagree with the Hindu concepts of reincarnation and karma, are predominately people coming from the social circles of the Christian and Muslim communities. In reality this fact confirms the theory of "resistance identity", proposed by Castells (1997). According to it ethnic or religious minorities may stick stronger to their ethnic, racial or cultural characteristics in order to differentiate themselves from the culture of majority. In this way, the Christians in India might be more devoted, sincere and ardent believers than many of the Christians in Europe who perceive their religion mostly as cultural traditions or as an ethical code to share. Thus, the Christians in India, too, would resist the prevailing religious ideology in the country in order to maintain their religious identity and to shape their cultural uniqueness.

At first sight the research data received in India and Bulgaria seem to be paradoxical. In the country where the concept of reincarnation has been a millenniums-old-tradition, there are religious and social communities, which clearly differentiate from it. And vice versa, in the country, where the idea of rebirth has been for a long time excluded from the official doctrine of the church, there is a growing number of people who profess this belief. However, a closer

look at the culture of India and Bulgaria shows the same tendency: there are more individuals nowadays who perceive their religion mostly as a set of cultural or ethical principles. One reason for this process might be the secularization of society, which, in the case of Bulgaria, is combined with the total collapse of the trust in the traditional religious institutions. This does not mean that in dropping out of the church individuals have become less religious, as some authors state (Diener et al 2011). Many of the Bulgarian informants who claim that they do not visit the church still consider themselves religious. This means that religion is not perceived by them as a collective participation in religious institutions. Rather, it is seen by many individuals as a particular way of life and personal experience. The shift is in the consciousness – from a more collective and institutionalized concept of religion to a more personalized perception of the belief system. This in fact is an intense process of de-institutionalization of religion.

Thus, in contemporary times many people can adhere to their traditional religion as a major framework of beliefs but they can be open to new ideas too. This is why some individuals who profess the Christian idea of a personal God may also believe in reincarnation, which is the case of the Bulgarian study. This is not necessarily a process of “creolization” or “hybridization”, in which old and new beliefs are intermingled to the point of a creation of an entirely new cultural construct. Rather, the new idea is incorporated into the old belief system without the latter to be significantly transformed. This process represents the cultural transfusion of ideas. For example, an individual may still believe in God, angels, retribution and life-after-death. But to these traditionally Christian beliefs they can add new ideas, such as the concept of reincarnation. In the process of cultural transfusion, in the same way as in the blood transfusion, the implant does not provoke any major changes in the recipient system but revitalizes and rejuvenates it. In this way, in order to regain new life, the existing gaps or inconsistencies in the old structures of beliefs are filled with new ideas.

A confirmation of this process can also be found in the EVS, where from 18% to 40% of the Europeans in the different countries share the belief in reincarnation, thus accepting a new and untraditional for their religious system belief. It also seems that the transfusion of ideas is not only European or Indian phenomenon. To one or another extent it affects all societies and cultures in the postmodern world. As an example, according to the EVS 28,4% of the people in Turkey believe in reincarnation too. Thus, it can be hypothesized that the cultural transfusion of ideas may have an impact on other Muslim societies in the world too. In this process the majority of the Christians and Muslims would not transform the major framework of their ideological beliefs. Rather, they would continue to define themselves as “Christians” or “Muslims” but simultaneously they incorporate some new elements in their traditional worldviews. It is evident that nowadays some Christians and Muslims accept ideas typical of Hinduism and Buddhism, while some Hindu people open up to Christianity or Islam. In this global mélange of cultures new components are added to the old traditional systems through cultural transfusion, so that individuals can rejuvenate their personal lives and rediscover their individual selves.

Conclusions

On the basis of the comparative analysis of the data collected in India and Bulgaria four models of religiousness can be outlined. The first one is the traditional model where individuals stick to their traditional values and beliefs. In contrast to it the second one is the model of withdrawal, characterized by individuals who are skeptical or fully disagree with any religious

ideas. However, both in Bulgaria and in India very few people represent this model. The third is the model of resistance. The religious feelings and concepts in it are underlined in opposition to other dominant ideologies and thus they function as a tool of individual and collective self-enhancement. And the forth one is the open culture model that is represented by people who perceive religion mostly as a set of cultural or ethical principles. However, the fact that the individuals do not adhere to the church does not mean that they are less religious. Rather, many of them perceive themselves as religious. This means that there is a shift of the consciousness from a more collective and institutionalized perception of religion to a more individualized set of beliefs. This is a proof of the intense process of de-institutionalization of religion in some societies in the postmodern world. The open culture model of religiousness embraces new concepts and ideas more easily. This is a process of cultural transfusion of ideas, in which the implantation of the new ideas and convictions often functions within the old systems, without the latter to undergo significant transformations. In such a way, the postmodern world represents varieties of religious feelings and attachments. In this broader context the old ideas, such as life-after-death and rebirth, are given new meanings and are redefined in old and new structures.

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The (meta)physics of immortality: Death and eternal life in Frank Tipler and Robert Lanza's theories

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Abstract

In an age when the explanatory and consolatory narratives of religion about death seem to lose their appeal, referring to scientific backgrounds to develop new theories about life after death seems an effective alternative. A demonstration of this assumption is given by the success of theoretical physicist Frank J. Tipler's books *The Physics of Immortality* (1994) and *The Physics of Christianity* (2007), and of the ones by famous physician Robert Lanza (in collaboration with the astronomer Bob Berman) *Biocentrism* (2009) and *Beyond Biocentrism* (2016). Both Tipler's Omega Point theory and Lanza's Biocentrism are based on particular interpretations of the concepts underlying the so-called "new physics", in particular quantum physics, the physics of time, and the cosmological anthropic principle. These two theories attribute a decisive role to the consciousness and thus to intelligent life in the construction of reality, proposing the hypothesis that life is destined to last forever. This implies that the individual consciousness of every human being, after death, should persist in other forms and contribute to the evolution of the universe.

Keywords: death, physics, immortality, Biocentrism, Omega Point theory

Foreword

At the very basis of the modern conception of scientific knowledge lies the separation between the domain of the knowledge acquired through the scientific method and those that pertain to metaphysical conceptions: the rise of a scientific community capable of developing theories independently from any metaphysical backgrounds marks the transition from natural philosophy to science¹. The demarcation between science and metaphysics proposed by Karl Popper (1959) is based on the criterion of the refutability, or falsifiability, of a theoretical system. A system is considered scientific – according to Popper – if it makes assertions that may conflict with observations. Since concepts like God, human soul or afterlife are not observable – that is, they cannot be analyzed empirically – it derives that they belong to metaphysics, not to science. However, in the last decades the "demarcation problem" assumed new relevance in the debate within the philosophy of science (Pigliucci & Boudry, 2013). The development of contemporary theoretical physics, with assertions that often go beyond the empirical investigation regime, forced theorists to question the role of falsification as a criterion of demarcation (Carroll, 2018; Pigliucci, 2016). This has led to the development of new

¹ It is the point of view expressed, among others, by Herbert Butterfield (1959), Arthur Koestler (1959), Edward Grant (1997), Paolo Rossi (2000) in their histories on the origin of modern science.

approaches to rethink the border between science and pseudoscience, in a debate that seems to have entered today in its critical phase (Kragh, 2017; Dawid, 2017).

This article aims to analyze two proposals based on the assertions of contemporary theoretical physics that make a real trespassing of science in the field of metaphysics, assuming the idea of afterlife as their object of investigation. These are the hypothesis of biocentrism proposed by Robert Lanza, a biotechnologist, together with Bob Berman, an astronomer, and the Omega Point theory proposed by the theoretical physicist Frank Tipler. The choice of studying these two proposals instead of others coming from the vast plethora of conjectures on the reconciliation between science and metaphysical conceptions of afterlife depends on three factors: 1) these are proposals promoted by personalities belonging to the scientific community, well rooted in the academic establishment, not outsiders; 2) these proposals are based on a careful evaluation of the concepts of contemporary theoretical physics and, in one case (Tipler), they propose assertions that can be refuted through empirical observations; 3) they were disseminated through best sellers translated worldwide, and therefore they received a wide media coverage.

In the first part I summarize Lanza's biocentrism and Tipler's Omega Point theory; in the second part I try to analyze them taking into account their scientific backgrounds and tracing a genealogy of the ideas on which they are based; in the last part, I suggest new ways to explain these two hypotheses in the light of the demarcation problem.

Robert Lanza's Biocentrism

Robert Lanza is a scientist specialized in the study of stem cells. He is currently Head of Astellas Global Regenerative Medicine and Chief Scientific Officer of the Astellas Institute for Regenerative Medicine, a research facility affiliated to the international pharmaceutical company Astellas. He is also Adjunct Professor at the Wake Forest University School of Medicine. His researches, carried out in teams with scientists from American and international universities and research centers, have been published in leading academic journals. In 2014 he was included in a list of the "100 Most Influential People in the World" by TIME Magazine. His popular book *Biocentrism: How Life and Consciousness are the Keys to Understanding the True Nature of the Universe* (2009) was written in collaboration with Bob Berman, an astronomer who collaborates with popular science magazines and who participates as a guest in television programs.

The starting point of Biocentrism is that «the laws of physics exactly balanced for animal life to exist» (Lanza, 2009, p. 7). This discourse is based on the assumptions of the so-called “anthropic principle”, according to which the values of fundamental constants and other physical parameters of our universe are the result of a sort of self-selection, due to the fact that the universe hosts life (at least on our planet). According to Lanza, the discovery of the so-called fine-tuning of the fundamental parameters of reality undermines the traditional conception of a universe that is the result of a casual evolution, in which life plays no role². On

2 The anthropic principle in its current formulation was proposed in 1973 by astrophysicist Brandon Carter as a solution to the fine-tuning problem. He distinguished between two interpretations: according to the weak anthropic principle, the observed values of physical and cosmological quantities are not all equally probable, but are subject to the restriction that there are places where a life based on carbon can evolve and that the universe is old enough to make it possible; according to the strong anthropic principle, the universe must possess those properties that allow the development of life within it, at some stage of its history (Barrow & Tipler, 1986).

the contrary, he believes that life must be considered the central feature of the universe, what explains the very existence of the universe in the form we know. If our universe would host no life (and intelligent life especially), the universe simply would not exist. This is the essence of the Biocentrism. In his book, Lanza endorses the interpretation of the anthropic principle proposed by the eminent theoretical physicist John A. Wheeler, known as *participatory anthropic principle*, according to which the existence of observers is necessary to allow the existence of the universe itself (Wheeler, 1978). Indeed, where the “weak” interpretation of the anthropic principle suggests a sort of tautology (the universe has these parameters because we exist, and if it had others we would not be here to measure them), the “strong” more disputed interpretation suggests that life should be considered as an indispensable ingredient for the physics of our universe, without which the whole reality would have no sense at all (Barrow & Tipler, 1986).

Lanza belongs to the supporters of the “strong” interpretation and explains the fine-tuning problem through Biocentrism. According to his First Principle of Biocentrism, «what we perceive as reality is a process that involves our consciousness» (Lanza, 2009, p. 23). Lanza therefore rejects the traditional division between *res cogitans* and *res extensa* dating back to Descartes and to his mechanistic vision of the universe, totally indifferent to human presence in the cosmos. He claims to be closer to the non-dualist views of Eastern philosophies, which do not admit this radical division. Lanza borrows the idea of a determining role of consciousness in the fabric of reality from Von Neumann-Wigner’s interpretation of quantum mechanics, in which the presence of a conscious observer (able to make observations of the quantum system and endowed with self-awareness) is determinant for the functioning of quantum mechanics itself. He writes: «When studying subatomic particles, the observer appears to alter and determine what is perceived. The presence and methodology of the experimenter is hopelessly entangled with whatever he is attempting to observe and what results he gets» (Lanza, 2009, p. 49). Here Lanza uses quantum mechanics’ pivotal concept of entanglement, at the center of a lot of debates still underway in the philosophy of physics for its paradoxical aspects (Bricmont, 2016; Rickles, 2016)³. According to Lanza, without the presence of a conscious observer, subatomic particles «at best exist in an undetermined state of probability waves» (Lanza, 2009, p. 59), as Von Neumann-Wigner’s interpretation says (Von Neumann, 1955).

This does not mean – Lanza says – that a conscious observer is able to manipulate reality or modify it at will. Here he intends to distance himself from the New Age conceptions of quantum physics, or from his purely pseudoscientific versions, expressed for example in the

3 The concept of entanglement or non-locality emerged in quantum physics with the so-called “EPR paradox” (from the names of physicists Einstein, Podolsky and Rosen who proposed it as a mental experiment in 1935): it assumed that by accepting the postulates of traditional interpretation of quantum physics, there would have been a paradox due to the violation of the limit of transmission of information placed by the speed of light predicted by the theory of relativity. Specifically, if you have two sub-particles that share mirror properties because they are produced by the splitting of a parent particle – e.g., the spin of particle A has a value of +1/2 while that particle B is -1/2, for the law of conservation of angular momentum – the measurement of a property of particle A has instant effect on the specular property of particle B, regardless of distance. This violates two principles of classical physics: firstly because the property of particle A or B is in an indeterminate state until the measurement is made, so the value that will emerge from the measurement is completely random, and yet the specular particle will assume the opposite property, showing the existence of a random correlation; and secondly because, suggesting the existence of a correlation that does not take into account the distance, it violates the principle of locality (according to which distant objects cannot have instantaneous causal influence in an instantaneous way). With the non-locality theorem by John Stewart Bell, in 1964, non-locality was proved to be an essential property of quantum physics, and the phenomenon was later demonstrated in many laboratory experiments, so it is now accepted by the scientific community, raising important problems on the nature of reality.

popular documentary *What the Bleep Do We Know?* (2004), quoted by Lanza in the text as an example of the distortion of quantum physics' concepts. He rather defends a probabilistic view of quantum mechanics, according to which it is not possible to decide in advance the outcome of an observation of a quantum system, while admitting that the transition from the probabilistic state to the ontological state of a quantum system is possible only in the presence of an observer. The biocentric hypothesis, therefore, provides that reality exists only if there is intelligent life, but rejects the idea that reality can be manipulated by consciousness (a popular idea among pseudo-scientific theories like those of the "quantum mind"). Rather, the basic concepts of physics, namely the existence of time and space, must be rethought in the light of Biocentrism: time and space are constructs of the mind, i.e. ways in which consciousness gives meaning to reality, but they do not exist in an absolute sense.

From this, Lanza goes so far as to question the concept of "death": «If time is an illusion, if reality is created by our own consciousness, can this consciousness ever truly be extinguished?» (Lanza, 2009, p. 146). The answer is no. This is because the conservation law requires that energy should never be destroyed, but only subjected to transformation: therefore, the amount of electricity produced by our body and our mind, and which produces what we call consciousness, cannot fade after death. Consciousness is conserved in some way, according to Lanza, because without it the universe cannot exist; therefore, the dissolution of the physical body does not coincide with death, because from the point of view of consciousness the universe is timeless and not subject to change.

He further explores this issue in *Beyond Biocentrism: Rethinking Time, Space, Consciousness, and the Illusion of Death* (2016), published again in collaboration with Bob Berman after the success of the first book. Here, Lanza assumes the point of view of the information theory to explain the phenomenon of consciousness and in general the very nature of reality: «If information is defined as everything involved in cause-and-effect exchanges, then information interactions are continuous and omnipresent on all levels», he writes (Lanza, 2016, p. 155). The same energy transformations should be understood as an exchange of information. Therefore, whereas previously Lanza considered consciousness as an expression of a certain quantity of energy, now he defines it as a quantity of information. However, the conservation law still applies: information can change, but does not disappear into thin air. Information about the universe we perceive, Lanza argues, constitutes the reality itself: to be computable, information must be acquired by a conscious mind. Therefore, putting the concept of information at the center of his theory of Biocentrism, Lanza concludes: «All we know and can know is contained within our mind/the information processed in our brains» (Lanza, 2016, p. 164). We are, ultimately, "machines with awareness", to use its expression.

In *Beyond Biocentrism* Lanza argues that it is necessary to get rid of the self/body identification, in order to get rid of the false conception of death. It is not true that when we see a dead body the person who owned that body no longer exists. This is because, above all, since time is a construct of our mind, «they cannot be thought of as "going away"—which requires the temporal concepts of before and after» (Lanza, 2016, p. 209). But then how is it possible that we can no longer interact with the consciousness that was inside that body? Returning to the idea of conservation of energy and information, Lanza argues that the consciousness of the "dead" person has entered a state of quantum superposition: it exists, but in an indeterminate state that is incomprehensible to our senses, exactly as all the possibilities of a quantum system exist when they are entangled, before the observation is made. From the

standpoint of the one who dies, the consciousness remains unaltered and he experiences the true timeless structure of the universe, just as an entangled quantum system experiences it.

Frank Tipler's Omega Point Theory

Frank Tipler is Full Professor at the Department of Mathematics and Physics at Tulane University and a former student of John A. Wheeler at the University of Texas, strongly influenced by his ideas. With John D. Barrow, Tipler published in 1986 the influential book *The Cosmological Anthropic Principle*, where they exposed their thesis on the problem of fine-tuning and the apparent central role of life in the universe. Barrow and Tipler proposed a particularly “strong” version of the anthropic principle, known as the *ultimate anthropic principle*, according to which, when intelligent life emerges in the universe, it is destined to fill the entire universe and to survive forever. In his controversial book *The Physics of Immortality* (1994), Tipler starts exactly from this assumption to develop his Omega Point theory, defined as «a testable physical theory for an omnipresent, omniscient, omnipotent God who will one day in the far future resurrect every single one of us to live forever in abode which is in all essentials the Judeo-Christian Heaven» (Tipler, 1995, p. 1).

The Omega Point is a singularity at the end of time when it will become possible to emulate eternally all living beings that existed in the universe in every age. The existence of the Omega Point represents a sort of postulate for the ultimate anthropic principle: if a conscious observer is needed so that the universe exists (it is the same assumption of Lanza's Biocentrism), how it should be possible that the universe existed well before the emergence of conscious life? This paradox is solved by assuming a conscious mind at the end of the universe that acts as an observer and “creator” of the universe in what appears to us as our past. It would seem an even more paradoxical solution; but Tipler mentions to support it the famous Wheeler's delayed choice experiment, a mental experiment that seems to demonstrate the possibility that an observation made in the present of an event happened in the past (for example the explosion of a supernova) could influence this same event in the past. In this way, it becomes admissible for an observer of the remote future, with its own observation, to give meaning to all past reality.

The omnipotent and omniscient mind that Tipler defines Punto Omega is identified by him with the God of the Judeo-Christian tradition. In particular, in the Omega Point it becomes possible to resurrect all the beings lived in the past, in a form that is identical to the one Christ had after the resurrection (not therefore a resurrection in the form of “ghost”, but in the flesh, although in a “transfigured” form). The assumption that makes Tipler's resurrection possible is the same as Lanza's: the essence of a living being can be traced back to his information: «More generally, it requires us to regard a “person” as a particular (very complicated) type of computer program: the human “soul” is nothing but a specific program being run on a computing machine called the brain» (Tipler, 1995, pp. 1-2). He believes that the Omega Point is a kind of universal Turing machine, able to emulate every other computable machine, including that represented by the human brain.

For Tipler, «a “living being” is any entity which codes information (in the physics sense of this word) with the information coded being preserved by natural selection» (Tipler., 1995, p. 124). Tipler believes that this explicitly reductionist conception of living being is in fact close to the theological notion of “soul” provided by Thomas Aquinas, which he borrowed from

Aristotelianism. In fact, the soul represents, for the scholastic theology, “the form of activity of the body”, and the soul informs (that is, it gives shape) the body with which it is united. Therefore, Tipler’s vision would not be antithetical to Christianity. The resurrection promised by Christ in the Gospels will occur through a kind of computer simulation, which does not mean creating a false reproduction of the true living being, perhaps in a “ghostly” holographic form, but a recreation of it in a form that is totally indistinguishable from the current one. As intelligent life will fill the entire universe, computers’ processing capabilities will increase. Gradually, life will begin to move through mind-uploading techniques inside computer hardware. According to Tipler, this transfer of a human consciousness to a digital medium does not produce a self that is different from the original one, because by reproducing it to perfection, it guarantees its continuity in terms of consciousness. Similarly, when we die and our physical body deteriorates, the resurrection that occurs in the Omega Point within the super-emulation happens without interruption from the point of view of our subjective time: we will close our eyes to immediately reopen them in the Paradise that God/the Omega Point created for us.

To justify the idea that «there is simply no way for the emulated people to tell that they are “really” inside the computer, that they are merely simulated, and not real» (Tipler, 1995, p. 207), Tipler uses the principle of “Identity of Indiscernibles” introduced by Leibniz, according to which entities that cannot be distinguished by any means whatsoever have to be considered identical. Therefore, «simulations which are sufficiently complex to contain observers – thinking, feeling beings – as subsimulations exist physically» (Tipler, 1995, p. 210). Our life after the resurrection will be very similar to the one we experience in this world, even with the same loved ones we lost in the past: indeed, based on the quantum principle of non-locality (that is, the state of entanglement that holds quantum systems that interacted in the past even at very large distances), it would not be possible to resurrect someone without emulating at the same time all the people that interacted with them in the past and in the same environment with which they interacted in their mortal life.

Tipler’s theory postulates that the universe is closed. A closed universe is a universe that does not expand forever from the initial singularity (Big Bang), but in which gravity overcomes cosmic expansion at some point, causing its collapse. The universe must be closed because, if it expands eternally, sooner or later it would become impossible to extract information from the regions of the universe moving away from our horizon of observation. In these regions, called “event horizons”, information in the form of light cones centered on the event no longer reach us and would be lost forever from our point of view. Vice versa, the Omega Point is the point where all the light cones converge into the distant future: if not, the Omega Point could not resurrect (i.e. emulate) the lives of those whose information lies beyond the event horizon. Moreover, an open universe would inexorably end with a thermal death, a state in which it is no longer possible to extract energy, so that life cannot exist anymore; vice versa, in a closed universe it is possible to extract useful energy from the gravitational energy that produces collapse. This point is so important that became the “First Testable Prediction of the Omega Point Theory”. Tipler’s closed universe, however, is not a cyclic universe. Another Tipler’s prediction is that under no circumstances gravity can become repulsive, so as to provoke, in the moment of the final collapse, a “rebound” that makes the cosmic expansion resume. The Eternal Return, according to Tipler, is essentially opposed to the idea of progress inherent in the Judeo-Christian theology and is therefore to be rejected. On the other hand, if in the

moment of the final collapse a rebound occurs, it would be impossible to produce the final singularity that Tipler defines “Omega Point”, and the whole theory would prove to be wrong.

When the book was published in 1994, the hypothesis of a closed universe was still prevailing in cosmology. But in 1998 two different research groups revealed that the universe, rather than slowing its expansion due to gravity, is accelerating its expansion, subjected to an unknown “dark energy”. Today, therefore, the hypothesis of a closed universe has been ruled out and everything leads scientists to believe that the universe will expand forever. This represents a blatant falsification of Tipler’s prediction. Instead of abandoning his theory, however, Tipler has identified a possible way out in his next book *The Physics of Christianity* (2007). He imagines that intelligent life, once filled the whole universe, will intervene on the fabric of reality so to nullify the positive cosmological constant that produces the acceleration of universe’s expansion. This could be done by pushing the Higgs field, which is in a state of false vacuum, in the state of true vacuum, that is, in its state of minimum energy, releasing enough energy to produce (for the relationship between mass and energy established by Einstein) a significant increase in gravitational attraction so to trigger the collapse of the universe. It is not a testable prediction, but just a hypothesis.

From Russian Cosmists to New Age physics: a genealogy of Lanza and Tipler’s ideas

Theories do not emerge from nothing. This also applies to those that can hardly be defined as fully scientific theories. Reconstructing the genealogy of the ideas on which Lanza and Tipler’s proposals are based is therefore essential to understand their success as well.

First, both proposals provide answers to a problem that emerged overwhelmingly in the field of theoretical physics and the philosophy of physics during the 20th century, that is the role of intelligent life in the universe. Von Neumann-Wigner’s interpretation of quantum mechanics, on a one hand, and the cosmological anthropic principle, on another hand, questioned the traditional mechanistic vision of a universe indifferent to life, which would have appeared entirely randomly as a result of fortuitous coincidences and the “blind” mechanism of natural selection. Within the scientific community itself there are some alternatives to this vision, and the proposals by Lanza and Tipler fall within this debate, which instead intend to restore to intelligent life an absolute centrality, as in a sort of reversal of the Copernican revolution. Both proposals are also based on a reductionist interpretation of the concept of “life”, understood as a mere process of information processing. It is useful to note that this “informational” interpretation of life was first proposed by one of the fathers of quantum physics, Erwin Schrödinger, in his lecture series entitled *What is life?* (Schrödinger, 1944). Since then this paradigm has been affirmed above all in physics circles, as an attempt to “crack” the mystery of life with a different approach than that of biology, but it has also been embraced by an evolutionist like Richard Dawkins (1986). By reducing the problem of life and consciousness to information, it is possible to treat these issues with instruments proper to physics, as Lanza and Tipler do.

The thesis of Biocentrism is also based on other more heterodox assumptions, in particular the idea of a non-dual reality. Lanza deals with this issue in *Beyond Biocentrism*, where he writes: «Today, the world still remains essentially divided into these basic two views of reality, Western and Eastern, dualistic and non-dualistic, that existed over a millennium ago» (Lanza, 2016, p. 24). Although in his first book he wanted to distance himself from New Age

theories and also from a classic of quantum mysticism such Fritjof Capra's *The Tao of Physics* (1975), he later writes:

It will surprise no one that our detour involves a turn to the East. It is there, in Hinduism and Buddhism, that these very issues remain front and center. This actually constitutes a major difference between Western religions and those with roots in the Indian subcontinent. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, duality is central to the perception of reality. The basics of life and the cosmos involve relationships – often encompassing tension or conflict – between the individual versus nature or the individual self and its relationship to a deity that is separate. They're almost always temporally structured, as when one's present life stands opposed to its spiritual goal, which supposedly lies in the future. Thus, for Westerners, a bedrock fundamental is the existence of time. (Lanza, 2016. pp. 131-132)

These are exactly the same considerations expressed by Capra in his 1975 best-seller. Capra, for example, spoke of «a trend of thought which led, ultimately, to the separation of spirit and matter and to a dualism which became characteristic of Western philosophy» (Capra, 1975, p. 20). And then he summarizes the Eastern point of view as follows: «The most important characteristic of the Eastern world view – one could almost say the essence of it – is the awareness of the unity and mutual interrelation of all things and events, the experience of all phenomena in the world as manifestations of a basic oneness» (Capra, 1975, p. 130). Compare this statement with Bob Berman's experience told in *Beyond Biocentrism*, in which the astronomer realizes «that birth and death do not exist. That all is perfect eternally, that time is unreal, and that all is one» and that things «were no longer separate items existing in space; instead, everything was the same continuum» (Lanza, 2016, p. 135). Even Capra, at the beginning of his book, describes a similar mystical experience. Robert Lanza is not for nothing a regular guest of the seminars of the international non-profit organization “Science and Nonduality”, which explores the topics of physics by hybridizing them with Eastern mysticism. On the organization's website we read:

Nonduality is the philosophical, spiritual, and scientific understanding of non-separation and fundamental intrinsic oneness (...). Dualities are usually seen in terms of opposites: Mind/Matter, Self/Other, Conscious/Unconscious, Illusion/Reality, Quantum/Classical, Wave/Particle, Spiritual/Material, Beginning/End, Male/Female, Living/Dead and Good/Evil. Nonduality is the understanding that identification with common dualisms avoids recognition of a deeper reality (<https://www.scienceandnonduality.com/about/nonduality/>).

It is therefore undeniable that Lanza's Biocentrism has its roots in the so-called “quantum mysticism”, born between the 1960s and 1970s in the United States (Kaiser, 2011) and subsequently spread worldwide. Among the endorsers of his books, we also find Deepak Chopra, a New Age best-selling author with his books *Quantum Healing* (1989) and the most recent *You Are The Universe* (2017), where the same thesis of Lanza is resumed.

Tipler's Omega Point Theory is instead inscribed in Western thought and avoids influences of some sort from quantum mysticism. The explicit inspiration of Tipler's theory comes from Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955), a paleontologist, evolutionist and Jesuit theologian, who had some clashes with the Church for his heterodox views. In his book *Le Phénomène Humain* (1955), Teilhard proposed the Omega Point as the peak of complexity and intelligence, a transcendent being endowed with the same qualities attributed to God and

toward which human beings naturally tends. For Teilhard, evolution is not a random process, but a development aimed at increasing complexity and intelligence until the full universe will become filled with intelligence (*noosphere*), so as to merge with the One, i.e. God. Evolution would be guided by a particular form of energy, called radial energy, which contrasts the second law of thermodynamics according to which entropy, that is the degree of “disorder” of the universe, is inexorably destined to grow over time; radial energy pushes life towards increasing forms of complexity. This is a strongly “vitalistic” vision, which costed Teilhard the accusation of pantheism on the part of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, since in his vision this sort of psychic energy is present in all living things, not just in human beings. Tipler, however, while drawing heavily on Teilhard’s theory, believes that his ideas are «completely wrong» (Tipler, 1995, p. 112), as they were formulated as an alternative to Darwinism in a time when, especially in France, Darwinism was hardly considered by evolutionists (*Le Phénomène Humain* was written in the 1930s), so that subsequent developments and the emergence of neo-Darwinism completely discredited Teilhard’s radial energy hypothesis. However, Tipler believes that «“radial energy” is actually quite analogous to another physics concept, information» (Tipler, 1995, pp. 112-113). In this way, by replacing radial energy with information, it is possible to assert that the quantity and complexity of information in the universe is destined to grow, to produce in the distant future the advent of the Omega Point, able to reproduce all the information created in the universe through a principle similar to the universal Turing machine.

But the affinities between Lanza and Tipler’s theories and those of Nikolai Fedorovich Fedorov (1829-1903), father of the Russian “cosmism”, are possibly of a greater interest. Cosmism was a unique doctrine that foresees the future ability of human civilization, through technology, to resurrect the dead. Tipler does not mention cosmism in his works, but certainly Teilhard was influenced by it: Young (2012) says that he followed the lessons of one of them, Vladimir Ivanovich Vernadsky (1863-1945), at the Sorbonne. In his writings, Vernadsky used the term noosphere, the same of Teilhard. Vernadsky was convinced that life, similarly to matter and energy, is an eternal constant of the cosmos, which has always existed and will always exist, similarly to what Lanza and Tipler say. With increasing complexity, intelligent lifeforms will be able – according to Vernadsky – to take control of their evolution and change the universe according to their needs.

This assumption is the basis of cosmist thought. Fedorov, in his role of librarian at the National Library of Moscow, was able to inspire a whole generation of Russian intellectuals; his thought was exposed in several writings later collected in the posthumous volume *Philosophy of the Common Task* (also known as *Philosophy of Physical Resurrection*). His idea is that in the world there is neither birth nor death, but only transformation, so that when the body decomposes it is always possible, theoretically, to bring back to life the dead collecting all its dispersed atoms and infusing new life into them. According to Fedorov, this will be the aim of humankind in the distant future: to recover all the atoms of dead people and to bring them back to life when technology will make it possible. This will require humans to move to the Moon and then to other planets, to recover the dust dispersed in interplanetary spaces. Like Tipler, Fedorov conceived space travels not as an end, but as a mean to allow humans to control the whole universe in order not to leave even a single particle that belonged to those who died in the past. It is the same idea as Tipler’s Omega Point, in which all the light cones must converge, so that the information of all those who have lived in the past can be recovered and reproduced. We could even draw an analogy between quantum entanglement and the

concept of *rodstvo* that, for Fedorov, represented what holds human beings and the whole universe together. In particular, when humanity will begin to collect the dust that belonged to the dead, the *rodstvo* will produce a kind of resonance when we are in the presence of the atoms belonging to one of our ancestors. Tipler imagined that entanglement allows people resurrected in the Omega Point to stay in touch with their loved ones.

George M. Young (2012) noted that the legacy of Russian cosmism has been inherited today by transhumanists, both in Russia and – above all – in the United States. There is no doubt that Tipler was influenced by transhumanism in his theory. He mentions mind-uploading, the hypothetical technology that would make possible to transfer the information of a human being onto a digital medium. Mind-uploading is one of the key concepts of transhumanism, being considered as the final solution to the problem of death, which transhumanists – like cosmists – intend to defeat with the support of technological progress (Moravec, 1988; Paura, 2016). It is therefore possible to suggest a direct link between cosmism, the Omega Point theory by Teilhard de Chardin, transhumanism and Tipler and Lanza's ideas. All these ideas share the belief that «the currently disregarded and unimagined sciences, that is, the alternative sciences, the “parascience” or the “pseudoscience”, can contribute to the discovery of what we need to know» (Young, 2012, p. 235).

Pseudoscience, alterscience, minor science

Following a traditional sociological interpretation, we should understand these two theories using the concept of “re-enchantment”. Richard Jenkins defines re-enchantment as a phenomenon consisting of two tendencies, «one which insists that there are more things in the universe than are dreamed of by the rationalist epistemologies and ontologies of science, the other which rejects the notion that calculative, procedural, formal rationality is always the “best way”» (Jenkins, 2000). However, the use of this concept to interpret this type of theories is problematic, as some recent studies have shown (Asprem, 2014; Togrimsson, 2017). We can certainly define as re-enchantment phenomena those pseudoscientific theories that suggest the possibility to contact dead by channeling, justifying this through the paradoxes of quantum mechanics, or that affirm the reality of the so-called near-death experiences. Here, however, we face two very different cases. The first, Lanza's Biocentrism, does not propose ways to get in touch with the afterlife or to experience directly the timelessness of the universe, so it is quite different from the typical attitude of New Age beliefs claiming the possibility to change reality through parascientific powers: Lanza simply proposes an interpretation of reality in the light of the discoveries of contemporary physics. Tipler's Omega Point theory is even more problematic: whereas Lanza, while imitating scientific language by proposing “postulates”, does not provide empirically testable predictions for his Biocentrism, Tipler instead tries to develop a real scientific theory, fully equipped with empirically testable predictions, such as the mass values, of the Higgs boson and the top quark, not yet known at that age, or the topology of the universe. However, some of these predictions have been later falsified, as we have seen, although Tipler attempted to take account of the new empirical results to redefine his theory.

Nor can we speak here of true pseudoscience. If we would be guided exclusively by Popper's principle of demarcation, we should conclude that Tipler's theory is in all respects scientific, especially if we consider that it has also been partly published in accredited scientific

journals⁴. But if we accept that the difference between “belief” and (scientific) “knowledge” consists in the fact that scientific knowledge will never be able to respond to questions pertaining to metaphysical beliefs, in particular on the existence of God, soul or afterlife (Bronner, 2004), then we must admit that Tipler’s theory is not an instrument of scientific knowledge. Alexandre Moatti (2013) proposed the concept of *alterscience* to define those heterodox theories of scientists who try to remain in the science, but proposing alternative theories to the accredited ones, for example to general relativity or quantum mechanics; here, however, we have two members of the scientific community who do not question any of the theoretical axioms and discoveries of contemporary science, but extend their assumptions. Nevertheless, some features of alterscience, such as the emphasis on a “holistic” science that overcomes the traditional division in compartments, or the belief that the explanations proposed by mainstream science are inadequate and that contemporary science is in an impasse, may be traced in the case of Lanza, whose theory of Biocentrism is proposed as an alternative to the mainstream explanation of the birth and evolution of the universe or quantum mechanics’ paradoxes.

Wolf-Meyer and Cochran (2015) recently proposed to use the concept of *minor science*, borrowed from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, for studying the quantum consciousness theories proposed by scientists such as Stuart Hameroff and Roger Penrose (1996). Minor science emerges within the scientific community as an attempt to extend traditional scientific research into “fringe” contexts, where the dominant scientific research by its very nature could not venture, with the aim of suggesting solutions to problems that emerge during the scientific progress, such as the role of the observer in quantum mechanics or the fine-tuning problem. Minor science is characterized by three elements: it is deterritorialized, that is, it employs scientific language but outside its traditional field of competence, for example employing concepts of physics and cosmology to propose a theory such as the Omega Point; it is intensely political, that is, it is opposed to the dominant science and starts from ethical assumptions, which it intends to defend (e.g., non-duality in the case of Lanza’s Biocentrism, which is opposed to the alleged dualism of Western science); third, minor science is “bachelor”, which means that it does not involve research groups or laboratories, but a limited number of individuals. Nonetheless, minor science operates in the context of scientific community, not outside it as in the case of pseudoscience. According to the authors, «as scientific disciplines continue toward specialization, some scientists see the opportunity to capitalize upon lacunae in thought to forward new scientific paradigms» (Wolf-Meyer & Cochran, 2015). This makes minor science a fertile ground for the sociology of scientific knowledge, thanks to its peculiar feature to be at the boundary between normal science, pseudoscience and borderland science (Shermer, 2013). The study of these theories in the light of new sociological and ethnological paradigms with respect to the more traditional concept of “re-enchantment” can aid us to better understand the complexity of the construction of scientific knowledge and the relations between scientific community and general public, especially considering the success of these theories within the popular science.

⁴ As Shermer (2013) suggests: «What makes them borderlands science instead of pseudoscience (or nonscience) is that the practitioners in the field are professional scientists who publish in peer-reviewed journals (...) From a pragmatic perspective, science is what scientists do».

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La rappresentazione della morte nell'islam: 'Izrā'il l'Angelo della Morte

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Abstract

Islamic eschatology has often focused on two features concerning death: the ineluctability and the fear it generates, especially among believers. This is one of the reasons for the attention paid to the Angel of Death, 'Izrā'il, and the vain attempts of humanity to escape from him, that has given rise to different elaborations, in religious and non-religious literature, still relevant in Muslim world. The attention to this literature and its representation is itself an instrument for deconstructing public discourses on death and Islam, often monopolized by jihadist martyrdom.

Keywords: 'Izrā'il, death, angels, Islam.

Introduzione

Il rapporto tra islam e morte è raramente trattato in letteratura¹ e, oggi, è spesso declinato nel discorso pubblico, influenzato dalle esperienze più recenti di eventi legati al jihadismo, sulla retorica e la pratica del martirio nei movimenti islamici più estremisti. Se la proposta di questi ultimi è essa stessa una parte estremamente limitata della più generale riflessione dell'islam sul martirio e sui martiri, l'escatologia islamica rappresenta un ambito di elaborazione teologica eterogeneo, che, nel tempo ha visto arricchirsi le descrizioni contenute nei Testi Sacri – Corano e Sunna – con contributi e suggestioni delle civiltà e delle culture che l'islam incontrava nel suo sviluppo secolare, influenzando anche la produzione letteraria e discorsiva non religiosa. Un elemento fondamentale di tale elaborazione è l'enfasi posta sull'ineluttabilità della morte, che, stabilita per decreto eterno di Dio, determina un particolare rapporto con l'esistenza quotidiana, quasi di ascesi intramondana, nonché con la morte stessa, temuta, perché improvvisa, anche da profeti e uomini di Dio.

La letteratura, religiosa e non, dell'universo di senso islamico, è stata, dunque, particolarmente prolifico nella descrizione di storie sull'incontro tra gli uomini e 'Izrā'il (o 'Azrā'il), l'Angelo della Morte, esecutore del decreto di Dio, incaricato, dunque, di staccare – momentaneamente – il soffio vitale dal corpo, in attesa della resurrezione, e, in particolare, dei tentativi vani degli uomini di evitare questo appuntamento.

L'articolo si concentra sulla rappresentazione della morte nel mondo musulmano, attraverso i racconti tradizionali, religiosi o non religiosi, e, in particolare, sulle narrazioni dei tentativi umani di sottrarsi all'estremo comando di dio, posponendo l'incontro con l'angelo, o, comunque, di gestire l'evento mortale, racconti che si ripetono declinandosi in modo diverso dai primi Secoli della storia temporale dell'islam fino all'epoca più contemporanea, quando la

¹ Una notevole eccezione è O'Shaughnessy's, T. (1969). *Muhammad's Thoughts on Death A Thematic Study of the Quranic Data*. Leiden: Brill.

figura di ‘Izrā’īl trova declinazioni letterarie, culturali e politiche peculiari, fino a rappresentare una possibile narrazione di resistenza al discorso pubblico dominante.

Morte e angelologia nell’islam

Due elementi sono fondamentali per comprendere la costruzione nelle tradizioni religiose e non religiose della morte, incarnata da ‘Izrā’īl, e del suo rapporto con l’umanità: la precipua concezione musulmana della morte e degli angeli. L’islam, infatti, introduce all’interno della società araba del VII secolo D.C. un’idea completamente nuova di morte, *mawt o wafāt*², che comporta una rinnovata relazione dell’uomo con essa. Nell’Arabia preislamica, infatti, la morte era considerata una manifestazione improvvisa del destino, tipica del solo mondo animato, che estingueva lo spirito vitale degli esseri viventi, pacificato dai vivi – dagli appartenenti alla stessa tribù – attraverso la vendetta, nel caso di morte violenta, o specifici riti funebri, nel caso di morte naturale. In questo senso, come sottolinea Abdesselem (1990), il tributo dei vivi e l’onore reso al dipartito erano più importanti della vita e la loro mancanza più temibile della morte.

L’islam, che sostituisce il vincolo tribale con quello di fede, introduce l’elemento della paura della morte, che appartiene a Dio, come la vita³ ed è dal suo decreto determinata. Vita e morte sono sacre⁴, ed è responsabilità individuale del singolo credente, pur parte della *umma*, rendere onore a Dio durante il proprio passaggio sulla terra, senza la certezza che tali azioni conducano necessariamente alla pacificazione e alla salvezza eterna, cui prima era necessaria la sola solidarietà tribale. La morte non è più la fine dello spirito, dunque, ma solo quella del tempo decretato (*adjal*) per l’uomo in questo mondo, un tempo di prova deciso da Dio. La paura della morte diventa, dunque, parte dell’essere credenti⁵ perché la relazione con essa è specchio della relazione stessa con Dio (Waardenburg, 2001). Tempo e luogo della morte sono stabiliti al momento della nascita, inseriti nello stesso seme vitale, e ogni essere vivente è destinato a “tornare” nel luogo decretato per la sua morte in un tempo preciso (MacDonald, 1964b).

Il decreto divino di fine della vita, come altre manifestazioni della volontà di Dio⁶, è eseguito da un messaggero, un angelo, *malak*, il cui ruolo nell’elaborazione teologica islamica è talmente rilevante che, come sottolinea Murata (1987), tutti i concetti di creazione, rivelazione, profezia, ma anche la vita spirituale e la vita materiale, la morte e la risurrezione, non possono essere compresi senza riferirsi a essi. La fede nell’esistenza degli angeli è, infatti, parte integrante del credo dell’islam⁷, e la loro negazione ontologica è segno di miscredenza, come recita il

2 *Mawt* ha il significato generale e comune di morte, mentre *wafāt*, letteralmente “compimento”, è un termine coranico, che più direttamente si riferisce al compiersi del tempo pre-determinato di un essere umano sulla terra e in epoca contemporanea è considerata un’espressione più raffinata e delicata per indicare il decesso (Abdesselem, 1990).

3 Il potere di dare la vita o la morte è, infatti, uno dei segni dell’onnipotenza divina, vedi Corano 25:58; 2:55-6; 15:29; 32:9; 38:72; 6: 162.

4 Vedi Corano 6, 98; 17:33.

5 I miscredenti, infatti, non hanno paura della morte e, solo quando la incontreranno, si pentiranno tardivamente (Corano 6:93; 33:19; 47:20; 56:83; 50:19), giacché la loro morte e la loro agonia sarà lunghissima (Corano 6:93).

6 Gli angeli sono, ad esempio, molto importanti rispetto alla rivelazione e all’esercizio della funzione profetica per via della relazione tra essi e lo spirito santo (Corano 16:102; 70:4; 97:4; 16:2). Sulla creazione e sulla natura degli angeli, sulla differenza con gli esseri umani vedi Webb, 2001.

7 Un ḥadīth riportato da al-Bukhārī (*Kitāb al-tafsīr*, Libro 65, n. 4777) recita: “Un giorno mentre l’Inviato di Dio era seduto con la gente un uomo arrivò e chiese “O Inviato di Dio che cos’è il credo?” e il Profeta disse “Il credo è credere in Dio, nei suoi angeli, nei suoi libri, nei suoi apostoli nell’incontro con Lui e nella Resurrezione”.

Corano (2: 98): “Chi è nemico di Dio e dei Suoi Angeli e dei Suoi profeti e di Gabriele e di Michele? Ebbene, per i miscredenti il nemico è Dio”⁸.

A differenza delle altre creature, essi sono creati dalla luce, sono completamente sommessi e obbedienti a Dio⁹, abitano il cielo e le sfere celesti e hanno sia una forma naturale, umana, che una forma sovrannaturale, la prima, tipicamente, di grande bellezza. Il Corano nomina solo pochi angeli direttamente, in particolare Jibrīl e Mīkā’īl¹⁰, mentre, più di frequente li cita facendo riferimento alle loro funzioni. Il loro numero, i loro nomi e le loro descrizioni più specifiche sono da ricercare, dunque, nella tradizione angelologica successiva. Ogni angelo ha, comunque, una e una sola funzione, nell'esercizio della quale crea un ponte tra questo mondo e quell'altro, tra Dio e l'uomo, tra la terra e il cielo. Tale funzione può riguardare sia elementi astratti (angelo della morte, angelo della vita, etc.); sia elementi naturali, testimonianza dell'influenza di Dio sul creato (angeli del vento, del fuoco etc.); sia eventi specifici della storia dell'islam (Angelo di Ḥasan e Ḥusayn); sia elementi del sacro musulmano (angelo della preghiera rituale; angelo dei riti funerari; angelo del Corano) (Burge, 2009).

Gli angeli più importanti, quelli più vicini a Dio, sono gli arcangeli (*ru’ūs al-malā’ika*), oltre ai già citati Jibrīl e Mīkā’īl, Isrāfīl e L'Angelo della Morte, *malak al-mawt*. Essi sono incaricati da Dio della gestione delle questioni delle creature e dell'ordine del cosmo: il primo è incaricato della rivelazione e della comunicazione, il secondo delle piogge e del nutrimento, il terzo suonerà le trombe alla fine del tempo¹¹, l'ultimo è il signore degli spiriti, incaricato di prendere il soffio vitale dagli uomini (MacDonald, 1964a). Secondo un ḥadīth di al-Suyūṭī, citato in Burge (2009), nel giorno della resurrezione i quattro arcangeli rimarranno vivi insieme ai 4 angeli portatori del trono di Dio (Corano 40:7; 69:17), e le loro anime saranno prese per ultime, prima Mīkā’īl, poi Isrāfīl, poi l'Angelo della Morte e, infine, Jibrīl.

Izrā’īl, l'Angelo della Morte

La presenza angelica nell'escatologia si declina in modo diversi, rispetto al giorno della resurrezione (Corano 25:22; 25:25), rispetto alla guardia delle anime (Corano 32:11), dell'inferno (Corano 66:6; 43:77) o del paradiso – rispettivamente Mālik e Riḍwān – rispetto alle punizioni per i peccatori. Due angeli, Munkar e Nakīr, visitano il morto la notte dopo la sepoltura. Pur avendo un aspetto terrificante, la pelle blu o nerissima, le voci tenebrose e lampi nello sguardo, non sono angeli diabolici, ma hanno la funzione specifica di interrogare il morto sulla sua fede, ponendo domande semplici, sulla *shahāda* – la professione di fede – e sulle pratiche cultuali fondamentali, senza poter giudicare, però, le azioni. L'interrogatorio nella tomba si configura, quasi come un passaggio preliminare verso il giudizio finale: coloro i quali non avranno soddisfatto gli angeli sono miscredenti, non avranno mai la possibilità di entrare in paradiso e il loro tempo nella tomba si trasformerà in un primo assaggio delle pene dell'inferno; i credenti, invece, aspetteranno, in pace, il giudizio sulle loro azioni che sono raccolte nel registro degli angeli registratori (Burge, 2009).

⁸ Le sure coraniche riportate nel testo fanno riferimento alla traduzione, curata da Ida Zilio-grande in Ventura, A. (a cura di) (2010). *Il Corano*. Milano: Mondadori

⁹ Sulla relazione tra angeli e peccato, e quindi sulla loro peccabilità o meno, vedi McDonald (1990).

¹⁰ Vedi sura 2:97-8; 2: 91, 92; 66: 4.

¹¹ Vedi Corano 39:68; 69:13.

Una figura più escatologica particolarmente rilevante è quella dell'angelo della morte, chiamato così dal Corano (32:11)¹² e nominato dalla tradizione religiosa ‘Izrā’īl¹³, il più saggio, astuto e crudele degli arcangeli, che, aiutato da angeli a lui subordinati¹⁴, porta via il soffio vitale dal corpo, in esecuzione del decreto di Dio.

È rappresentato in quasi tutte le tradizioni come una figura terrificante, sebbene alcuni autori sostengano che abbia due diverse forme, una bellissima, per i credenti, una spaventosa per i non credenti (Burge, 2009). ‘Izrā’īl è di un’ampiezza cosmica, tanto che se l’acqua di tutti i mari e i fiumi cadesse sulla sua testa non una goccia raggiungerebbe la terra. Ha un trono di luce – a seconda delle tradizioni nel quarto o nel settimo cielo – sul quale riposa uno dei suoi piedi, mentre l’altro poggia sul ponte tra paradiso e inferno¹⁵, anche se altre tradizioni religiose riferiscono che abbia 70.000 piedi. Come nella letteratura ebraica, ha 4.000 ali e il suo intero corpo è fatto di occhi e lingue, il cui numero dipende dal numero degli esseri viventi: ogni volta che un occhio si chiude, una creatura muore (Wensinck, 1997). L’est e l’ovest sono nelle sue mani, come un vassoio su cui tutte le cose sono disposte, perché mangi ciò che vuole, e gira nelle sue mani il destino degli uomini come si rimescolano i soldi nelle tasche (Lari, 2011). Egli ha, inoltre, quattro facce, una davanti, una dietro, una in cima alla testa e una ai piedi: con la prima prende le anime dei credenti, con la seconda quella dei non credenti, con la terza quelle dei profeti e degli angeli, con la quarta quella dei jinn (MacDonald, 1964b).

‘Izrā’īl diventa il *malak al-mawt* alla vigilia della creazione dell’uomo, quando Dio chiede a turno ai quattro arcangeli di prendere una manciata dei maggiori costituenti della terra. La terra, però, oppone resistenza, lamentandosi e scuotendosi e gli angeli non riescono a portare a termine il compito. Solo ‘Izrā’īl rimane indifferente ai lamenti della terra e, con forza, ne strappa un pugno per portarlo a Dio, che gli affida il compito importantissimo di prendere le anime. Proprio la sua mancanza di pietà ne determina, quindi, la funzione. Egli ha il compito irrevocabile, che svolge senza compassione, di strappare gli uomini da quello che conoscono e amano, per condurli verso quello che non conoscono e temono (MacDonald, 1964b). Tale compito gli è affidato di volta in volta da Dio, per cui l’angelo non conosce l’anima che andrà a prendere fino a che una foglia non cade dall’albero a fianco al Trono. Sulla foglia c’è il nome e la data della morte dell’individuo, che, a quel punto, è considerato già morto in cielo, mentre sulla terra rimarrà altri quaranta giorni. ‘Izrā’īl in quel momento conosce anche il destino dell’uomo il cui nome è segnato nel registro celeste se dannato, con un segno nero, se salvo, con un segno luminoso¹⁶ (MacDonald, 1964b). Egli può portare a termine il suo compito in diversi modi, attraverso la gola, la mano, una lancia avvelenata. Se muore un credente, l’angelo è a capo del letto e prende il suo spirito dolcemente, come se drenasse acqua dalla pelle e lo consegna ai suoi vicari, che lo portano nel più alto dei cieli, prima di posizionarlo nella tomba con il corpo; se muore un miscredente, invece, l’anima gli viene sottratta con forza, il cancello

12 “Dì: “L’angelo della morte, a voi preposto, vi farà morire e poi al vostro signore sarete ricondotti”.

13 Sull’identificazione del *malak al mawt* con ‘Izrā’īl, l’accordo degli studiosi musulmani è pressoché unanime. Solo parte di chi si riconosce nel wahhabismo, richiamando alcune tradizioni considerate più o meno autentiche, considera il nominare l’angelo, che il Corano richiama solo in relazione alla sua funzione, una pericolosa innovazione.

14 La presenza o meno di angeli della morte vicari non trova conferma nel Corano, ma la tradizione generalmente ritiene che ‘Izrā’īl si occupi direttamente delle sole anime dei profeti e degli uomini di Dio (Wensinck, 1997).

15 MacDonald (1964b) riferisce invece che secondo altre tradizioni uno dei suoi piedi è sulla caverna di Gehinnom e l’altro è su un trono nel Giardino dell’Eden.

16 Secondo un’altra tradizione due lacrime cadono dal Trono di Dio sul nome dello spirito del moribondo. Una è verde e una è bianca. La verde indica che l’uomo è dannato, la bianca che sarà salvato (MacDonald, 1964b).

del paradiso si chiude davanti a lei ed essa è rigettata con violenza nella tomba (Wensinck, 1997).

Fuggire la morte

L'elaborazione tradizionale rispetto agli angeli e alla morte ha dato origine a diverse declinazioni folkloristiche, in modo particolare nel caso di ‘Izrā’īl, la cui figura nella narrativa religiosa, così come nell'immaginario culturale, ha impersonificato nel tempo il tema centrale della paura e dell'ineluttabilità del decreto divino. Proprio per questo le tradizioni religiose e i racconti popolari si concentrano spesso sui tentativi degli uomini di sottrarsi alla scure dell'angelo, tentando di delegittimarla, chiedendo prove della non arbitrarietà della sua azione, o di sfuggire alla sottrazione dell'anima, recitando invocazioni, così che essa non possa uscire dalla bocca, o compiendo atti religiosi, in modo che non possa essere presa dalla mano (MacDonald: 1964b).

Un elemento tipico della tradizione religiosa è l'incontro tra l'angelo della morte e i Profeti, che, anche se più vicini a Dio, temono anch'essi la morte, dalla quale non possono comunque sottrarsi. Negli ahādīth di al-Suyūtī, raccolti e tradotti da Burge (2009), si narra, ad esempio, la storia, molto nota, di Mosè che, quando ‘Izrā’īl gli si presenta, lo schiaffeggia e gli cava un occhio. A quel punto, Dio, attraverso l'angelo, concede a Mosè di poter vivere tanti anni in più, quanti peli dei di una pelle di bue riesca a coprire con una mano. “E dopo cosa succederà?”, chiede Mosè. “La morte”, risponde l'angelo. “Allora preferisco che sia adesso”. Il Profeta Enoc, volendo contrattare più tempo, chiede a un suo amico angelo di condurlo sulle sue ali direttamente dall'angelo della morte: questi, però, gli risponde che il suo nome è stato già cancellato e che non gli rimane che un battito di ciglia, così che Enoc muore tra le ali dell'angelo. Abramo, invece, chiede all'angelo della morte di poter incontrare direttamente Dio. Giunto al suo cospetto si lamenta: “Mi sono preoccupato quando gli hai comandato di prendermi l'anima”. Ma l'angelo della morte gli prende l'anima, comunque, attraverso il respiro.

I racconti più emozionanti riguardano l'incontro con Muḥammad, durante il quale l'angelo della morte si dimostra particolarmente rispettoso, mentre il Profeta, esempio del comportamento umano, pur sofferente e spaventato, accetta il volere di Dio. In un ḥadīth, l'angelo arriva nella casa del Profeta malato, mentre giace con la testa poggiata su suo genero e cugino, ‘Alī ibn Abī Tālib. Questi lo caccia senza riconoscerlo, ma Muḥammad lo fa entrare chiedendogli di far venire Jibrīl. Solo quando quest'ultimo sarà arrivato, ‘Izrā’īl tornerà a prendergli l'anima. In un altro racconto è Jibrīl che nel giorno della morte annuncia al Profeta l'arrivo dell'angelo della morte: “Egli chiede il permesso di entrare nella tua casa. Non ha mai chiesto il permesso di visitare nessun uomo, né lo chiederà mai più”. Muḥammad lo fa entrare e l'angelo della morte dice: “Dio mi ha mandato da te e mi ha comandato di obbedirti; se mi comandi di prendere la tua anima, allora la prenderò; se non vuoi, io la lascerò.” Costui risponde: “Fallò, angelo della morte”.

Le tradizioni popolari hanno elaborato gli elementi più peculiari di queste storie in narrazioni molto fantasiose e spesso ironiche, che, però, restituiscono al lettore temi tipici della rappresentazione della morte, l'ineluttabilità, i tentativi umani di sottrarvisi, l'impersonalità di ‘Izrā’īl. Una di queste, raccolta insieme ad altri racconti mitici da Hanauer ai primi del '900¹⁷, narra che l'angelo della morte, avendo peccato, viene condannato da Dio a un ciclo di vita

¹⁷ Il testo è qui stato consultato nella sua riedizione del 2002.

mortale, senza, però, venir meno al suo dovere primario. Egli, sulla terra, si sposa con una donna cattiva, ha un figlio e diventa un famoso medico. Giunto alla fine del suo passaggio, rivela al figlio la sua identità, promettendogli che avrebbe provveduto al suo futuro, aiutandolo nella pratica medica: qualora avesse visto il padre a capo letto di un paziente, questi sarebbe morto inevitabilmente, viceversa avrebbe potuto salvarlo. Il figlio di ‘Izrā’īl diventò, così, molto famoso, ma essendo un libertino, spese tutto quello che aveva guadagnato. Un giorno, fu chiamato da un ricco notabile malato e vedendo il padre a capo letto, ne dichiarò la morte vicina. L'uomo ricco si gettò ai suoi piedi, promettendogli metà dei suoi averi se lo avesse salvato. Il medico fu tentato e disse che se gli avesse dato i tre quarti della sua fortuna, indipendentemente dall'esito, avrebbe provato a curarlo. A quel punto pregò il padre di allontanarsi dalla testa del letto, ma ‘Izrā’īl non rispose. Chiamò quattro uomini forti per girare il letto, ma ‘Izrā’īl si muoveva con esso. Tentò allora di spaventare il padre, dicendo che la madre stava arrivando. L'angelo scappò e l'uomo si salvò. L'Angelo della morte, però, non apparì mai più al figlio e la fama di quest'ultimo cominciò a declinare. Un giorno, mentre era al funerale di un suo paziente, vide suo padre sulla porta di una grotta, che gli disse che, avendolo distolto dai suoi doveri, la sua vita era stata accorciata e di lì a pochi minuti sarebbe morto. Il figlio lo implorò di non farlo e ‘Izrā’īl gli rispose di non poterlo aiutare, a meno che lui non aiutasse se stesso, e lo invitò nel suo ufficio. Entrati entrambi nella grotta, attraversarono sette stanze, sulle pareti delle quali c'erano bottiglie, urne e scatole, che contenevano la descrizione di come ogni essere umano sarebbe dovuto morire. Poi attraversarono un'altra stanza, in cui c'erano miriadi di lampade di varia forma e grandezza. Alcune bruciavano forte, altre debolmente, altre ancora si stavano spegnendo “Sono le vite degli uomini: è Jibrīl che le riempie e da loro luce, ma non ci presta molta attenzione: vedi ha lasciato una tanica di olio dove sei tu.” Il figlio chiese: “Dov’è la mia lampada?”. L'angelo gliela indicò e si avviò all’uscita. “Padre ti prego riempila!”. “Non è il mio compito! Io però non ti prenderò la vita subito, andrò prima a togliere dall'altra stanza alcune lampade che si sono spente”. Il figlio guardando la sua fiamma morente, prese la tanica di olio e tentò di riempire la lampada, ma questa gli cadde. L'angelo della morte, rientrando, vide la lampada spenta e il figlio correre verso l'apertura della caverna, dove fu trovato il suo corpo morto. “Stupido figlio” pensò “che vuole interferire con il lavoro degli angeli. In ogni caso non può dire che l'abbia ucciso io”.

La storia di Salomone e ‘Izrā’īl: da Rūmī a Satrapī

Una delle storie più note rispetto alla morte e alla sua inevitabilità è quella di Salomone e ‘Izrā’īl, presente nella letteratura musulmana e non musulmana¹⁸, che si colloca proprio all’incrocio tra tradizione religiosa e tradizione popolare. La storia è basata su un ḥadīth generalmente non considerato autentico, in quanto la sua catena di trasmissione non raggiunge il Profeta. Tutte le versioni islamiche della storia si riferiscono, infatti, a due narratori di ahādīth: Shahr Ibn Hawshab e Dāwūd b. Abī Hind, il primo dei quali, morto nel 730, pur considerato un buon trasmittitore di ahādīth, rappresenterebbe in effetti la fonte primaria del racconto (Al Garrallah, 2016).

Le fonti religiose musulmane e i maggiori commentari la includono, però, come esemplificazione dell’ineluttabilità del decreto divino, cui non è possibile sottarsi. Essa è presente anche nell’antologia di uno degli imam delle quattro scuole giuridiche classiche

18 Per riferimenti sulla presenza di questo racconto in altre tradizioni religiose o culturali vedi Sánchez e Hanauer (2002).

dell'islam, il *Kitāb Al-Zuhd* (Libro dell'astinenza) di Ahmad ibn Hanbal (780-855). In altre esegezi coraniche, come quella di Abū l-Qāsim Mahmūd ibn ‘Umar al-Zamakhsharī (1074-1143) è considerata un aneddoto che chiarisce il versetto 34 della sura 31: “La scienza dell'ora è presso Dio, Egli fa discendere la pioggia sul mondo, Egli conosce quello che è nel ventre delle madri, ma nessun uomo conosce quel che l'indomani porterà, nessun uomo conosce in quale terra dovrà morire. Dio sa tutto, è informato di tutto”.

La storia è poi ripresa da al-Ghazālī (1058-1111) ne *al-Tibr Al-Masbūk fī Nasīhat Al-Mūlk*, un libro di consigli per i re, ma la versione che più ha contribuito alla sua diffusione, e alla sua trasformazione in un canovaccio sul quale sono intessute diverse rappresentazioni della morte in generale e nell'islam particolare, è quella narrata dal poeta sufi Jalāl ad-Dīn Muḥammad Rūmī (1207-1273), nel *Mathnawī*, qui ripresa dalla traduzione di Reynolds (1960) e intitolata “Come ‘Izrā’īl guardò un uomo e come quest'uomo scappò al palazzo di Salomone; e dello stabilire la superiorità della fiducia in Dio rispetto allo sforzo e alla sua inutilità”.

Un giorno un uomo nobile arrivò nella sala della giustizia di Salomone. Il suo viso era pallido per l'angoscia e aveva entrambe le labbra blu. Allora Salomone disse: “Signore, qual è il problema?” Rispose: “‘Izrā’īl mi ha lanciato uno sguardo pieno di rabbia e odio”. “Vieni” disse il re “che cosa desideri ora? Chiedilo!” “O protettore della mia vita” disse lui “comanda il vento di portarmi in India. Forse, quando ritornerà, il tuo schiavo avrà salva la vita”. Vedi, le persone fuggono dalla povertà: quindi preda di bramosia e aspirazioni. La paura della povertà è come il terrore di quell'uomo: sappi che la cupidigia e l'impegno sono come l'India. Salomone comandò al vento di portarlo rapidamente sopra l'acqua fino alla parte più estrema dell'India. Il giorno dopo, Salomone disse a ‘Izrā’īl: “Hai guardato con rabbia quel musulmano in modo che vagasse esiliato dalla sua casa?”. ‘Izrā’īl rispose: “Quando l'ho guardato con rabbia? L'ho visto mentre passavo e l'ho guardato stupito, poiché Dio mi aveva comandato, dicendo: “Ascolta, oggi prendi il suo spirito in India”. Ero meravigliato e mi sono detto “Avesse 100 ali, è un viaggio troppo lungo per arrivare oggi in India”

Così giudica tutti gli affari di questo mondo, apri gli occhi e guarda! Da chi dovremmo fuggire? Da noi stessi? Oh, assurdità! Da chi dobbiamo fuggire? Da Dio? Oh, crimine!

La storia, che anche nel racconto di Rūmī è un espediente narrativo per ricordare l'impossibilità di sfuggire a se stessi e a Dio, è diventata nel tempo un modo tipico di rappresentazione della morte dell'islam, all'incrocio tra la paura della morte, la necessità di confrontarsi con essa, e l'ineluttabilità e l'incertezza, tanto che è stata ripresa più o meno fedelmente nelle tradizioni letterarie del mondo arabo islamico, ma anche in altri contesti. Sanchez, ad esempio, ne traccia la presenza in opere europee nella novella di Jean Cocteau (1889- 1963), *Le grand écart* (1923), nel *Death and the gardener* (1926) di Pieter van Eyck (1887-1954) (1926), *Trece fábulas y media* (1981) di Juan Benet (1927-1993), fino all'opera dello scrittore statunitense Paul Theroux *Elefanta Suite* (2007). Rispetto al mondo anglofono, Al-Garrallah (2016) si concentra, sulla recezione della storia nella letteratura anglo-sassone, sottolineando, peraltro, il non riconoscimento della sua origine islamica, malgrado il fatto che molti poeti del XIX secolo l'abbiano direttamente tradotta o comunque adattata, tra questi Leigh Hunt, Edwin Arnold, James William Redhouse in Inghilterra; Richard Chenevix Trench in Irlanda; Henry Wadsworth Longfellow e Edward Willard Watson negli Stati Uniti.

Una rappresentazione interessante di ‘Izrā’īl che richiama direttamente alla fiaba di Rūmī pur nel quadro di un diverso rapporto con la morte, si trova nel lavoro grafico *Pouelet aux prunes* (2004) di Marjane Satrapi, fumettista, sceneggiatrice e regista iraniana, naturalizzata francese, che ha raggiunto la notorietà con la novella grafica *Persepolis* (I ed. 2000).

La novella è ambientata nel 1953, durante la restaurazione del potere degli *shah* seguita alla deposizione da parte della CIA e dei servizi segreti britannici del Primo Ministro nazionalista Muhammad Mossadeq¹⁹. La scelta temporale di un romanzo che scorre sullo sfondo di un Iran perduto e delle forme di resistenza soggettiva alle ideologie dominanti – vero tema racconto – è particolarmente significativa: il rovesciamento di Mossadeq rappresenta da un lato uno dei maggiori tradimenti dell'Occidente rispetto alle istanze dei paesi dell'area, e nello stesso tempo prepara la strada alla Rivoluzione Islamica che sarebbe avvenuta più di vent'anni dopo e che, velatamente, si respira nel romanzo.

Il protagonista della storia è un musicista, Nasser Ali, che non riuscendo più a trovare un *tar* che gli desse gioia, dopo che la moglie aveva rotto quello che suonava abitualmente, decide di lasciarsi morire. L'autrice dunque segue gli ultimi otto giorni della vita del musicista, tra nostalgia per un passato ormai perso, proiezioni del futuro, tentativi di suonare – e, quindi, di riapprocciarsi alla vita – rivendicazioni, litigi, abbandoni, ricordi di un amore incompiuto.

Per quanto riguarda la morte, Nasser Ali, non determina un modo nel quale morirà, ma decide già il primo giorno di attendere che fosse lei a sopraggiungere. ‘Izrā’īl arriva, in effetti, il sesto giorno, con un mantello nero e lunghe corna. Nasser Ali, per quanto lo attendesse, si spaventa, cerca di scappare, ma poi si abbandona a quello che crede sia il suo destino, invocando Dio. Ma la sua ora non è giunta, perché l'angelo è venuto solo per conoscere chi lo invocava da quasi una settimana.

È ‘Izrā’īl stesso a narrare la storia di Salomone, ma non per ricordare l'inevitabilità della morte, ma semplicemente per esemplificare come spesso incontra gli uomini senza che necessariamente sia la loro ora. D'altra parte, Nasser Ali, non cerca di sfuggire alla morte, come invece aveva tentato di fare alla morte della madre, credendo di trattenerla con le preghiere, ma di andarle incontro. Anche in questo caso, però, la morte è di Dio e in nessun modo il tempo si può manipolare. Nasser Ali morirà due giorni dopo. Al suo funerale insieme alla famiglia, agli amici, ai musicisti, c'è anche ‘Izrā’īl, che, impassibile o forse severo, guarda la donna che il musicista aveva a lungo amato: l'ultima tavola lascia il dubbio se sia lì per prenderne l'anima attraverso il cuore spezzato, se la rimproveri per non averlo salvato, o se si tratti di un incontro casuale, come nella storia di Salomone.

Conclusioni: Izrā’īl e la rappresentazione contemporanea della morte nell'islam

La figura di ‘Izrā’īl, all'incrocio tra religione e tradizione, è ancora oggi centrale nella rappresentazione della morte nell'universo di senso musulmano e non solo, incarnando di volta in volta i dilemmi umani, la paura e l'attrazione per l'Aldilà, la possibilità e la volontà effettiva di essere padroni della propria esistenza, tra scelta e destino, Dio e terra, restituendo, pur nella continuità degli espedienti narrativi, la complessità del pensiero islamico sulla morte. Il racconto

19 Due anni prima, nel 1951, il giorno dopo essere stato eletto questi aveva nazionalizzato il petrolio iraniano, provocando il boicottaggio commerciale della Gran Bretagna, che prima controllava la risorsa attraverso l'Anglo-iranian Oil Company e aveva iniziato una serie di provvedimenti per limitare il potere economico e politico degli *shah*, e assicurare una forma di redistribuzione delle risorse ai più poveri. Isolato dalle élite divenne sempre più autoritario e si alienò anche l'appoggio della popolazione e del partito comunista, quando sedò nel sangue la richiesta popolare per l'istaurazione della repubblica. Gran Bretagna e USA decisero di intervenire, deponendo Mossadeq (che morirà agli arresti domiciliari nel 1967) e ridando il potere in mano ad una monarchia sempre più dittatoriale, che eliminò tutte le riforme dell'ex Primo Ministro, tranne la nazionalizzazione del petrolio, i cui proventi continuarono a essere usate per la corte e per una modernizzazione infrastrutturale gestita dalle potenze straniere (Campanini, 2017).

stesso di tale complessità rappresenta, in questo senso, una contro-narrazione importante, rispetto allo schiacciamento comunicativo e ideologico dell'esperienza islamica della morte sul solo martirio jihadista. La mediatizzazione degli eventi legati all'islamizzazione della radicalizzazione in Europa così come delle esecuzioni sommarie praticate dai militanti del *daesh*, soprattutto quando tra il 2014 e il 2017 si espresso all'interno di una dimensione territoriale, hanno contribuito a costruire l'immagine di un islam che ricerca la morte – preferibilmente violenta e su una presunta via di Dio – nella certezza di una ricompensa futura. Questo da un lato, ha impedito la comprensione degli elementi propri dell'elaborazione escatologica, tra cui la paura e l'inevitabilità, su cui il saggio si concentra, che, come rilevato, hanno una continuità importante nella rappresentazione culturale della morte, dall'altro ha sostenuto anche in questo caso la costruzione dell'islam come universo monolitico, immutabile, inerentemente *altro*, nemico.

I jihadisti del sedicente “califfato” hanno finito per occupare tutto lo spazio discorsivo sull'islam e sui musulmani, appropriandosi della definizione e della legittimazione di significati e significanti. Forse per questo è particolarmente rilevante l'utilizzo simbolico della figura di ‘Izrā’īl anche nella contrapposizione pratica al *daesh*, proprio dove essa è più pervasiva. In Iraq, recentemente, infatti, ha raggiunto una certa popolarità²⁰, un combattente delle milizie sciite, impegnate nell'arginare lo stato islamico, che si fa chiamare Abu Azrael, padre dell'angelo della morte. Al di là dell'effettiva identità del personaggio – alcuni dicono sia un ricercatore, altri un campione di taekwondo, o un insegnante di educazione fisica.;, altri che sia un uomo comune, padre di 5 figli, o un uomo dei servizi segreti altamente formato – è interessante notare come nella sua autonarrazione ed eteronarrazione siano utilizzati alcuni elementi tipici della rappresentazione dell'angelo della morte, esemplificando come essa possa essere considerata una resistenza simbolica alle narrative dominanti: Abu Azrael, infatti, non conosce compassione né pietà – nei confronti dei miliziani jihadisti – come dimostrano le immagini delle decapitazioni; in modo impassibile compie il destino stabilito per i suoi nemici; è spesso ritratto con una scure alle mani; e, come ‘Izrā’īl in molte delle narrazioni tradizionali, è ironico.

20 La sua fama è spesso ricondotta alla specifica capacità mediatica Iraniana. Su questo, per esempio, vedi www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-31913278.

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Transformation of Death in Postmodern Russian Fairy Tale Retellings

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the changes in the traditional character of death – Koschei the Deathless – retrieved by Catherynne Valente from the Russian fairy tales and incorporated in her novel *Deathless* (2011). As a postmodern fairy tale reinterpretation, the novel supplies a modified plot along with the substantial changes in fairytale characters. In particular, this paper observes how the character of death changes from a black-and-white villain to a complex, morally ambiguous protagonist. Literary analysis and comparison focuses on several points such as romanticising and humanizing death, change of its function and purpose, as well as adding political criticism.

Keywords: death, transformation, fairy tale retelling, Koschei, postmodernism

Introduction

Death has always been a natural part of life. Everything living eventually dies; a fact, which humanity has been trying to digest, oppose or accept since it has realized there is no escaping death. There is so much and so little known about it; medicine helped to postpone it, psychology to understand the mind of the sick and dying, and yet, the mystery surrounding death has remained intriguing up to modern times.

It has traditionally been fairy tales, folk tales and later fantasy and horror novels which have worked with the curious darkness surrounding death. In the past, when humans did not have access to modern findings about the human body, death was frequently mystified and personified and has been proven a grateful literary trope to work with. Portrayals of death as a skeleton, a woman, a god or a goddess, an angel and many more can be found in almost all ancient myths and religions, whether we look at the Greek *Thanatos*, Norwegian *Hel* or Chinese *Yama*:

In this manner, death, too, rather than remaining shapeless and chaotically threatening, is made concrete and visible by our creative imagination. Such image-making, such interpretation through personification, occurs on all levels of consciousness, in all cultures, in all times that have left record (Guthke, 1999, p. 10).

Centuries later, many authors such as Terry Pratchett, Jose Saramago, Neil Gaiman or Tanith Lee became inspired by the portrayal of death and have reworked the myth anew in order to appease the modern reader.

This article focuses on death as perceived by Russian folklore and its further reinterpretation found in the novel *Deathless* (2011) by Catherynne M. Valente. Traditionally, Russian folklore portrayed death as an individual named *Koschei* - an immortal villain of ugly

appearance, abducting Russian fairy tale heroines. Koschei commonly had only negative personality traits and generally Slavic folklore depicted him as a skeleton, referring to the name having origin close to the word “bone.”

Catherynne Valente borrows the personified character of Russian death and significantly reworks it in her novel. The article addresses this reinterpretation with purpose to determine how the postmodern portrayal of death differs from the traditional portrayal in this limited cultural example. The literary analysis is based on the comparison of the novel *Deathless* with myths that the novel draws from. The aim of the article is to focus on the conversion of the image of death from a mythical representation to fiction highlighting changes such as romanticising death, elimination of death’s negative traits, addition of human attributes to death, life and death opposition or political aspects of personified death.

Death and Postmodern Reinterpretations

Death has been a popular character in various cultures. A figure of death has not been limited to mythology and literature only - death appeared in popular films as well, such as *Collateral Beauty* (2016) or *Meet Joe Black* (1998). The portrayals of death in popular culture differ according to the given author, nevertheless, our focus is on the personifications of death, or the instances, when death takes human (like) form.

Personification of death has been present since ancient religions, where gods and goddesses of death were worshipped in many different cultures. Although some cultures worshipped gods of death that are similar in nature or appearance (such as *Hades* in Greek mythology and *Pluto* in Roman mythology (Coulter & Turner, 2012, p. 201)), generally there have been observed great differences in the appearance, character, nature, gender and even number of these gods. For example, some religions relate the god of death being equivalent to “god of war, intelligence, and poetry” (Coulter & Turner, 2012, p. 357) as in case of *Odin*, or *Shiva*, who “is a creator god, moon god of the mountains, god of agriculture, fertility god, lord of the cosmic dance, god of the arts and learning, god of truth, god of luck, god of the rivers, god of the forests, god of death...” (Coulter & Turner, 2012, p. 427). In a more narrow perception relating to death only, there is *Thanatos* depicted with wings, sword and wearing a black robe (Coulter & Turner, 2012), Mexican *Tokakami* “described as black and blood-smeared who come from the underworld to devour the Indians” (Coulter & Turner, 2012, p. 471) or the Celtic goddess of death *Badb Catha* “usually depicted as a crow, sometimes as a bear, wolf, cow, a foul hag, a gigantic woman, or a beautiful young woman” (Coulter & Turner, 2012, p. 89).

It appears so many cultures have given death a face along with certain personality traits, behavior trends, and even motives that is it impossible to list them all. Postmodern literature has often used the opportunity to gain inspiration from the old myths, creating reinterpreted stories along with renewed characters. The popular fantasy series for children *Percy Jackson & the Olympians* by Rick Riordan uses Greek gods as characters, and gods from various religions appear in many other novels by authors such as Steven Erikson (*Malazan Book of the Fallen*), Neil Gaiman (*American Gods*) or Terry Pratchett (*Discworld*).

The common trait of these works is that they take an old myth and strip it bare, leaving only its essence. The author then builds the character anew, giving it personality, motives, aims and desires. For example, *Death* (male) in Pratchett’s world is “a seven-foot skeleton in a

hooded black cloak who carries a scythe, rides a white horse (named Binky), and always speaks in capital letters; Death has an abiding fascination with humans” (Hinds, 2014, p. 2). On the other hand, the Spanish author José Saramago’s *Death* is female, with an ability to change shape, sending letters to humans who are supposed to die a week after receiving one. There is no limit as how to imagine death and the discussion ranges from “Why is Grim reaper a man?” (Guthke, 1999, p. 7) to death being a lover: “Death the lover is an even more common motif the world over” (Guthke, 1999, p. 12).

Reinterpretation as such is a widespread trend in postmodern literature. Just as an example, there are numerous reinterpreted *Beauty and the Beast(s)* (by Robin McKinley, 1978, Cameron Dokey, 2008, or Victoria Leybourne, 2017), and classic literature has not escaped this tendency either, manifesting in *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (Seth Grahame-Smith, 2009), *Alice in Zombieland* (Nickolas Cook, 2011) or *Sense and Sensibility and Sea Monsters* and *Android Karenina* (Ben H. Winters, 2009 and 2010).

Taking an old idea and reworking it into something new is one of the main traits of postmodern literature. Reinterpretation, or “the action of interpreting something in a new or different light” (Oxford Dictionary, 2018) is a reaction to postmodernism’s refusal of originality and authenticity. Kušnír says that

postmodern literary work does not pretend to be new and original, but uses the old literary forms, genres, and kinds of literature and art, kitsch, quotation, allusion and other means to recontextualize their meaning in a different linguistic and cultural context to show a difference between the past and present as well as between the past and present forms of representation. (Kušnír, 2011, p. 28)

In other words, postmodernism gives traditional ideas a fresh breath or a new point of view.

Transformations: for better or worse

Appearance

The contemporary depiction of death in Russia is that of a female in a black cloak with a scythe - the word “death” in Russia is female as well (Tolstaya, 2012, p. 58-71). However, it does not mean that the female is the only personification of death in this culture. In mythology, death was associated with other prominent characters too, such as Koschei. In the course of time, the older image of a great villain was worn out during the multiple adaptations, but the original meaning of Koschei was frightful: he would stand high in the hierarchy of the underworld, respected for his wisdom and the domains he owned.

Vasmer’s Etymology Dictionary, one of the most respected dictionaries on Slavic etymology, explains the word “Koschei” as a “thin, lean person, a walking skeleton” or a “miser” (Vasmer, 1986, p. 362), both characteristics being relevant, because traditional fairytale Koschei was skeleton-like and owned significant riches: “There’s King Kashchey, o’er his gold withered” (Pushkin, 1820). Vasmer gives another meaning of “koschei” as borrowed from the Turkic “Košči,” i.e. a slave (Vasmer, 1986, p. 362). However, Kalashnikov (2017) rejects the latter meaning wondering how Koschei could be anyone’s slave and how a typical Slavic myth could adopt a Turkic name for its character implying that “bone” is probably a more likely etymology.

In other sources, we encounter similar descriptions of a unlikable, unappealing and frightening figure: “in legend Koschei is most often described as ugly, and he enjoyed riding naked upon his enchanted horse through the mountains of Russia” (Winters, 2015, p. 1). It would seem that his ugliness is a prominent feature along with his villainy.

All these elements are removed in Valente’s depiction of Koschei. The character’s appearance is completely reimagined; there is no longer a skeleton-resembling man, but rather a “handsome young man in a handsome black coat, his dark hair curly and thick, flecked with silver, his mouth half-smiling” (Valente, 2011, p. 55). Although still evoking fear, references to his physical beauty are found repeatedly: “Koschei Bessmertny, is so handsome that he could lend a cup of his beauty to every man in Yaichka and still charm the bark from his dogs” (Valente, 2011, p. 55).

The removal of the traditional ugly appearance can be found in different mythological creatures; in postmodern literature, vampires, zombies or werewolves are often portrayed as attractive. In a similar fashion, Koschei becomes more attractive and appealing to the reader, resembling a romantic character more than a fairy tale villain.

Romanticisation

Romanticizing negative characters is by no means a new trend in literature. It has affected several mythological or fictional creatures, such previously mentioned as vampires, werewolves or zombies. Death has been no exception in popular culture, having often been reworked into a character that is misunderstood, lonely, positive or emphatic (see Terry Pratchett’s *Mort*). In fact, romanticising death as an act, including suicide or murder, has been also popular. Saul in his study of German romanticism acknowledges that “love and death was equally firm outside Germany” (2009, p. 165) and as stated by Freud, human beings have a desire to live or love and to die (*Eros and Thanatos*). The combination results in the peculiar merging of the morbid and the attractive.

In a similar fashion, Valente romanticizes the previously morbid. In addition, the originally unappealing and evil nature of Koschei is reimagined, although the level of romanticizing is less obvious. In the traditional portrayal of the character, Koschei abducts Russian princesses and fights with the hero: “And he came up with the fair Princess Marya Morevna as she was going her way, laid hold of her and carried her off home with him” (Lang, 2008, p. 43). In Valente’s portrayal, Koschei loses the negative aspect of his personality, becoming less evil, but more complex. This complexity corresponds with what Joosen calls characterisation, or expanding the features of traditionally black and white characters. Consequently, the black-and-white aspect is limited or lost and the focus shifts to psychological development of the characters: “The reader is given access to the inner lives of round and complex characters” (Joosen, 2011, p. 15).

Valente’s Koschei has lost the evil aspect completely. His portrayal as an evil villain as found in the Russian fairy tales does not correspond with the reimagined version of himself. The elements that make him evil are missing; there is no abduction nor evil intentions. Koschei gains positive features as well; he is sinister, but caring: “He placed honey on her tongue, and pear jelly, and brown, moist sugar” (Valente, 2011, p. 67).

Humanization and Relationships

Both fairy tale and mythological portrayals depict Koschei as a monster. As previously mentioned, this depiction is not present in Valente's version and the character is greatly humanized. The monstrous aspect is lost; Koschei no longer resembles a demon or a god of death. The loss of the black and white characterization and the complexity of the character's psychology allow the development of relationships with other characters. Originally, Koschei has no relationships at all - whether romantic, friendly or family relations. He serves as a supernatural force that is usually defeated with a clever trick.

The only interactions he originally has are in the form of kidnapping and fighting: "Then he took Marya Morevna from him, and carried her off" (Lang, 2008, p. 45) and "Koshchei [...] chopped him into little pieces, put them into a barrel, smeared it with pitch and bound it with iron hoops, and flung it into the blue sea" (Lang, 2008, p. 46). These interactions with other characters are only negative, depicting Koschei as a plain villain essential for the nature of fairy tale.

The reinterpretation, however, deepens the layer of the relationships aspect significantly. Koschei is attributed the ability to have romantic and family relationships. His family, the notorious Baba Yaga, is portrayed as his sister, having "Koschei, my insatiable brother" (Valente, 2011, p. 108). The relationship of the siblings is tense, one attempting to control the other: "Family is a thorny, vicious business, and Koschei can't marry without my say-so" (Valente, 2011, p. 108).

Perhaps the most interesting and most developed is the aspect of romantic relationships. In mythology, Koschei is said to have abducted princesses, but he was always defeated in the end. There were no elaborations regarding a relationship between him and any princess. In *Deathless*, Koschei actually becomes a husband to Marya Morevna: "Among the other things Yaichka possesses is a short, wide house where Marya Morevna lives with her husband" (Valente, 2011, p. 292). The marriage comes with aspects of romanticism, sexuality and infidelity. The marital relationships of Koschei and Marya are anything but regular for both of them explore on the opportunities outside their relationships while being strongly attached to each other in the struggle to dominate in their house: "Just remember that the only question in a house is who is to rule" (Valente, 2011, p. 58). Unlike the traditional Koschei, Valente's character is highly dependent on Marya allowing her anything in exchange for the promise of being together:

Let us be greedy together; let us hoard. Let us hit each other with birch branches and lock each other in dungeons; let us drink each other's blood in the night and betray each other in the sun. Let us lie and lust and take hundreds of lovers; let us dance until snow melts beneath us... Only do not leave me, swear that you will never leave me, and no empress will stand higher (Valente, 2011, p. 162).

In this manner, Koschei, too, becomes more human, through being allowed relationships. No longer emotionally distant and plain, he gains new depths that allow the reader to perceive a developed, complex character.

Function and Purpose

One of the most striking differences between the original Koschei and Valente's reinventions is the function of the character. Gavrilov and Nagovitsyn support the idea that in the past, Koschei was similar to Karachun, the demon of winter, who was also associated with death: "Very likely that Koschei could personify the frost which "drags" the life powers from the nature and human and kills them" (Gavrilov & Nagovitsyn, 2002, p. 262). Indeed, he knows sorcery and is capable of killing the living beings: "In some versions of fairy tales, Koschei turns his opponents into stone" (*ibid.*).

Koschei of the Russian fairy tales was still closely associated with death, but another characteristic of him came to fore - that is his immortality. In tales, he would abduct beautiful princesses and present himself for the hero to prevail over him. Despite a rather trite image of the fairytale Koschei, he still remains the most fearful character, the master of all the villains, the antonym of life who cannot stand the "Russian spirit" (Afanashev, n.d.).

The only aspect maintained from mythology and fairy tales is the immortality, through which Valente recreates Koschei in a complete opposition to its original version. Though still frightful, he represents life instead of death: "Koschei is the Tsar of Life" (Valente, 2011, p. 191). This opposition manifests in Koschei's constant fight against death. Himself being immortal, he is bound to stay alive while he fulfills his purpose of fighting death:

To be Deathless is to treat with death in every moment. To stave death is not involuntary, like breathing, but a constant tension, like balancing a glass on the head. And each day the Tsar of Life fought in his own body to keep death down like a chastened dog (Valente, 2011, p. 91).

Even the original association with the winter demon Karachun was taken away from him. In the novel, this function was given to the General Frost: "Ask anyone, and you will be told that Russia's greatest military man is General Frost. He whips our enemies with ice and freezes their guns in their paws and sends out his dogs" (Valente, 2011, p. 274).

Though Valente completely changed the character of Koschei from the embodiment of death into a protector of life, death is not removed from the story but assumed by another character who is also present in the Russian mythology - that is Koschei's brother Viy, "whose eyelids go down to the earth, and they had to be opened - and then nothing could escape his sight" (Afanashev, 1996, p. 238). There is a lot of proximity between the brothers both in the mythology and in the novel. Some sources suggest that Koschei and Viy were originally two of the three sons of the notorious Chernobog, the ruler of Nav', the Kingdom of the Dead, where both had their own dominions.

Valente moved Koschei from the mythical Kingdom of the Dead to a fairytale location - the isle of Buyan, the "Country of Life" with the fortress Chernosvyat in the heart of it. Unlike typical depictions of Buyan as a place full of miracles, Koschei's residence is nevertheless a dark place: "in the deepest, most hidden room of the Chernosvyat, whose ossified cupolas shone here and there... Koschei the Deathless sat on his throne of onyx and bone" (Valente, 2011, p. 89), and the first encounters with the place give a chill as "the fountains of warm blood" (Valente, 2011, p. 145) gurgle around the palace.

Viy was a less prominent character in the Russian mythology, but he instilled as much fear as his brother did. In Valente's novel, Viy has a land of his own - Silver country, which gets rich when humans wage big wars or spill brotherly blood: "And Life, that old tyrant, he knows my land is fertile now. So many white flowers. So many dead since '17" (Valente, 2011, p. 165).

Valente's Viy retains a lot of his original characteristics, and he does not look like a human being, but rather a real demon:

The man's black hair fell all the way to the floor. He wore a grey priest's cassock, and his chest glowed with a splatter of silver light, like a star. His eyelids were so long that they covered his body like a priest's stole, their lashes brushing the floor (Valente, 2011, p. 164).

Viy is very well aware of his powers, and he relishes the moments of decay and finds joy in seeing the beauty fade: "Let me kiss your bride on both cheeks, Life. Let me feel her hot blood slowly cool against my eyelids" (Valente, 2011, p. 164).

On the other hand, faithful to her intention to move away from the black-and-white characters, Valente retains proximity even between such opposing characters as Koschei and Viy: "The rapt pupil will be forgiven for assuming the Tsar of Death to be wicked and the Tsar of Life to be virtuous. Let the truth be told: There is no virtue anywhere. Life is sly and unscrupulous, a blackguard, wolfish, severe. In service to itself, it will commit any offense" (Valente, 2011, p. 79).

The unnatural affinity between the two brothers deepens because of how much the Tsar of Life is afraid of death: "But the Tsar of Death and the Tsar of Life greatly feared one another, for Death is surrounded by souls, and is never lonely, and the Tsar of Life had hidden his death away in a place deeper than secrets, and more secret than depth" (Valente, 2011, p. 47-48). Moreover, Koschei is depicted very egoistic. Despite his generosity and manners, he would not remove death from anyone else even though he might love them. As Viy, the Tsar of Death, put it: "Never for anyone else does our brother take out his scalpel. Only he lives forever. Everyone else, one way or another, is for me" (Valente, 2011, p. 165).

Political Criticism

Another important addition to the image of Koschei in Valente's book is his association with the political leaders of the Soviet age. The author draws parallels between him and Lenin, calling both "papa": "Who is Papa Lenin?" (Valente, 2011, p. 83) and "Papa Koschei" (Valente, 2011, p. 40). This comparison, however, prefers Koschei as better, criticising Lenin for greediness, cruelty and misuse of power: "The goblins of the city may hold committees to divide a single potato, but the strong and the cruel still sit on the hill, and drink vodka, and wear black furs, and slurp borscht by the pail, like blood" (Valente, 2011, p.). Koschei, on the other hand, is a preferred father figure among all characters: "Zemlehyed has one Papa: Papa Koschei. He needs no nasty bald Papa Lenin!" (Valente, 2011, p. 83).

The political aspect of Koschei is prominent through the entire book. It is an interesting addition to the character and the reader is able to decipher his political preferences. By means of irony and satire, Koschei frequently drops hint about what he thinks about the political situation in Russia:

Children may wear through their socks marching in righteous parades, but Papa never misses his wine with supper. Therefore, it is better to be strong and cruel than to be fair. At least, one eats better that way. And morality is more dependent on the state of one's stomach than of one's nation (Valente, 2011, p. 65).

Generally, anti-system opinions can be observed criticising the poverty, inequality and the establishment. The comparison of Koschei with the political leaders of the time humanizes him

by making him look similar to the existing people but also dehumanizes him because he follows the inhuman practices of the political leaders of his time. This way, Valente shows a very human-like fairy tale character with inhuman practices and views. These two parts of Koschei's personality - cruelty, egoism, and ruthlessness on the one hand, and passion and love on the other - make him a rounder and more complex character than he has ever been in a myth or a fairy tale, and move him away from the former associations with a death demon.

Conclusion

This article focuses on how Catherynne Valente addresses the ancient mythical and fairytale image of Koschei the Deathless, a notorious magician, who was often associated with death or the deadly winter demon Karachun, and reworked him in a completely different character in her acclaimed novel *Deathless*. The degree of reimagination as well as the approach to the controversial figure of Koschei motivated this research and defined the structure of this paper, which was built around the various transformations undertaken by the author to rework the traditional understanding of Koschei.

The author starts by changing the appearance of the character. Instead of an ugly villain, Valente depicts a handsome young man who is attractive to women. This change goes along with the romanticisation and humanization of the character. Koschei loses his position as the black character in the classic black-and-white fairy tale dichotomy and takes on both positive and negative traits. In this way, he becomes a complex character with motives, feelings and desires, alienating himself from the purely evil depiction found in mythology and fairy tales. The gray portrayal allows the character development, which creates a realistic character with positive and negative traits.

The function of the character also changes from being the embodiment of death and the evil into that of a Tsar of Life, who protects life and wages war against death. On the other hand, the opposition to death has yet another dimension: Koschei is so afraid of dying himself that he has to wage war against death even in his own body.

While being transformed from the Death into the Tsar of life, Koschei retains startling similarity to his brother Viy, the Tsar of Death. Not only family ties, but also mutual hatred and the methods of fighting each other that unite him. Besides, it is Viy who uncovers the egoistic nature of Koschei, who has removed death from himself, but would not do the same even for those who he loves. In addition, though Koschei is the Tsar of Life, he instills fear, and his palace is black with blood fountains gurgling around it.

Finally, the author completes the image of Koschei with a comparison to the political leaders of the early Soviet period. This collation offers further humanization of the character by making him look like a real person who chooses to use inhuman practices. On the other hand, Koschei is used to criticize the political habits of the time and strip totalitarian regimes of their mysticism and symbolism to show its ugly nakedness.

Despite the relative limitation of this research - it focuses on a single novel only - it is a good example of the contemporary way of rethinking Death in fiction similarly to famous reinterpretations of death by Terry Pratchett in *Mort* or Katherine Arden in *The Bear and the Nightingale*. Valente completely reimagined the mythical representation of death into a complex morally grey figure by changing his appearance, function, character by romanticizing and humanizing Koschei. Meanwhile, this change was not from negative to positive, but rather

from a flat to a round character further complicated with references to the political dimension of early 20th century Russia. The multidimensional structure of Koschei's persona is no longer a simple thing to comprehend.

The comparison of Valente's death to similar reimaginations would produce better understanding of the complex approach of modern writers to this character and inspire further investigation into the topic. Other ways of deepening this analysis lie in collating Koschei's reimagining with similar approaches to other Slavic mythical creatures such as Karachun (winter god) in Katherine Arden's *The Bear and the Nightingale*, Baba Yaga in Patricia A. McKillip's *In the Forests of Serre* or life-thirsty spirit in C.J. Cherryh's *Rusalka*.

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The return of the dead

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*The kind-hearted servant of whom you were jealous,
Who sleeps her sleep beneath a humble plot of
grass,
We must by all means take her some flowers.
The dead, ah! the poor dead suffer great pains,
And when October, the pruner of old trees, blows
His melancholy breath about their marble tombs,
Surely they must think the living most ungrateful,
To sleep, as they do, between warm, white sheets,
While, devoured by gloomy reveries,
Without bedfellows, without pleasant causeries,
Old, frozen skeletons, belabored by the worm,
They feel the drip of winter's snow,
The passing of the years; nor friends, nor family
Replace the dead flowers that hang on their tombs.
If, some evening, when the fire-log whistles and
sings
I saw her sit down calmly in the great armchair,
If, on a cold, blue night in December,
I found her ensconced in a corner of my room,
Grave, having come from her eternal bed
Maternally to watch over her grown-up child,
What could I reply to that pious soul,
Seeing tears fall from her hollow eyelids?*

Charles Baudelaire

Some biographical hints that might help to understand the path I have taken in my research.

I lost my father at the age of one year and I have lived for several years (those that are fundamental to my psychic development) symbiotically with my mother. Then when I was older she got remarried and had my brother. I was just over thirty years old when my mother died in a car accident and for me it was a very painful shock. A few months later in an attempt to overcome the mourning I went in psychoanalysis. At the end of this long and psychologically tiring journey, I thought I had overcome the trauma and, as far as possible, returned back to normality.

I was wrong!

One day me and my wife were offered a trip to Egypt, which I joined enthusiastically. Egypt is a strange country with a recent history that no one is interested in. What is usually fascinating is its age-old civilization and the mighty traces that this civilization has left, the monuments, the temples, the statues, but above all the tombs, everywhere. On entering Cairo

the first thing they show you in this chaotic city are the pyramids, that is to say, gigantic graves. Then as the journey continues you have more and more the feeling of being immersed in an imposing and huge cemetery, inhabited not only by the dead - like every cemetery- but also by its cohort of gods that, being almost all destined for the dead, are the most important in the Pantheon of the country.

Once back, after the loss of a dear friend, I suddenly fell back into depression. It did not take long for me to understand that - despite the analysis - I still had not succeeded in mourning my mother's death.

Having overcome the depression, I had a dream: I was sleeping in the lower side of a bunk bed and I realized that in the upper one there was the rotten corpse of my beloved mother. Remember that Plains Indians leave their dead on a kind of pedestal. They deliver them to the weather and to the animals.

After so many years my mother was still above me, looming. It struck me that I had not let it go, and soon realized something that I had only guessed so far: my grieving process had basically failed. Technically, mine had been an incorporation rather than an internalization As if I had imprisoned her inside me in a "crypt" preventing her from taking flight. Despite its cruelty, I must admit that the dream left me with some unconscious awareness- like a revelation- which gave me some hope.

Personal experiences are, at least in my opinion, the basis of our research, and it has been years that I have been filling the holes of my psyche.

Zombies

George Romero's "Night of the Living Dead" dates back to 1968 and is inspired by Richard Matheson's story "I Am Legend" in which a mysterious virus has infected an entire continent, transforming the risen dead into cannibal murders. Since then, this figure has become a powerful part of the modern imaginary, with an endless series of literary works, comics and movies.

I want to examine three of them, which I think are very significant: World War Z; The Walking Dead and Games of Thrones.

World War Z is a 2013 movie directed by Marc Forster, and it is the adaptation of its homonym novel, dated 2006. Neither is likely to ever be considered high art, but the director's work has a slightly novel vision of the living dead, while the skilful use of the modern technology of cinema arouses considerable emotional involvement among viewers.

In fact, in World War Z, a film that seems to be built to enhance the beauty and the athletic qualities of Brad Pitt, the zombies are, compared to the norm, very different.

The story is simple: Gerry Lane (Brad Pitt) is an employee of the United Nations, at the beginning of the story he is in the car with his family in the traffic of a city that, if I remember correctly, should be Philadelphia, when suddenly chaos breaks out. Hordes of infected dead transformed by an unknown evil pounce with incredible ferocity on anyone who is on their way, biting, infecting and transforming everyone in few seconds.

Having been called upon by the government to provide his help, he agrees to return to duty and starts searching for the place of first infection. The shared hope of everyone is to find a vaccine to save the survivors from the seemingly unavoidable horrendous massacre.

I argue that this umpteenth film about zombies is remembered for two reasons:

1. Because of the mastery with which zombies are represented, they appear not only horrific, but also as beings that seem impossible to resist. Not slower and therefore more avoidable, (a motif reminiscent of medieval dance of the macabre) but fast and, at the same time equally greedy for human flesh, In addition, compared to the traditional zombies in which the transformation requires at least some time, here the metamorphosis happens almost immediately. In short, more dangerous, uncontrollable, and even more threatening.
2. For the discovery of a vaccine with staggering properties. In this film, in fact, the authors adopt a variant that makes this movie different from others of the same kind. A change to the plot that I think is very significant. That is to say, not all men are potential victims. Gerry Lane discovers that the dead in their destructive fury towards everything and everyone, seem to ignore those who are suffering from fatal diseases. As if these seriously ill people were invisible to them. In a nutshell, he senses that one can escape the fury of the dead by injecting a lethal poison and then immediately afterwards, the antidote, so as to survive. On discovery of this kind of vaccine, humanity (since no American movie can do without a happy ending) will head towards victory in this terrible battle.

At least that is what the film suggests to us.

In the TV series “The Walking Dead” the type of zombie matches with the ones invented by Romero, slow, also obsessed with human flesh and only sensitive to noise. Here again, most of humanity is infected with a terrible virus that has turned it into an immense army of zombies. Few survive. Generally, the survivors organize themselves into various type of groups and gangs. The groups are often unknown to each other, or are more often locked into murderous struggles, for food, water, or simply for power.

In my opinion, the long TV series can be divided into two strands, which appear chronologically one after the other. In the first, the tremendous struggle is directly against the living dead, accompanied by dramas within the group due to that this obsessive and threatening presence. Threats everywhere, and also unexpected moments, sometimes of courage, and even cowardice or indecorous escapes when facing danger. These acts seem perfectly justified by the hellish situation in which the survivors are immersed.

All this is coloured by true massacres that the survivors carry out against these (once human) beings.

This carnage often creates tremendous conflicts of conscience, especially in the first part especially when, as sometimes happens, the infected people are relatives, friends, or simply people with whom any kind of interaction was once made. In these cases, as the protagonists learn at their own expense, compassion or simply humanity must be banished, or at least suppressed. Destruction of the brain of the dead, with any sort of a weapon, becomes a sort of categorical imperative in order to prevent them from turning into human flesh-thirsty monsters. Even companions, once bitten and immediately aware of their doom, during that short and dramatic interval that precedes the transformation, beg their companions or whoever surrounds them at that moment, to be “killed” in the prescribed manner. It seems that their real terror is not death - to which they seem, if not used, clearly resigned - but metamorphosis. Perhaps this terror, in those periods of great religiosity that have characterized long periods of our history, is the same type of terror that characterized the faithful near death: that of being condemned to hell.

Death here takes on a particular aspect: it is not feared as much the living dead are. And the sentence “rest in peace”, commonly expressed in every funeral, assumes, in this case, its full meaning. These representations tell us that there is something “worse than death”.

The other narrative thread follows the first. While in the first phase the main theme revolves around zombies, where life is a continuous struggle to defence against their attacks, in the second phase it is the gangs, often formed by ferocious criminals, from which it is necessary for the survivors to protect themselves at any cost. In this second phase, the living dead slide from their central role and are almost confined in the background. This despite the fact that it is still them and their animalistic ferocity that forces the survivors to behave with such brutality!

Sometimes, very occasionally, they take on the appearance of unconscious victims, slightly worthy of some mercy.

Even if from the background, their terrifying presence remains responsible for the collapse of civilization in this world. The habit to kill has so profoundly undermined the psyche of all the protagonists, that even the purported heroes of this story are not exempt from extreme aggression and violence. But then again, in order to survive in such a world, it is necessary to know how to kill, and not only once but continuously, obsessively. The living ones gather around scattered small groups immersed in an ocean of living dead and everyone has tried in vain to send back in the world of the dead dozens if not hundreds of zombies. But, as the series teaches, it is a vain attempt: it seems that every massacre that the survivors operate is completely useless. Like holding back the tide with a broom. The number of undead seems to be endless and the battle never ends.

I believe that the whole story should be seen and interpreted as a kind of nightmare, from which one cannot get out. Or as the re-launch of a video game, in which a paranoid obsession to shoot down all assailants prevails.

Moreover, the vastness of the representations of this nightmare and their enormous diffusion is - in my opinion - explained as an enormous difficulty of the modern world to relate not so much with death but essentially with the dead.

There is, however, a third type to consider, a long and articulated saga, from this point of view slightly different from the others because it is not centred exclusively on the “undead”; but perhaps for this reason it is even more significant: Game of Thrones.

The story is very intriguing and also very complex, but in some ways it can be summed up as a gigantic and ruthless struggle for power between contenders, helped from time to time by the various people that inhabit the so-called “Seven Kingdoms”. Here too (with some distinctions that lead us to disambiguate - even if with great difficulty - the protagonists from the antagonists) the fight is conducted by all parties with ruthless violence. The world is pictured as gloomy and morally bankrupt, and as a place where it is difficult to glimpse a semblance of resolution, or at least of hope.

Alongside these power struggles that, in their vicissitudes and how they have been realized, have long captured the attention of millions of spectators, there is another narrative strand seemingly parallel to the first. In the sense that, ultimately, it could also not be included in the general narration. I mean that its absence could go unnoticed by the viewer, now perfectly engrossed in progress of the other fascinating stories. Yet it has a very important value.

What is it about?

Far in the north, in a world of cold and frost, a giant ice dam has been built since time immemorial and, according to those who erected it, has the task of defending all seven

kingdoms from a very serious threat posed by a mysterious population ready to invade and destroy the whole kingdom.

This population, headed by a leader, and maybe even by a hierarchy of warriors, is entirely made up of undead people.

The threat is so serious that those who have always defended the barrier are a sort of warrior monks, subject to a strict discipline, (every slightest disobedience can be punished with death) and ready to sacrifice their lives to prevent invasion. All of them living behind the barrier are, in fact, aware of the seriousness of the situation. It is no longer about who will conquer the throne, but about the very survival of the whole kingdom of men. The Undead are going to invade and occupy the space of the living. But still it does not seem that this danger, though looming, can distract the people of the seven kingdoms from the bloody struggle they are involved in.

Each of these pieces, though indirectly, provides us with a particular way of interpreting a common theme. Injecting a deadly poison as a solution to the tremendous threat of the dead, as Gerry Lane suggests in "World War Z" - I think that symbolically it means to assume a death so far denied. A denial that somehow could be the direct cause of the ferocity of the dead and their desire for revenge. "Game of Thrones" imagines a world in which the struggle for power is so extreme that men forget their essential relationship with existence, while "The Walking Dead" is the most pessimistic and hopeless work of the three. It may also be the closest to how we nowadays establish our relationship with the dead.

The selection I have made of these three pieces (one movie and two TV series) represents a small part of the rich and seemingly never-ending zombie¹ genre. There are so many films, stories and comics revolving around this theme that inevitably lead us thinking that it is a true indicator of our need to target the dead, together with the consequent general malaise related to them.

Moreover, it must be noted that in the first two representations the origin of the disease that turned men into zombies must be traced back to some virus (possibly the result of horrifying or simply failed experimentations) with the emphasis on (I must say a very weak) sense of collective guilt. Conversely, in "Game of Thrones" there is no guilt: there is only living dead animated by a ruthless hatred towards humans. And it is the same hatred that apparently distinguishes all the dead beyond the barrier. As if death were a curse that pushes all those affected (at least in those lands) to strongly hate the living and to punish them simply for their crime of being alive.

Which – at least sociologically – raises some questions that require some explanation.

The Revenants

'The return of the dead' theme is not a modern prerogative, it is very old and perhaps universal. Also, it represents a chapter of the general relationship, present in every social grouping, between the living and the dead. In a nutshell, it is the eternal question of what should be done about the dead.

This problem, albeit in different ways, somehow affects all cultures. Each culture takes "care", "cultivates" the dead, and it does so with a degree of ambivalence whose intensity can vary accordingly. One thing is certain: ethno-anthropological research has shown that the intense bond that binds people of a culture to their deceased runs parallel to a fear of them.

¹ We should actually add also vampires to the list

And among these mortal dreads, the main one (although of course it does not include all the deceased) is that of their return.

The same research informs us that these cultures adopt particular systems and rituals to exorcise this frightening possibility, since apparently the dead can return and not always with good intentions.

Jean-Claude Schmitt, in a rightly famous work (Schmitt, 1994), deals precisely with the theme of “the returning dead” that he calls with a French term difficult to translate, “les revenants”. In this fascinating work, he argues that both the imaginary of death and in a particular the imaginary of the returning dead are an essential part of the magic-religious set of beliefs of every society. This belief naturally takes different forms, depending on the social group. His work specifically concerns the Christian West and in particular that long period commonly called the Middle Ages.

In fact, examples of the returning dead can be found almost everywhere in the entire Western “literature”². In the Bible we can mention Saul who, through the intercession of the Pythoness, recalls Samuel from the world of the dead, asking him to reveal his destiny. The episode in many ways resembles Necromancy, strongly condemned in the Bible, and Jean-Claude Schmitt assures us it is the only instance. But if revenants are rare in the Bible, they are not so rare in medieval times.

On the contrary!

Jean-Claude mentions Saint Augustine, and how, although on one hand he denies the possibility of the dead to live amongst the living people, on the other hand he sees in the angels the power of mediation conferred by God, whereby by virtue of this power, they show men the images of those related to them. What Augustine calls image resembles through and through the notion of a ghost, that is, of an immaterial being that manifests itself with a “mask” representing the effigy of the one who died.

But soon this notion in the medieval world will be flanked by a different idea: those who return from the afterlife acquire more and more a corporeality, that is, they take on the “bodily” features of when they were alive. No more ghosts or shadows like those that Odysseus encounters on his travel to the underworld of Hades. Those same shadows that assume their pristine fatness as they approach the sacrificial blood, not anymore beings composed of flesh and blood.

An idea that therefore belongs deeply to Christian culture.

Remember that Christ did resurrect with his body, and it is precisely by exhibiting his body of flesh and blood to the sceptical Thomas that he unequivocally demonstrated his return to life. And, as is known, according to the prophecy, at the end of time people will resurrect “with their own bodies”. Perhaps to establish the lack of distinction in the soul-body dichotomy or because they to have not yet fully understood the idea of soul that later will be better defined.

The revenants will continue to manifest themselves in the long medieval period, arousing, in the case of the saints, authentic hopes or otherwise tremendous fears. Jean-Claude Schmitt claims that from the eleventh to the twelfth century there is a turning point which is very significant. Not only do the apparitions of the dead increase, but also that they manifest more often in groups.

It seems - according to the scholar - that it was a Norman reporter who, while writing a story about the Normans, first described of the chilling appearance of a “troop of the dead” or

² As literature is intended broadly speaking books and reports of that time.

even called “of wild hunters”, made up of a large mass of “living dead people”, armed with weapons, even riding horses, and who, at least in the opinion of the chronicler, appear aggressive and dangerous. A pack that appear to be demons until the reporter recognizes the faces of people he used to know, and realizes they are dead people.

Well, this army of the dead is very similar to the army that in Game of Thrones threatens the world of the living. No more ghosts but groups of dead beings, moved by hatred towards the living. The Norman reporter seems the first to have witnessed the vision of those whom we will then improperly call “zombies”.

The grieving process

The grieving process introduced by Sigmund Freud in the common discourse has been widely used and trivialized, taking on different meanings. A seemingly serious version of the Italian proverb “chi muore giace e chi vive, si dà pace” (those who die lay , and those who stay will find some peace) is prevalent. But the grieving is a long and difficult process of which there has been much discussion, especially in the psychoanalytic world.

For the Viennese master, the grieving process initially manifests itself with a lack of interest in the outside world that derives from the loss of the object to which one was affectively linked. All the mourner’s energy seems absorbed by pain and memories, until the Ego is confronted with the dilemma: to decide to follow the lost object (follow it in death) or to continue to live on, by breaking the link with it. In this latter case, the grief is processed, otherwise in the former case we speak of pathological grief. Here, as a consequence, ambivalences (unavoidable for psychoanalysis) will arise – followed by guilt trips or better remorses – that prevent the natural success of the process itself.

A more fleshed out is the position of Freud’s brilliant disciple Melanie Klein, who insists more than her teacher on the ambivalent aspect of any affective relationship. The loss would trigger early and ambivalent relationships that involve the subject, a re-emerging of hatred followed by a feeling of triumph at the announcement of death that would exacerbate the consequent and inevitable feelings of guilt. The targets of this unresolved ambivalence would turn into ruthless persecutors, and this process would prevent the necessary detachment from the dead.

Within this dichotomy the solutions are structured – essentially defensive – by the culture, every type of culture (as the anthropology has shown us) in order to solve the problem. The intention is to systematize what is found to be useful in leading the dead to peacefully separate themselves from the living. In other words, to institutionalize a psychologically valid system that convinces” the dead to accept their new condition without further involvement of those affected by the loss. In a nutshell, a system that eliminates the fear of persecution among the living.

In his impressive work on the anthropology of death, Louis-Vincent Thomas documents in great details the systems adopted by the various cultures (in particular in the African world) to console the living and reassure the dead. In examining them he emphasizes: “... the surprising complexity, the astonishing richness of the means designed to organize condolences, the fight against the pain of separation and the anguish of death: beliefs, thought systems, liturgies, rites, the techniques to find the dead and look for what the living can benefit from this new status, are composed according to cultural areas”. In these areas Thomas tells us “... the imaginary field favours the symbolic language, accepts death in order to transcend it, turns the

deceased into an alter ego, refuses to dichotomize in an absolute way the world of living beings with that of the dead”(Thomas, 1975, p. 524). So – although the scholar himself does not seem to agree that much – in denying separation - at least the definitive one- we end up denying death as well. Then, only oblivion will eventually let the dead drift definitively away from our lives, but then the symbolic instruments will have controlled if not completely deprived them of their power. (Both in a positive and negative sense, both for saints and demons).

Always of course if symbolic systems work!

Christian culture is not very different. Jean-Claude Schmitt tells us that the orientations of Christian culture towards the dead are widely built in the notion of memoria, which basically had a different meaning from what we attribute to it today, in fact, it was aimed only at the deceased. In fact, it was an exquisitely liturgical memory. The names of the passed away, at least those worthy of mention, were included in the so-called memorial books, *libri memoriales*, in the necrologies, or in monastery and convent obituaries. Those people were remembered in a particular way during Masses that were especially celebrated for their salvation. According to the author, these ceremonies had a dual function: a manifest and a latent function. Ostensibly it was a way to recall all those worth remembering and commemorating according to the community. However, the French scholar highlights that the true purpose, the real latent function of this so-called “memory”, was also that of being able to separate in a psychologically useful way the living and the dead.

Now, let us remember that the Christian afterlife was tripartite. At the two opposite poles there is Hell and Paradise and in between the extraordinary invention of Purgatory.

It took several centuries, from the III to the end of the XII century for Purgatory to become fully integrated into Christian dogma (Le Goff, 1985, p. 84). “It was formed at the beginning in practice: prayers for the dead, and all the acts for the salvation of the dead always called the suffrages”. It was in fact in the IV century AD that Christians – as Jacques Le Goff (Le Goff, 1981) explains – still not convinced by eschatological horizons, began to reflect upon the situation of those souls dwelling in that suspended time between individual death and final judgment: based on some reflections of the Fathers of the Church, they concluded that the souls of certain sinners could be saved precisely in this period of time, after having succeeded in some very tormented trial. Salvation, or at least the length of the sentence, could be determined by the behaviour of the living. By appropriate acts every believer would allow the remission - partial or total - of the dead’s sins.

This extraordinary invention had some surprising consequences: on one hand it allowed the religious to partly, even if only minimally, substitute divine power - instead, their prayers and behavior were able to change divine judgment. On the other hand, this allowed them to maintain almost constant contact with their loved ones, giving them the intimate illusion of never have been abandoned, though they actually keep the dead distant from themselves by placing them in far and different space and time from which they could not return. This way the inevitable feelings of guilt would dim, the fear of retaliation would be dispelled, and finally the living would have been allowed to slowly and smoothly forget all those who died. Thus, time was allowed, without great drama, to dissolve their memory in the river of oblivion. This system, in an apparently paradoxical way, revealed the true function of “memory” or at least of that memory: forgetfulness. Meanwhile, the Church, through its functions, and with the help of specialists of symbols related to this important function, probably in perfect (at least supposed) good faith, assured a guaranteed “everlasting” memory of the deceased.

This new representation of the afterlife was accompanied by the institution of the feast of the dead and also by the collocation of cemeteries around the parish church. The function of intermediation between the dead and the living made the ecclesiastical system even more essential for the religious, and, by consequently made dispelling these beliefs even more difficult.

Sometimes this technique, which was intended to first bring peace and then aid forgetting, would not work perfectly; some of the dead prevented the “grieving process” from working, but most importantly the system which had worked well enough for so long began to be seen to have some limitations. And this happened at the same time when Purgatory entered into the Church dogma for the first time.

The transition to modernity

This change (Cavicchia, 2007) has taken place on various levels, and often over the same period of time:

1. new orientation towards the past;
2. collapse of the ritual;
3. individualisation;
4. inevitability of death.

Time

Nowadays, there are many studies on the diversity in the construction of time in the Western world and all of them agree that this culture reverses a millenary custom. It is known that all traditional societies are oriented towards their past, drawing strength and meaning from an original time when what is essential for the existence of men has already been accomplished. The re-proposition of this primordial time (which in essence means annulled time) is the task of the traditional man and the cult of ancestors is a direct and logical consequence. In these societies time appears collapsed, which allows for easy cohabitation between the living and the dead.

On the contrary, modernity – as is unanimously known – is projected into the future to find its full realization. The idea of progress (even if now it is in crisis) is consistent with this new orientation in the history of humanity. The consequence is devaluation of the past, including a devaluation of those who have built this past, that is to say past generations. The dead count for less and genealogies have only a very fatuous charm.

If we add to this the modern speed of change or rather its acceleration, which makes the identifications of the past very quickly obsolete, everything contributes to relegate those who have preceded us to a grey limbo, little visible, or at least with unclear outlines.

The Rite

As for rite, it goes hand in hand with the spread of secularization: the more plausibility of religious responses loses ground, the more credibility is lost in the rites of which religion has had a quasi-monopoly up to now. The secular rituals that still exist, despite efforts, do not convince the vast majority of Western populations so that they feel no longer able to cry

credibly over their dead. After all, what the critics of modernity still do not understand is that the fracture between the two worlds (traditional - modern) has been very deep and that modern orientations or new rituals are not yet able to replace the institutionalized and well rooted-in models, as we have seen with Purgatory.

The Individual

I would not like to dwell so much on the issue of individualisation more than I have already. What I would like to stress here is that the more modern man feels and realizes himself as an individual, the more he will tend to personalize, that is, privatize his meaning. To reject the “liturgy” that etymologically means “the work of the people”. This means that each individual starts to manage their losses by not fully sharing others’ meanings, and this inevitably creates isolation from society and a consequent loss. Moreover, individualisation means the search for autonomy, in the sense that each person (at least on paper) tends to choose and construct their own destiny and this aspiration has a very explicit meaning: the rejection of fathers – excluding the case of their symbolic elimination, reading it in psychoanalytic terms.

And fathers represent the past, as has always been the case since the dawn of time - just think of the widespread diffusion of ancestor worship in every society. On the other hand, there is a price to pay for freedom.

Death as a definitive end

Even if not completely internalized by everyone, the awareness of the inevitability of our end is slowly becoming the way – especially in certain more cultured segments of the Western population. This idea inflicts a death blow on the founding belief of Christianity and its ritual systems adopted so far, with some success. in fact they all presupposed an idea of survival that is today declared non-rational and therefore totally illusory. Dichotomization (the two worlds, separate but contiguous) is no longer possible, the passage has closed, and the world of the dead is only a melancholy world inhabited by memories.

Someone said that the sunset of rituality and this new conviction has exacerbated the fear of death in us as modern people. I cannot respond with adequate certainty to this statement; I just note that the daily worry of archaic cultures to respond to death and properly manage their deaths, makes me think that the thought if not the terror of dying was very relevant. And that in our world probably – as Paul Yonnet states with convincing arguments – death, not being daily visible as it was in societies prior to ours, would instill less fear(Yonnet, 2014). Historically, infant and maternal mortality rates were very high. Until the beginning of the 1900s, the death of one or more children was still very common and all family members in every age group were used to dealing with the dead.

The four points briefly analyzed mark the difference between two worlds, or better two cultures, in many ways opposed to each other: a culture that canonizes or sanctifies the dead, shaping itself in their memory based on received customs and ideas, and a culture that in the name of the new, the fascination, the unexpressed, but also based on individual freedom, refuses links with tradition, denies the past holds the meaning of life, and therefore rejects any (simplified) mixture with those belonging to the past.

This attitude towards the dead made Louis-Vincent Thomas write these significant words: “It is to be expected that the dead will be pushed to take revenge, eventually disturbing the unconscious of their imprudent survivors”(Thomas, 1975, p.522).

Someone has written that the dead who are no longer addressed die twice, but that is not true. It is not true because “Dying twice does not mean strengthening of the status of the dead, but rather, the fact of keeping him present, “not really dead” (Higgins, 2004, p. 1643). In short, the desymbolization carried out in this difficult passage prevents, hinders or delays the grieving process, and makes it possible for the dead to become dangerously “not really dead”.

So, the dead condemned to stay in this intermediate time, because no one is able to collocate them in a plausible home anymore, can once again demand it!

Otherwise they get infuriated!

But the solution is not restricted to the behaviour of the individual, the grieving process is a work that, in order to bear fruit, must first of all become a fundamentally symbolic collective response to the losses shared by all or almost all, or rather deeply and collectively internalized. Ten men are needed to recite Kaddish in the Jewish community during the mourning. At present, we should need to take back the past and our ancestors who built it, to possibly try to be proud of our genealogies (which we mean, are those that also found our identity), to develop a new Purgatory or its successor, which naturally has to be credible, meaning in harmony with the new values and the new knowledge that modern times absolutely expect.

The Collective memory

This general vision must be accompanied by the historical circumstances which are limited to the 20th century and which have aggravated, or even brought the transition to a conclusion: I am referring to the two World Wars which caused bloodshed first in Europe and then worldwide.

I recently came across a good historical work by two French scholars, Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker, on the First World War. The work is entitled 14-18, Retrouver la Guerre (Audoin-Rouzeau & Becker, 2000) and is a vivid documentary on the First World War, with a closer look at the French side.

After reminding us of the statistics (10 million deaths and huge numbers of injured) of the horrific violence involving almost the entire Western world, the two authors face the problem of post-war mourning.

A particular grieving process because – they rightly say – it is a specific type of mourning since the dead were mostly the youngest men in society³

This unusual massacre has ended up reversing the normal order of the succession of generations and has done so in a very short space of time, preventing any form of understanding and adaptation to this sudden and tragic change. And this has been a tremendous shock that took us a while to understand in all its gravity. A shock which was felt all the more because, paradoxically, at that time, there had been a drop in the mortality rates of the young.

What was missing, moreover, from those who had suffered such a sudden and painful loss, was the lack of a body, the body of those who had died far away and who were often irrecoverable because they were unrecognizable. This lack prevented the survivors from practicing the so-called piety for the dead, that is, those rites that have always been practiced for

³ France witnessed more than 600.000 war victims and 400.000 war invalids.

the body of the dead, and that were able to pacify the dead and help the death's metabolization. It is with the corpse and through ritual treatment of it that the symbolic elaboration begins.

Someone is right to say that the distinction between the animal and human world is precisely the treatment of the bodies of the dead. Let us remember Patroclus who, in the form of a ghost, reproaches Achilles for not having yet provided for his funeral ceremony, and how Priam humiliates himself in front of Tethys 'son in order to have the body of Hector, the most loved of his numerous offspring, and to be able to give him what is still called "an honourable burial".

When Achilles is moved with pity by the tears and petitions of this old father and personally returns the body of the Trojan hero, Priam begins the rites of condolences. Only at the end of the complex ten day ceremony does the king of Troy feel that he has fulfilled his duty towards his dead son and has set for posterity the trail for his glorious past, which relieves him and all his companions from pain⁴.

On the other hand, the lack of a body would have meant that there was a concrete and very real threat of immediate and almost inevitable anonymity. The prospect for all those who had suffered a loss is that their children would become unidentified dead (deprived not only of life but also of their name) what the Greeks called *nonumnoi*: The Unnamed dead tragically delivered to immediate oblivion.

The authors posit that their research has shown a widespread sense of guilt in the generation too old to fight and that therefore had to resign themselves to seeing their children die. The death of an adult child is not only perhaps the most painful loss that can be conceived, but it becomes even more unbearable when it is accompanied by guilt.

Rudyard Kipling, who lost a son in the First World War, depicts the feeling of guilt with particular effectiveness in a very short poem in 1919 in which he lets his deceased son speak.

If any question why we died,
tell them, because our fathers lied.

Someone with a touch of malice coined the term "Abraham's Complex" referring to the sacrifice of Isaac, advancing with this definition the hypothesis of a desire of fathers to eliminate their children.

Well, according to the authors of the work, these conditions have made the "work of mourning" very difficult.

In 1918/19 Abel Gance made a film that in many ways will remain in the whole history of cinematography. The film is entitled "J'accuse" and foreshadows "our living dead".

The protagonist, a soldier and poet named Jean Diaz, is being driven mad by the war. He is hospitalized, escapes from hospital, reaches his village and tells the villagers of a dream. In a battlefield cemetery with reversed wooden crosses, a huge black cloud rises from the bottom, and ghostly figures emerge from the ground. "They are wrapped in crumbled bandages, some limp, others blindly wander with their arms raised, others still stagger like Frankenstein's monster. All of them leave the battlefield and follow the country lanes to their villages. What they want is to see if their sacrifice has been in vain" (Winter, 1998, p. 27).

They will naturally be disappointed!

Later Gance resumed the theme using a resumption of a march of victory made by the victorious Allied army accompanied by the most important authorities of the time: and while

⁴ Patroclus appears in a dream to Achille reclaiming his missing "honourable burial".

the soldiers parade under the Arc de Triomphe to celebrate the victory, the army of the dead march above it.

The film is a prefiguration of what will happen in the following decades. The historian Jay Winter, to whom I owe these precious indications, in a fine work on mourning and memory, holds that in countries devastated by war the shock of the conflict was so profound that - in his opinion - the world of the living should have taken into account the dead that would have somehow invaded it. To confirm his theory, he analyses two phenomena that characterized the decades following the First World War: the art of that time with the quite obsessive representation of the return of the dead, and the spread of spiritualism like wildfire. That was an incredibly widespread phenomenon that significantly involved all the layers of the population of that time, even the most culturally different.

After the carnage of the First World War came the Second World War and the horror of Nazi extermination camps and Soviet gulags: together with the tragic lack of unknown and unburied dead bodies (when not reduced to "smoke in the air") and the consequent impossibility of adequate ritual. Until the end of the 50s and 60s (think of the death of one of the greatest mass killer in the history, Joseph Stalin) there was a sort of "affective traffic jam", an inability to recover the dead and properly place them in a collective memory to then be able to let them go.

Then inevitably – we should no longer be surprised – came the revenants, a perfect representation of our current deficiencies and fears!

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La generazione morente. Cosplay zombie come atto di rivendicazione politica The Dying Generation: Zombic Cosplay as Act of Political Claim

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Abstract

In September 2013, members of the artistic group “Fin de un Mundo”, disguised as zombies, invaded a Buenos Aires subway station in a demonstrative action against Mauricio Macri’s austerity policies. On July 6, 2017 about one thousand activists of the “Gestalten” movement invaded the streets of Hamburg, completely covered in white to protest against the de-humanizing effects of technocapitalism. These are just two examples of political use of the zombie figure. The paper aims to explore the evolution of socio-cultural meanings associated with the figure of the zombie in the age of networks and globalization. In this sense, the political claims implemented through acts of zombic cosplay refer to the will of the Millennials to draw attention to the “dying generation”, deprived of horizons and perspectives of life due to the precariousness of work, affections and relationships.

Keywords: zombie cosplay, Millennials, zombie politics, zombie apocalypse, film cultures.

La generazione dei morti viventi. I Millennials, il digitale e gli orizzonti di vita

Dopo le prime pionieristiche ricerche di Mannheim (1927), secondo Burnett (2010), nel campo delle scienze sociali, è possibile identificare tre approcci allo studio delle generazioni: un primo approccio concepisce l'appartenenza generazionale come un fattore sociale; un secondo approccio si focalizza sulle correlazioni e le relazioni intergenerazionali; un terzo, infine, produce mappe concettuali basate sulle caratteristiche ricorrenti che distinguono le generazioni.

I fattori che contribuiscono alla nascita di una nuova coorte generazionale possono essere differenti e di varia natura. Alcuni studiosi italiani hanno optato per un approccio multidimensionale, che include fattori storico-biografici e fattori tecnologici e culturali (Donati, 2002, Aroldi, Colombo, 2003, 2007). Autori come Aroldi (2011, 2012), Tapscott (1998, 2008), Prensky (2001), Palfrey e Gasser (2008) si sono concentrati sul ruolo di media e innovazioni tecnologiche come traino per il cambiamento generazionale. In particolare, per la generazione dei nati tra il 1980 e il 1994, classificata come Generazione Y (Kotler, Armstrong, 2006) o Millennials (Howe, Strauss, 2000, 2007), il cambiamento tecnologico ha condotto a significative trasformazioni legate alla diffusione di connessioni e dispositivi mobili (smartphone, tablet,

notebook), sempre più performanti; pertanto, i membri di questa generazione hanno sperimentato pienamente la transizione dal mediascape analogico ai media digitali. Secondo una ricerca di Yahoo! Advertising (2015), basata su dati Nielsen, i Millennials italiani (di cui il 76 per cento è stabilmente connesso al web) esibiscono quattro fattori socioculturali distintivi: il fatto di essere la prima generazione autenticamente globale; il ruolo attivo nelle scelte di consumo (incluso il consumo mediale); la propensione all'uso dei media digitali, in particolare mobili; la tendenza a investire in processi di costruzione identitaria attraverso i social media. Se riconosciamo che «la generazione non è quindi un anonimo aggregato di individui appartenenti alla medesima fascia di età, ma un costrutto socioantropologico, contrassegnato da specifici "indicatori" o "marcatori" (vissuti comuni, fatti memorabili, riti e miti)» (Qualizza, 2013: 2), nel caso della Generazione Y, Fabris (2008) identifica questi indicatori nella definitiva affermazione di Internet e nel trionfo della cultura digitale. Allargando lo sguardo ad altri fattori socioculturali, dovremmo riconoscere, con Napoli (2015), che i Millennials sono cresciuti in un contesto di generalizzata disaffezione per la politica, precarizzazione del lavoro e presentificazione degli orizzonti temporali, tutti fenomeni che incoraggiano stili di consumo ludico-edonistici (una tendenza già prefigurata in Jedlowski, 2001). Numerose ricerche condotte in Europa e negli USA confermano che i Millennials sono la prima generazione che prevede di avere nel futuro un tenore di vita inferiore a quello dei genitori, in virtù della difficoltà ad ottenere lavori stabili (e quindi ad accantonare contributi pensionistici), e a concorrere attivamente alla determinazione degli indirizzi politici, economici e culturali delle comunità di appartenenza (Ruetschlin, Draut, 2013, Silva, 2014). Se la Generazione Y crede sempre meno alle organizzazioni politiche tradizionali, la consapevolezza di una progressiva riduzione della sfera dei diritti e delle protezioni sociali ha spinto molti Millennials ad abbracciare la causa di movimenti e personaggi politici radicali (Madland, Teixeira, 2009), come è avvenuto negli USA con Occupy Wall Street e Bernie Sanders oppure, in Europa, con Podemos (Spagna) e Syriza (Grecia).

L'evoluzione della metafora zombica

L'obiettivo che si propone il presente paper è di indagare i fenomeni e i processi socioculturali, attraverso i quali la figura dello zombie viene risemantizzata dai Millennials in chiave politica, sfruttandone la carica simbolica in senso anticapitalista. Tuttavia, per poter condurre un'analisi socioculturale di questo genere, occorre preliminarmente ripercorrere alcune delle tappe della storia culturale dello zombie.

Partendo dal presupposto che parlare della morte significa sempre parlare delle metafore della morte (Macho, 1987), Lucci (2016) individua nello zombie una particolare metafora della morte, sospesa tra presenza e assenza, che ricopre un ruolo fondamentale nel sistema di rappresentazione e metaforizzazione collettiva. Il potenziale metaforico della figura zombica

appare particolarmente ricco nelle formulazioni filmiche e narrative degli ultimi quindici anni, a partire dalla cosiddetta “Zombie Renaissance” (Hubner, Leaning, Manning, 2015; Addeo, 2015). La figura dello zombie passa attraverso narrazioni (prevalentemente filmiche) che ne ampliano progressivamente confini e territori. Com’è noto, la prima apparizione cinematografica dello zombie si ha nel film *White Zombie* (1932) di Victor Halperin, tratto dal romanzo *The Magic Island* (1929) del giornalista-esploratore William Seabrook. Il film svela le origini haitiane dello zombie, legate ai riti voodoo dell’isola caraibica: lo zombie, infatti, è qui una vittima dello stregone, che rianima i morti per ridurli ad una sottomissione totale. Come ricorda Boni (2016), questa genesi filmica è particolarmente significativa per due ragioni: in primo luogo, le recenti ricerche nell’ambito degli studi postcoloniali ricordano come lo zombie sia connesso alle ansie culturali dell’Occidente verso l’indipendenza delle popolazioni caraibiche, che si risolve nel cosiddetto “orientalismo”, una sorta di re-immaginazione occidentale delle culture locali (Sheller, 2003, Said, 2010); dall’altro lato, *White Zombie* chiarisce da subito il legame tra la figura del non-morto e la schiavitù e l’alienazione lavorativa – un processo culturale decisivo nell’evoluzione delle narrazioni zombiche.

Per alcuni aspetti, la capacità dello zombie di rinviare a plessi semantici anche in reciproca contraddizione può essere anche collegata al fatto che lo zombie, attraverso il rapporto con la maschera, «rimanda a una antica tradizione dove l’identità si cela, o meglio prolifera in molte sue derive di possibilità (dunque lo zombie mostra di avere una identità poli-forma nel suo agire, seppure contenuta)» (Frezza, 2015: 272). In particolare, una genealogia culturale dello zombie consente di collegare questa figura dell’immaginario (per il concetto di “figura dell’immaginario” si rinvia a Frezza, 2015b) alle categorie del grottesco e del mostruoso. Lo zombie sembra ereditare, in particolare dal grottesco carnascialesco, la propensione alla sovversione degli schemi e delle convenzioni culturali: il non-morto fa proprie le istanze di rivolta degli ultimi e dei marginali (Coulombe, 2014).

Una seconda tappa fondamentale della storia culturale dello zombie è il cult movie *Night of the Living Dead* (La notte dei morti viventi, 1968), in cui George A. Romero piega la metafora del non-morto verso una critica alle tensioni razziali e alla guerra in Vietnam. Il successivo capolavoro romeriano *Dawn of the Dead* (L’alba dei morti viventi, 1978) condensa nella nota sequenza in cui gli azzannatori si rifugiano all’interno di un centro commerciale una marcata critica alla divorante pulsione consumistica delle società occidentali: il cannibalismo diviene, cioè, trasparente metafora della cannibalizzazione di culture e forme di vita operata da un consumo cieco e ottuso. Il tratto che accomuna lo zombie-schiavo allo zombie-consumatore è l’alienazione, che caratterizza tanto la dimensione del lavoro quanto quella del consumo.

In anni più recenti, le ultime pellicole dell’esalogia romeriana (*Land of the Dead*, La terra dei morti viventi, 2005; *Diary of the Dead*, Le cronache dei morti viventi, 2007; *Survival of the Dead*, L’isola dei sopravvissuti, 2009) anticipano alcune delle evoluzioni dei significati dello zombie nella cultura contemporanea. In particolare, queste opere, unitamente a serie come *The*

Walking Dead (2010 – in corso) (Frezza, 2015, Holdaway, Scaglioni, 2017) e a film come *World War Z* (2013) di Marc Foster, tratto dal romanzo omonimo di Max Brooks, rielaborano le ansie culturali correlate alla perdita di sicurezze sociali ed economiche, arrivando ad una progressiva umanizzazione del non-morto e ad una de-umanizzazione dell’umano in occasione delle apocalissi zombiche (Bonì, 2016: 18-19). In queste opere, fondate sulla scandalosa affermazione che “gli zombie siamo noi”, la carica simbolica della devastazione zombica si lega ad altre questioni centrali nell’immaginario contemporaneo, come il terrore della pandemia, dell’esclusione sociale, dell’impoverimento. Lo zombie si connota così, sempre più spesso, come metafora della marginalità, in un senso molto ampio che comprende le generazioni più giovani, i migranti, i poveri e tutte le soggettività ritenute improduttive da un tecnocapitalismo, orientato esclusivamente a massimizzare la performatività delle sue componenti (viventi e non-viventi).

L’altissimo potenziale metaforico della figura zombica deriva dalla sua natura liminale, sospesa tra vita e morte, tra individuo e massa: il non-morto è infatti per un verso la vittima delle violenze e degli abusi del sistema socio-economico su quanti sono ridotti alla categoria di “non-persone” (Dal Lago, 1999); per un altro verso, però, la facoltà ancora riservata allo zombie di azzannare il vivente gli riserva una residua possibilità di resistere e ribellarsi al sistema dominante. A tal proposito Rutherford (2013) parla dello zombie come di una “metafora di massa”, in grado di produrre continuativamente nuovi significati.

La pervasività della figura zombica nell’immaginario contemporaneo si può misurare attraverso la quantità di prodotti che il cinema e la serialità televisiva hanno immesso nell’ultimo quindicennio. Da ciò deriva anche una tendenza, piuttosto marcata, ad utilizzare metafore zombiche all’interno delle scienze sociali, umane e naturali, in relazione ad uno spettro realmente significativo di fenomeni e oggetti di ricerca. Secondo Luckhurst (2015), la condizione del non-morto, segnata da un decadimento delle funzioni vitali senza che se ne abbia coscienza (ad esclusione di alcune recenti narrazioni, come *Warm Bodies*, 2012, di Jonathan Levine, tratto dal romanzo di Isaac Marion, in cui sembra affacciarsi un barlume di consapevolezza tra i non-morti: cfr. Frezza, 2015), può essere una metafora ad ampio raggio della zombificazione del mondo occidentale, le cui strutture sociali e culturali sono letteralmente collassate e sopravvivono, appunto, come entità zombiche.

Nel vasto magazzino di metafore del non-morto (Lucci, 2016), talora anche conflittuali, ai fini dell’analisi dell’appropriazione simbolica della figura zombica da parte della Generazione Y, ci interessa evidenziare che, nell’immaginario contemporaneo, lo zombie si configura come una categoria in cui far confluire la vittima sacrificale (Pintor, 2015, Doni, Tomelleri, 2015). Probabilmente, come nota Lauro (2015), pur nella variegata rete di iterazioni e interpretazioni, la figura dello zombie conserva una traccia della propria genesi haitiana, in cui è già inscritta la dialettica tra sottomissione/schiavitù e resistenza/ribellione.

L'appropriazione del non-morto. Generazione morente, *zombie capitalism* e rivolta cosplay

Lo zombie esibisce dunque la sua scandalosa natura di reietto, escluso, scarto e rifiuto della società tardocapitalista, diventando metafora produttiva delle soggettività ai margini del discorso pubblico, come migranti e giovani: in altri termini, il non-morto simboleggia le nuove forme di discriminazione, come afferma l'efficace slogan – centrato sul colore cadaverico degli azzannatori - “the grey is the new black” (Ahmad, 2011). In questo senso, la zombificazione diventa una possibilità di trasformazione delle condizioni di vita di un'ampia fascia della popolazione occidentale, esposta ad una feroce disciplina dei tempi di lavoro e di consumo.

Gli eventi cosplay che analizzeremo usano lo zombie in quanto strumento di critica sociopolitica, traducendo in atti performativi alcune delle teorie emerse negli ultimi anni sulla zombificazione della società.

Come vedremo, lo zombie emerge come metafora complessa, che può essere riferita tanto alle classi dirigenti colpevoli di imporre, in nome del neoliberismo, condizioni di vita intollerabili ai cittadini, quanto ai cittadini stessi che, in virtù del dominio sul proprio tempo di vita, sono ridotti a soggetti sacrificati dai dettami del tecnocapitalismo dell'era digitale.

Ci sembra opportuno, a questo punto, analizzare tre casi in diversi contesti (Italia, Argentina e Germania), in cui la figura dello zombie è stata utilizzata da collettivi giovanili in atti di contestazione e rivendicazione politica attraverso pratiche cosplay.

Per gli scopi del nostro lavoro non ci addentreremo nel dibattito sulle origini e la circoscrivibilità del fenomeno cosplay, rinviando al lavoro di Theresa Winge (2006). In quanto utile punto di partenza, definiamo qui il cosplay, seguendo l’Oxford Dictionaries, come “the practice of dressing up as a character from a film, book, or video game, especially one from the Japanese genres of manga or anime”. Il fenomeno entra a far parte del patrimonio delle culture giovanili in Italia e nel resto dell’Occidente a partire dagli anni Ottanta, quando la cosiddetta “Generazione Goldrake” (Pellitteri, 2008, Teti, 2012), dopo aver avuto accesso massiccio alle produzioni giapponesi di manga e anime, scopre la teatralizzazione di quell’immaginario attraverso la pratica cosplay. Sebbene non esista uno studio completo sulla composizione anagrafica e demografica dei cosplayer, diversi studi (Vanzella, 2005, Winge, 2006, Bonnichsen, 2011, Benesh-Liu, 2007, Rahman, Wing-sun, Hei-man, 2012, Lamerichs, 2013 e 2014) concordano sulla natura globale del cosplay come pratica intergenerazionale, a cui accedono tanto Post-Millennials (nati tra il 1995 e il 2012) quanto Generazione Y (nati tra il 1980 e il 1995) e, in misura minore, Generazione X (nati tra il 1960 e il 1990). Il cosplay può essere concepito come una subcultura, ovvero come una comunità di persone, che condividono norme, credenze e valori, in parte differenti da quelli della cultura ufficiale, in grado di influenzarne stile di vita e gestione delle risorse. Come ogni altra subcultura, il cosplay intrattiene con la cultura più estesa di cui fa parte, il fandom di anime e manga, un rapporto di interazione dinamica, come sostiene Hebdige (2017): per alcuni aspetti il cosplay condivide

credenze e valori con la cultura “genitrice”, per altri se ne differenzia provando ad affermare la propria ideologia, ovvero un insieme di asserzioni coordinate e coerenti in base alle quali orientarsi nella comprensione della realtà circostante (Swindler 1986). È dentro questa dimensione effervescente di teatralizzazione performativa dell’immaginario audiovisivo globale, propria del cosplay, che si collocano le zombie walk e le altre zombie performance che analizzeremo qui di seguito.

Nel giugno 2012, nel pieno della più grave crisi economica dal secondo dopoguerra, che costringe il governo tecnico di Mario Monti a varare un imponente piano di tagli e sacrifici per il Paese, l’associazione culturale Nero Cafè organizza a Roma una *zombie walk* diversa dalle altre. Se infatti le *zombie walk* sono sostanzialmente *flash mob* spettacolari in cui fan delle narrazioni zombiche sfilano per le strade di città e metropoli per inscenare una apocalissi zombie (de Valo, 2010), nel caso specifico dell’evento romano gli organizzatori mostrano un’evidente consapevolezza del significato politico dell’uso della metafora zombica. Si legge infatti nel comunicato degli organizzatori:

Banche, governi e aziende, ci vogliono tutti omologati e senza anima, spremuti del nostro essere, oltre che dei nostri soldi. Nel giorno della Festa della Repubblica, gli organizzatori intendono dare risalto all’attuale situazione dei cittadini italiani, peggiorata dalla recente crisi economica e delle rigidissime manovre correttive, adottate dallo Stato [...] I nostri governanti ci immaginano così, ridotti come degli zombie, privati del diritto che abbiamo di vivere decorosamente e serenamente la nostra esistenza. Ci vogliono annichilire con questo clima di terrore ed incertezza che, come una presenza malvagia, aleggia quotidianamente generando pessimismo e sconforto. Manifestiamo, dunque, la nostra indignazione e facciamo sentire la nostra presenza massiccia: un’orda di morti viventi che camminano silenziosamente per le vie della capitale d’Italia, perché spesso il silenzio è più assordante delle parole¹.

Tra agosto e novembre 2013, il collettivo artistico giovanile “Fin de un mundo” ha messo in scena tre performance cosplay, in cui membri dell’organizzazione, travestiti da zombie, hanno invaso le strade e la metro di alcuni quartieri di Buenos Aires per protestare contro le politiche di Mauricio Macrì, governatore della città (Gentile, 2013, 2013b). Lo stesso collettivo definisce queste azioni come piccoli attentati artistici, attraverso i quali manifestare contro l’impoverimento culturale, il finanziamento dell’istruzione, la privatizzazione degli spazi culturali popolari. “Fin de un mundo” definisce lo zombie PRO (o “prombie”) come “una metafora”, “un archetipo moderno”, un simbolo utile per smuovere le coscienze e combattere la monotonia culturale. In una dichiarazione alla stampa, il collettivo afferma che le performance artistiche, volte a riappropriarsi degli spazi cittadini attraverso azioni ad alto impatto, sono ispirate a quattro valori: critica sociale, ironia, humour e sperimentazione.

¹Il comunicato è riportato dalla rivista Horror Magazine ed è consultabile all’indirizzo <http://www.horrormagazine.it/6786/zombie-walk-a-roma> (ultimo accesso 12/3/2018).

Il terzo e ultimo caso analizzato costituisce forse l'esempio di più clamorosa e ampia protesta contro il capitalismo globale: si tratta della performance inscenata da oltre cento attivisti del collettivo “1000 Gestalten”, che il 6 luglio 2017 hanno sfilato per oltre due ore per le strade di Amburgo, città in cui si sarebbe tenuto, di lì a poco, il G20. Ricoperti di argilla grigia, a passo lentissimo, gli attivisti-zombie hanno invaso la città teutonica, barcollando incerti e afasici. L'obiettivo della sfilata era protestare in forma creativa contro l'impatto devastante del tecnocapitalismo sulle vite di migliaia di giovani (e meno giovani). Anche qui le parole del collettivo sono inequivocabili: «Our campaign is a further symbol for the fact that many people do not want to put up with the destructive impact of capitalism any longer. What will save us in the end is not our account balance but someone who will offer their holding hand» (Roxborough, 2017). La performance si concludeva con i non-morti che, scrollandosi di dosso l'argilla, recuperavano i colori e tornavano ad una vita, simbolicamente liberata dalle vessazioni del sistema capitalista².

Appare, dunque, piuttosto evidente l'orientamento anticapitalista degli usi politici dello zombie nelle performance cosplay della Generazione Y. Occorre ora chiedersi a quali teorie o produzioni culturali si riconduca una interpretazione dello zombie in questa prospettiva.

La produttività simbolica della metafora dello zombie determina un insieme complesso di associazioni. Si può partire dall'idea di una *zombie politics*, ovvero di una politica sviluppata da una classe dirigente di morti viventi, il cui obiettivo è restare al potere, seminando ovunque morte, ingiustizia e disgregazione sociale (Giroux, 2011). In questa chiave, i dogmi del neoliberismo sono le fondamenta di una cultura della crudeltà, che perpetra disuguaglianze e iniquità, esercitando una sistematica violenza soprattutto sui più giovani. Le proteste argentine contro i tagli all'istruzione e alla cultura del governo Macrì, prima citate, rivelano una resistenza al progetto neoliberista di asservire globalmente i saperi al controllo, riducendoli a fattori di produzione utili al capitale. Il progetto di una zombificazione della formazione, attraverso una pedagogia zombie (Carrington *et al.*, 2016), e dell'università, mediante la diffusione della “cultura della valutazione” e la proliferazione del lavoro burocratico (Whelan, Walker, Moore, 2013, Chicchi, 2016), sono in realtà tasselli di un pervasivo progetto di trasformazione politica, che, per Giroux (2011), si traduce in un depotenziamento delle assemblee e delle istituzioni democratiche, nella depoliticizzazione delle volontà individuali e, infine, nella riduzione dei processi elettori e decisionali a un mero *zombie theater*. La teoria di una *zombie politics*, in cui lo zombie è metafora della condizione delle classi politiche, si fonda su uno spostamento del potere decisionale dalle tradizionali istituzioni democratiche ai poteri finanziari e, pertanto, va necessariamente collegata alla discussione su uno *zombie capitalism* (Harman, 2012).

McNally (2011) spiega come già in Karl Marx il capitalismo può essere analizzato nei termini di una storia dell'orrore. Nell'ambito di una vera e propria *monsteroLOGY* del capitale, Marx delinea un'analisi del capitalismo come storia dell'orrore, attraverso un immaginario

²Alcuni video della performance sono disponibili su YouTube: si vedano, per esempio, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F2D86oWtgj8> e <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9HVR7C2-TkQ>.

gotico, tra vampiri, licantropi e, appunto, zombie. Secondo McNally, in questo framework teorico, il lavoro zombie produce una zombificazione del lavoratore, attraverso l'alienazione e la reificazione. McNally sottolinea che per Marx non è solo il lavoratore ad essere alienato, ma anche lo stesso capitalista, poiché è il capitale stesso una forza zombie, che trasforma i "padroni" in morti viventi: in altri termini, se il proletario è il lavoro reificato, il capitalista è capitale reificato (McNally, 2011: 265). Sintetizzando, possiamo affermare che queste teorie usano lo zombie come metafora del sistema capitalistico e individuano nel neoliberismo un insieme di dispositivi in grado di produrre la morte simbolica degli individui, delle libertà e delle idee (Newitz, 2006).

La metafora dello zombie è applicabile, dunque, all'intera organizzazione politico-economica occidentale. Tuttavia, negli esempi citati, l'appropriazione della figura del morto vivente da parte dei movimenti giovanili anticapitalisti si riconnette soprattutto alla metafora del lavoratore-zombie, ridotto a condizioni di vita inaccettabili e senza alcuna prospettiva di autodeterminazione e libertà. In altri termini, se, come visto, la teoria dello *zombie capitalism* ha ottenuto una discreta fortuna, ancor più efficace sembra essere il campo discorsivo dei *corporate survivors*, che Golub e Lane (2015: 48) definiscono come

the multitude of workers trying to survive in today's volatile and arguably terrifying labor market (...) It is these people — the unemployed, the underemployed and the insecurely employed — who most resemble the haggard, resilient survivors of the zombie-riddled landscapes of popular culture, surviving day by day in hostile, uncertain environments while managing an unending but ever-changing set of demands on their minds, their bodies and their souls.

Il concetto di moltitudine ben si presta a legare simbolicamente lo zombie alla classe lavoratrice di individui impoveriti, che vagano disperatamente tra le rovine del capitalismo provando a reperire le risorse minime per la mera sopravvivenza. Per comprendere fino in fondo le implicazioni culturali e teoriche del concetto di moltitudine, occorre ricordare, con Ronchi (2015: 25-26), che «non esiste lo zombi (...) esistono solo *gli* zombi. Gli zombi sono 'molteplicità senza uno', massa oncologica». Questa massa informe, che produce un collasso strutturale della civiltà occidentale (Graziani 2017), trova una prima teorizzazione, addirittura nel concetto di *onkos* nel *Parmenide* di Platone, che, sempre secondo Ronchi (2015), si interroga su cosa accadrebbe qualora "i molti" sfuggissero a un principio ordinatore. *Onkos* rinvia perciò a questa moltitudine, che si riproduce illimitatamente e infinitamente, e diventerà, per analogia, anche la radice etimologica con cui si denominano le patologie tumorali. Il terrore della massa che sfugge al controllo dell'ordine costituito e soverte le strutture politiche pervade, com'è noto, la storia del pensiero occidentale, fin dalla Rivoluzione Francese e si riverbera in una serie di riflessioni, teorie e opere di natura filosofica e sociologica (per un quadro d'insieme si rinvia a Curti, 2018). Come scrive ancora Ronchi (2015: 48), non è un caso che il pericolo simbolico che le orde di zombie costituiscono per le società tecnocapitaliste dell'era digitale è assimilabile al terrore suscitato dalle masse proletarie in tutto l'Occidente dopo

la Rivoluzione d’Ottobre. A partire da questa possibilità teorica, possiamo rinvenire due riferimenti socioculturali che spiegano come la centralità del concetto di moltitudine (che non coincide con quello di massa) operi da baricentro per le rappresentazioni zombiche dell’era digitale. Il primo rinvio, diretto e inevitabile, è al pensiero di Hardt e Negri (2002, 2004), per i quali l’Impero globale può essere sconfitto solo dalla moltitudine, concepita come “carne della vita”, “pura potenzialità”, come un “mostro rivoluzionario”. Questo «assembramento caotico, incoerente ed eccessivo» (Bonì 2016: 53) si nutre della resistenza degli sfruttati in opposizione alle forze di morte e oppressione del capitale globale. Tralasciando le dimensioni politiche e biopolitiche dei testi di Hardt e Negri, il loro concetto di moltitudine è quanto di più vicino a una concezione sovversiva delle formazioni di zombie che, riproducendosi infinitamente, invadono e contaminano gli spazi vitali del capitalismo contemporaneo. Il secondo riferimento è direttamente *Land of the Dead* di Romero, in cui gli zombie sono rappresentati come pura forza lavoro³, come “ultimi fra gli ultimi” o, in termini sociologici, autentiche “vite di scarto” (Bauman, 2007). Tuttavia, sono proprio i *living dead* a sviluppare una sorta di coscienza di classe, come scrive Lutz (2010), portando l’assedio alla residenza blindata di Kaufman, il “padrone” oppressivo e spietato. È a questa concezione degli zombie come moltitudine di diseredati e sfruttati, che si ribellano alla governamentalità del tecnocapitalismo, che si rifanno le performance zombiche che abbiamo analizzato in precedenza.

La condizione del morto vivente si estende ad una intera generazione, privata di risorse e orizzonti di vita, in un contesto di mediatizzazione della cultura e della società (Lundby, 2009, 2014). L’uso politico dello zombie da parte dei Millennials deve necessariamente passare attraverso forme di sovversione delle logiche mediatiche.

Media, consumo/lavoro digitale e sovversione performativa

Lo zombie con cui si confrontano i Millennials è una figura dal potenziale metaforico più esteso che in passato. Essa, infatti, non si connette solo all’alienazione del lavoro, ma anche a quella del consumo e, in particolare, del consumo mediale. Un prodotto audiovisivo essenziale per comprendere questo processo di simbolizzazione è la serie televisiva britannica *Dead Set* (2008), composta da un’unica stagione da cinque episodi e significativamente scritta da Charlie Brooker, creatore di un altro culto seriale, *Black Mirror* (2011 – in corso), centrato su una visione critica della società digitale (Tirino, 2017, Garofalo, 2017). La serie narra di un’epidemia zombica che travolge l’Inghilterra, salvo i pochi concorrenti del reality show *Big Brother*, che sono confinati in un’abitazione isolata in virtù delle regole restrittive della trasmissione circa i contatti con l’esterno. Soltanto quando il virus è ormai diffuso, i concorrenti vengono a conoscenza del pericolo che corrono e della conseguente necessità di prepararsi a difendere la loro stessa vita. Come scrive Bonì (2016: 84)

³Ringrazio Giso Amendola per i preziosi spunti critici donati su *Land of the Dead*.

gli autori focalizzano l'attenzione del pubblico sulla relazione tra gli zombie e la produzione e il consumo dei media. La metafora è chiara: gli spettatori televisivi – e i consumatori di media in generale – sono come gli zombie di *Dead Set*. Non più solo *walking dead*, essi diventano soprattutto *watching dead*.

Nell'ambito di una visione critica dei *media studies*, sono ricorrenti le posizioni secondo cui le industrie mediali sfruttano il lavoro del pubblico per trarne profitti e vantaggi, ad esempio trasformando l'attività di spettatore/consumatore mediale in un valore da tesorizzare mediante la vendita agli inserzionisti pubblicitari di informazioni sui loro gusti e sulle loro preferenze. Questo tipo di critica, che precede l'avvento dei media digitali, si ripropone più recentemente con le teorie sul *digital labour* (Scholz, 2013) e sul *free labour* (Terranova, 2000): nel primo caso, l'accento è posto sul fatto che, nel mediascape contemporaneo, gli utenti sono anche produttori di contenuti e delle comunità e degli ambienti entro cui questi contenuti circolano; nel secondo, si paragonano gli utenti del Web a “schiavi”, che, quasi come spettri o non-morti (Zwick, Bonsu, Darmody, 2008), svolgono un'attività continua e ininterrotta, quasi una nuova forma di lavoro proletarizzato. In questa chiave, infatti, attività di consumo mediale, come generare contenuti per piattaforme quali Facebook, Twitter o TripAdvisor, si traduce in realtà in una produzione di valore, non retribuita, poiché la redditività di queste imprese mediali si regge sulla possibilità di profilare gli utenti sulla scorta dei contenuti prodotti. A ciò va aggiunto che i media mobili digitali favoriscono una erosione dei confini tra tempo libero e tempo di consumo/lavoro, rendendo i soggetti sempre raggiungibili, nel nome di una flessibilità che sottopone il tempo a una nuova vigilanza e ad una nuova, più estesa e performante, forma di controllo (Sennett, 1999).

Inoltre, il discorso sul *dark side* delle industrie mediali digitali è ben più vasto e, inserendosi in un framework complesso (e in qualche misura contradditorio) come la svolta apocalittica negli studi sul digitale (Balbi, 2018), rende possibile l'applicazione della metafora del morto vivente anche ai lavoratori di Amazon o delle imprese della *sharing economy* (Foodora, Deliveroo, Uber e così via). I freelance assunti da queste organizzazioni, sia che svolgano un lavoro creativo, sia che ne svolgano uno fisico, sono soggetti ricattabili in un sistema che zombifica il lavoratore, esposto a una competitività estrema che lo rende carne sacrificabile non appena smetta di essere produttivo, spesso senza poter neppure contare sulle reti di protezione del welfare tradizionale. Si tratta di una forza lavoro che le retoriche della rivoluzione digitale hanno ignorato e nascosto, favorendo un dibattito centrato sugli algoritmi e sulla loro capacità di generare automaticamente lavoro e reddito (Ciccarelli, 2018). Infine, nuovi approcci nell'ambito dei *media studies*, riassumibili nel framework del *digital materialism* (Tirino, 2017b), portano alla luce la dimensione materiale del lavoro digitale, sottolineando nel contempo lo sfruttamento della manodopera (soprattutto, ma non solo, nei Paesi di estrazione delle materie prime) per la produzione di dispositivi, reti e connessioni con cui operiamo quotidianamente.

Tornando a *Dead Set*, il merito di questa serie è di aver posto in rilievo i processi di zombificazione non solo delle audience dell'era digitale, ma anche delle professioni creative delle industrie mediali. La serie rende trasparente l'applicabilità della metafora zombica alla condizione esistenziale dei lavoratori della televisione, soprattutto Millennials, estensibile però tout court a buona parte della forza lavoro: nei nuovi scenari dell'economia digitale, dove i dogmi della flessibilità, del “presentismo”, della formazione permanente, della fusione tra spazi di lavoro e spazi di vita e tra tempo di lavoro e tempo libero (con la richiesta di un'adesione emotiva, pàtica e quasi devozionale ai valori dell'azienda), si profila una inedita figura di *dead man working* (Cederström, Fleming, 2012). Sorvolando sul fatto che *Dead Set* attinge un livello di analisi così profondo da utilizzare la metafora zombica, oltre che per il pubblico e i lavoratori delle industrie culturali, anche per gli stessi concorrenti del Grande Fratello – forza lavoro a basso costo, sorta di “celetoi” (celebrità-asteroidi) (Rojek, 2001), facilmente sostituibile, da dare in pasto ai network e al pubblico, ci sembra opportuno ricordare qui, che, proprio nell'episodio *Fifteen Million Merits* di *Black Mirror*, la connessione tra la zombificazione del pubblico e quella delle nuove celebrità è evidenziata con notevole carica metaforica. La trama, scritta dallo stesso Brooker insieme a Kanaq Huq, narra di un futuro distopico nel quale tutti sono costretti a pedalare su cyclette, mentre possono consumare contenuti medi (show comici, videogames, porno) e accumulare punteggio da spendere per acquistare cibo e, soprattutto, per provare a cimentarsi come concorrente in una serie di talent show. L'unica via di fuga da una condizione di mera sottomissione è accadere a questo tipo di trasmissioni: in realtà, però, si tratta di passare dalla schiavitù dello sfruttamento della forza lavoro (che produce energia in cambio di crediti) ad una schiavitù fatta di false celebrità, che acquistano notevole fama e guadagni per brevissimi periodi.

Se nel citato episodio di *Black Mirror* non compare alcuno zombie (la condizione di zombie è puramente “virtuale”), *Dead Set* utilizza lo zombie come metafora di una condizione di passività pervasiva dell'intero sistema di produzione e consumo dei media. In questo senso, se, come abbiamo scritto, la mediatizzazione della cultura implica che le narrazioni e le autonarrazioni attraverso cui i soggetti e le comunità si rappresentano passino necessariamente per canali medi, si registra un cortocircuito per cui l'uso politico della figura dello zombie si indebolisce nella misura in cui è essa stessa inserita in circuiti zombificanti come quelli dei mezzi di comunicazione digitale. In altre parole, qualsiasi narrazione che usi lo zombie come simbolo politico di rivolta e ribellione all'alienazione e alla reificazione degli individui, attraverso il lavoro e il consumo dell'economia capitalistica digitale, corre il rischio di entrare nel flusso continuo di contenuti medi consumati da un pubblico-zombie e prodotti da lavoratori-zombie.

Affinché possa mirare ad una costruzione simbolica più efficace, l'appropriazione della metafora zombica da parte dei Millennials deve dunque assumere una forma diversa dalle tradizionali rappresentazioni medi (film, serie televisiva, fumetto). In questa prospettiva, le

zombie walk costituiscono un esempio molto interessante di un tipo di performance corporea, in cui lo statuto ribelle della figura zombica è inscritto nel corpo stesso dei performer e si manifesta attraverso una occupazione del territorio urbano della metropoli. Una prima domanda che occorre porsi a proposito di questi eventi è se essi rientrino oppure no tra i fenomeni cosplay. Se intesa in senso generico, come nella sopracitata definizione dell’Oxford Dictionary, la concezione del cosplay può essere agevolmente applicata alle tre performance citate in precedenza. La carica metaforica dello zombie si coniuga qui con il potenziale performativo della subcultura cosplay, che, come abbiamo scritto poco sopra, intrattiene con la cultura dominante di appartenenza – quella dei media e, segnatamente, del fandom - un rapporto di contestazione e sovversione (sul rapporto tra cultura e subcultura si veda Hebdige, 2017). Così reinterpretate, le *zombie walk* possono essere lette in quanto atti performativi di riappropriazione generazionale del potenziale sovversivo dello zombie, finalizzati a reinscriverne il portato scandaloso e ribelle nel tessuto materiale dei corpi di quegli stessi cosplayer Millennials, zombificati dal sistema socioeconomico tecnocapitalista. Tale margine di manovra riservato ad alcune formazioni tra le audience mediali - gli zombie cosplayer nel caso specifico - dovrebbe spingere anche a rivalutare gli spazi partecipativi, comunque conquistabili dai pubblici: in altre parole, se gli entusiasmi legati al protagonismo dei *prosumer* nell’era della convergenza digitale (Jenkins, 2007) hanno lasciato il passo a concezioni sempre più critiche sul potere dei media, fino alla cosiddetta svolta apocalittica nei *media studies*, le performance zombiche live confermano il potenziale non del tutto espresso dalle culture *grassroots*.

In particolare, la performance amburghese valorizza la carica antagonista degli eventi dal basso, in grado di mettere in scena una riappropriazione e una risemantizzazione dei simboli circolanti nella cultura mainstream. La performance “1000 Gestalten”, infatti, si basa sulla rivendicazione della natura di moltitudine delle orde zombiche, rovesciandone, però, il senso: se, infatti, in buona parte delle narrazioni mainstream gli zombie sono formazioni pericolose, instabili e, in definitiva, carne putrescente di *dropout*, marginali ed esclusi da eliminare dal tessuto sociale, i Millennials rivendicano attraverso il cosplay questa moltitudine di reietti ed esclusi come unica opportunità di portare al collasso un sistema crudele e feroce, che ne preclude la libertà, lo sviluppo e le possibilità di realizzazione. Inscenare la morte per garantirsi la vita: questa, in conclusione, la partita in gioco nelle performance degli zombie cosplayer della Generazione Y.

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The representation of legal executions in American TV series: the paradox of an inaccessible public death

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Abstract

67 episodes, broadcast on American networks from 1950 to 2009, presenting the topic of legal execution are analyzed. Narrative and framing devices are described. During the Networks Era, access to the execution chamber is denied: as in real life, the public cannot see and judge executions, democratic review of this procedure is denied. The hero and the elite are the only worthy witnesses. In the more recent episodes, representations are diverse, access to the death chamber is common. Militant representations (retentionist and abolitionist), the adoption of the lethal injection (respecting the modern norms of the “good death”) and the reinstatement of the death penalty justified by the “super due process” probably account for these changes. While the paternalistic messages (defending a private execution) persist in the conservative programs, more liberal storylines stage and request access to the execution chamber to encourage the public to judge the procedure.

Keywords: execution, lethal injection, capital punishment, “good death”, violence on television

In December 1951, the National Association of Radio and Television Broadcasters adopted the Code of Practices for Television Broadcasters. The preamble reminds broadcasters “that television’s relationship with the viewers is that between guest and host.” Television content is then regulated by broad principles to make sure that programs provide entertainment for the whole family and avoid objectionable images and ideas – as any good guest would do. Thus, “the detailed presentation of brutality or physical agony by sight or by sound [is] not permissible.” Moreover, “[violence and illicit sex] should not be presented without indications of the resultant retribution and punishment.” These latter dispositions illustrate one paradox surrounding representations of legal executions in American TV series: capital punishment is at the same time required on-screen as a form of retribution and forbidden as a lethal violence. Despite this obstacle, legal executions and the death penalty are a common topic in American television shows, which is probably a result of another paradox. For its proponents, the legal killing is a moral lesson, deterring potential criminal activity. Consequently, this legal act has to be public, if it is to be efficient. Yet executions take place inside the prison, in front of a restricted number of authorized witnesses, including members of the press. So this death is private and, at the same time, symbolically public.

In this paper, we discuss the representation of politics, since capital punishment is the most severe expression of the state’s power on individuals. Legal executions are a specific case: this political event is invisible, since recording devices are strictly forbidden in the execution

chamber. This absence of visual support has led to the conduct of several studies on the translation into words of this procedure by journalists in the news and the press (Sarat, 2014; Fan, Keltner & Wyatt, 2002). However, representation studies of fictional executions are partial in the field of popular culture (Lesser, 1994), cinema (O'Sullivan, 2003) and television series (Wardle & Gans-Boriskin, 2004).

We propose to analyze televised fiction using a structuralist approach focused on the identification of narrative and framing patterns, and the interpretation of their political and social meaning. TV programs are treated here as a source material for the study of social values and norms, as well as public opinion, given their production conditions. In fact, exploring the specific framing of fictional legal killings is informative on social values through the distinction between shown and suggested content. Actions on-screen are considered appropriate, those left off-screen offending, violent or obscene (Prince, 2003). Framing is a selecting tool, and it defines what the viewer should not see. While dying characters and dead bodies appear on-screen, even in the early days of television, executions and executed characters seem less visible, indicating that this death is special. We will study this paradoxical death, which is legal but also premeditated and violent.

To perform this study, we determined a corpus of episodes meeting two criteria. We selected episodes of the top-30-rated series broadcast on networks. These programs are of particular interest because they are widely popular and have to propose consensual content. We investigated episode synopses on this list of shows and retained those depicting a character in a state of "imminent execution", i.e. planned in the next 24 hours. The corpus analyzed today is constituted of 67 episodes, aired from 1950 to 2009 during prime-time (7 to 11 pm)¹. It covers a period starting when television becomes a mass media, and ending after a 2008 Supreme Court decision (*Baze v. Rees*). Indeed, after a few months of moratorium, the Court allowed lethal injections to resume, considering this method respects the Eighth Amendment of the Constitution (forbidding "cruel and unusual punishments"). We included episodes produced during the 2008-2009 season.

A preliminary analysis reveals two distinct periods: most of the corpus was aired during the Networks Era², between 1950 and 1974 (with 44 episodes for 24 years). Then, during nine years, no episodes met the two criteria. From 1984 to 2009, popular series presented once again imminent executions, but less frequently (23 episodes for 25 years). Interestingly, this chronology matches with state-sanctioned killings in the United States: between 1968 and 1976, there was no execution in the country, then this punishment was rarely used until 1984 (when more than ten prisoners were put to death). In 1972, with *Furman v. Georgia*, the Supreme Court declared capital punishment unconstitutional, but let the states reform their penal codes. With *Gregg v. Georgia*, decided in 1976, the Court validated the new codes, allowing the resumption of this practice. This reversal explains the decade-long *de facto* moratorium on executions in the United States (Bohm, 2012).

We will study the tension between the privacy of the convict's death and the public access to a legal killing, a political act and the most severe punishment in the American justice system. Often presented in the studied episodes, this conflict echoes the real-life debate on this issue. Moreover, the fictional representation of executions has evolved: whereas the execution would remain private during the Networks Era, privatization has been debated on-screen from the

¹ Although exhaustiveness was our goal, the method used to identify episodes is not infallible since synopses available are more or less detailed depending on the source.

² Before the creation of the first cable channels in the 1970s, American television was limited to three national networks.

1980s on, and access to the execution chamber has been given to the viewer. We will describe the representation of these deaths in the two periods and propose hypotheses to account for the differences. Beyond changes in the production and broadcasting conditions, access and request for access have become part of the conversation on capital punishment. Indeed, accessibility is a political issue.

From denying to granting access to the execution chamber

Narrative devices before and after the 1970s: non-deadly execution scenes tend to disappear

From the 1980s on, fiction has looked like reality, the social commentary has been more direct, contrary to the Networks Era, which was dominated by westerns. Episodes from the latter period in our corpus represent this pattern: 34 episodes fall into the western category. In total, 38 episodes, out of 44, take place in a non-contemporary setting. The context of the stories is contemporary in six episodes only, with detective shows (*Peter Gunn*, and *Checkmate*) and dramatic anthologies (*Alfred Hitchcock Presents* and *Climax!*). So, in most cases, access to contemporary executions is denied by the setting of the series itself: the procedure mostly unfolds in a mythical past.

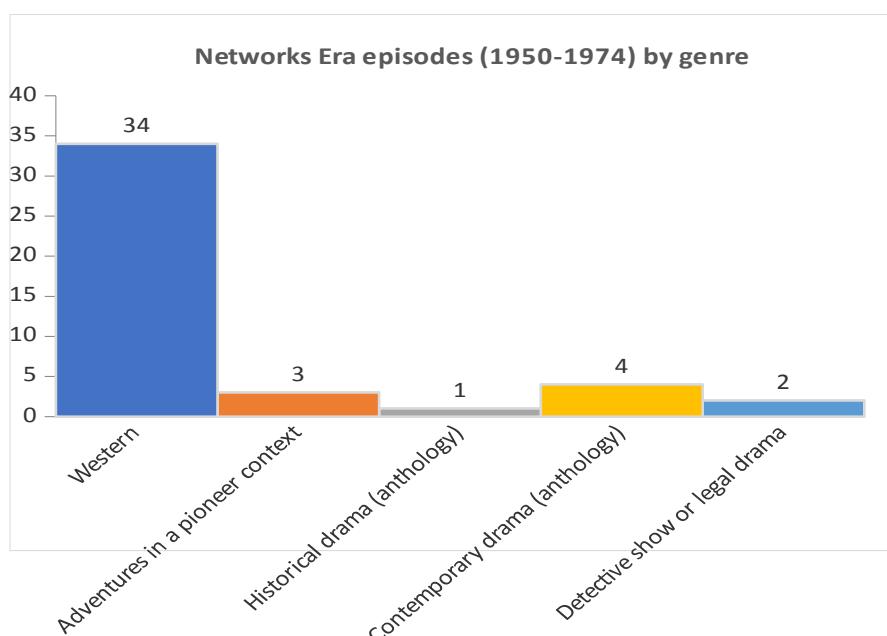


Figure 1 - Networks Era episodes (1950-1974) by genre

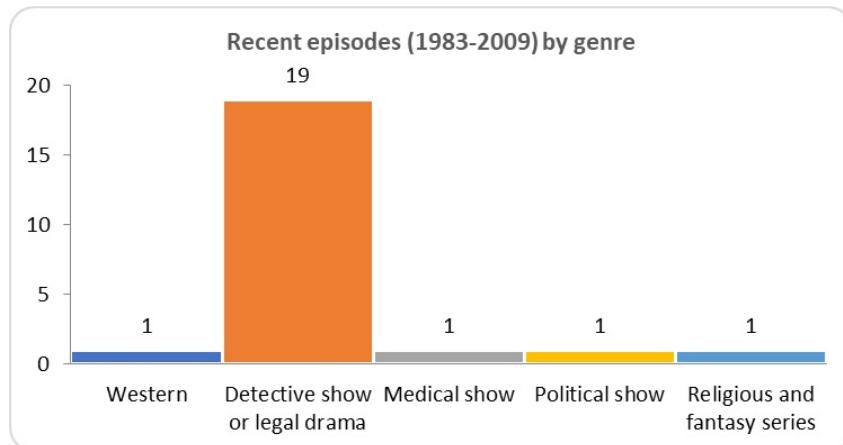


Figure 2 - 1984-2009 episodes by genre

On the other hand, the 1984-2009 episodes are set up in a contemporary context. Most of them are detective shows and legal dramas such as *LA Law* or *Criminal Minds*. Executions also take place in a medical series (*Grey's Anatomy*), a political drama (*The West Wing*) and in a religious show (*Touched by an Angel*), only two happen in a non-contemporary context³. Thus, since 1984, inmates have been put to death in a world similar to the viewer's world: they have had access to "realistic executions".

Apart from the setting, storylines are another device which denies or grants access to a legal homicide. From 1950 to 1974, a quarter of the episodes present no execution scene: the state-sanctioned homicide is canceled early in most cases. The 33 remaining episodes stage 35 execution scenes. We consider that an execution scene starts when a prisoner is taken out of their last place of detention to be brought to the place of execution, which is usually called the "last walk". The most common narrative device in those sequences is the "interrupted execution scene". The character is released on the spot, usually because their innocence is revealed at the last moment. The rescue of the convict occurs in 13 execution sequences. The promised death does not take place, even in the non-realistic western context, which in effect denies access to the viewer. This also suggests a reluctance to kill the prisoner. Another recurring narrative figure is the "non-fatal execution". The condemned is here subjected to the entire procedure but survives to it because the execution apparatus was sabotaged (blanks are placed in the firing squad rifles in *Zorro Fights is Father, Zorro*, 1958 for example), or malfunctioned (the rope breaks during a hanging in *An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge*, *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*, 1958). Four scenes are "non-fatal".

To summarize, 18 scenes on 35 (or almost half) do not result in death. The character in a state of imminent execution survives in 26 episodes. Consequently, narrative conventions of the Networks Era do not give access to the procedure or give access to it when nothing irreparable happens.

³ In *The Witch's Curse (Murder, She Wrote*, 1992) a convicted witch is burned at the stake by Puritans; *Abduction (2) (Dr Quinn, Medicine Woman*, 1994) presents a hanging in the context of a western.



Figure 3 - Typology of execution scenes for the 1950-974 period (left) and the 1984-2009 period (right)

During the 1984-2009 period, the inmate's death is much more common. Out of the 19 execution scenes, one is "interrupted" and another "non-fatal". The inmate only survives in five of the more recent episodes. Consequently, the figure of the timely rescue of the innocent almost disappears after the 1970s and the viewer has access to fatal executions.

Framing devices before and after the 1970s: more frequent explicit on-screen images since 1984



Figure 4 - Access is denied: the execution is behind the door (Death House Testament, Peter Gunn, 1958); copyright Peter Gunn - Season 1, Liberation, 2007

When the condemned men actually die in Networks Era episodes, they do it off-screen. Two devices render their dying inaccessible. The "cut execution scene" is the first one. We characterize a scene as such when the prisoner starts his "last walk" but the scene is abruptly cut, before they are killed, by the editing: another scene in another location or the credits start. The outcome yet is unambiguous; the character dies "behind the door of the death chamber" (or the symbolic curtain of the credits), whose threshold the viewer cannot cross. The most

violent part of the procedure is beyond their reach and this happens in one out of five execution sequences. The “behind the door” figure takes place for example at the beginning of *Death House Testament* (*Peter Gunn*, 1958) in a contemporary setting, and “after the credits” in western episodes such as *Born to Hang* (*Gunsmoke*, 1957).

The second device, which renders executions inaccessible, is the displacement at the moment of dying (notion defined by Prince, 2003). This framing convention we call “fatal execution with displacement” occurs in nine execution scenes (or about a quarter). By this convention, the camera’s point of view stays in the place of execution, but cannot capture the prisoner’s passing because reaction shots of the witnesses are on-screen. In most cases, a sound effect signals the moment the killing device is activated: the sound of a whiplash (*Tolliver Bender, Wanted: Dead or Alive*, 1960), the trap of the gallows being sprung (*Eight Hours to Die, The Rifleman*, 1958), or rifle shots (*The Prisoners, Daniel Boone*, 1966). This staging device is used in all fatal execution scenes of this part of the corpus, except for one in *An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge* (*Alfred Hitchcock Presents*, 1958).



Figure 5 - The displacement figure: the prisoner walks up the scaffold (left), followed by a reaction shot while the trap is being sprung (right) in The Mescalero Curse (The Rifleman, 1961); copyright Rifleman Season 3, volume 2, Team Marketing, 2016

So, with the “cut execution scene” and the “fatal execution scene with displacement”, the viewer does not have access to the actual dying. Framing patterns are more diverse in the latest part of the corpus, and grant access to the chamber and the moment of dying. Indeed, while the electric chair was “behind the door” in the Networks Era episodes, it is on-screen in three episodes, about to be activated in *Fry Me to the Moon* (*LA Law*, 1986) for example. We witness one asphyxiation in the gas chamber (*The Last Gasp*, *LA Law*, 1990). The viewer crosses the threshold of the execution chamber and shares the points of view of all people in attendance, inmate included. Moreover, fatal execution scenes are more frequent (10 out of 19). The classical framing with displacement is used in four sequences (in *Riding the Lightning*, *Criminal Minds*, 2006, notably), but we also observe new figures. The explicit view of the death-row inmate, shot with a face close-up when he dies (with or without focus) is the most remarkable one.



Figure 6 - The viewer enters in the execution chamber (Riding the Lightning, Criminal Minds, 2006, left, copyright Criminal Minds, Season 1, Disney, 2007); and they can sometimes see the moment of death (12:01 AM, Numb3rs, 2009, right, copyright Numb3rs Complete Boxset, Paramount, 2011)

Distance created by non-realistic genres like the western, “interrupted execution scenes”, “non-fatal execution scenes”, “cut execution scenes” and “fatal execution scenes with displacement”: the viewer cannot apprehend contemporary legal killings in televised fiction during the Networks Era. The most important part of the process is off-screen. This apparent reluctance to show the legal taking of life, performed in retribution for a serious crime (usually murder) raises questions. Were executions considered an objectionable content? On the other hand, is the disappearance of these devices in the most recent period a sign of changed social norms?

Changes explained by production and broadcasting conditions?

During the Networks Era, fiction faced production and broadcasting constraints; the content of the programs was restricted by the obligation to be a good guest, as evidenced by the Code of Practices. The “classical age” of television (1947-1975) was dominated by the monopoly of the three national networks (CBS, NBC and ABC). They benefitted from a “captive audience” but still had to attract the largest possible public to be profitable. Consequently, programming was consensual and conservative, usually based on the theory of the “least objectionable program” proposed by Paul L. Klein, a high executive with NBC in the 1960s (Edgerton, 2007). When choosing their shows, viewers allegedly favor those offering no offending content.

In this context, non-realistic genres seem to be ideal to tackle a controversial topic. The flawed western justice system could be seen as pure illusion in a fantasy world, or a fact of the past. It could also be construed as a metaphor of the contemporary justice system. This ambivalence enabled networks to air content satisfying every customer since public opinion has been divided on the retention of capital punishment, as the Gallup polls indicate (see figure 7). To our mind, the narrative conventions of this period suggest that punishment is necessary, since exacting retribution upon a guilty person is not questioned in the corpus – which could satisfy a conservative audience. However, the procedure is not deadly and the possibility of a miscarriage of justice is raised – which could satisfy a more liberal audience. There is no lethal

violence on screen: the show is suitable for families despite the topic. Seemingly, the networks tried to please everyone even when approaching sensitive issues.

The more realistic narrative conventions and the harsher tone described in the most recent part of the corpus match with the production context. From the Eighties on, cable channels have competed with networks. The audience has no longer been captive but more demanding and volatile. The advertisers have started to target “quality demographics” (a younger and more urban viewership, then teenagers in the 1990s), forcing networks to develop “niche marketing”. In this new competition, the cable channels have been exempted from FCC rules on nudity and obscene language, a seductive quality for a large part of the audience. Networks have had to offer edgier programs, and use controversies ripped from the headlines. The time to try to please everyone is bygone, networks can take the risk to alienate part of the public. Politically invested showrunners and series have found a new place on networks in this context (Boutet, 2010; Edgerton, 2007). Writers and showrunners such as David E. Kelley and Aaron Sorkin, for example, proposed episodes criticizing capital punishment while public support for this practice was at its peak during the 1984-2009 period. Studies of media accounts of executions show that reports are written assuming a pro-death audience (Niven, 2002). With this presumed general acceptance, it is possible that fiction does not need to be ambiguous anymore, and “pushing the envelope” is probably even necessary to offer engaging content, with more clearly politically-oriented programs. Furthermore, this issue appears in cop shows, legal and medical dramas, generally broadcast after 10 pm, intended for a more adult viewership. These series often claim to be realistic and educational (explaining forensic sciences, legal argumentation or medical conditions to the viewer). Accessing the death chamber is likely considered as part of the audience’s expectations, deriving from this formulaic unveiling of “hidden truths” (Jost, 2011). All these factors could account for more realistic and partisan representations of capital punishment.

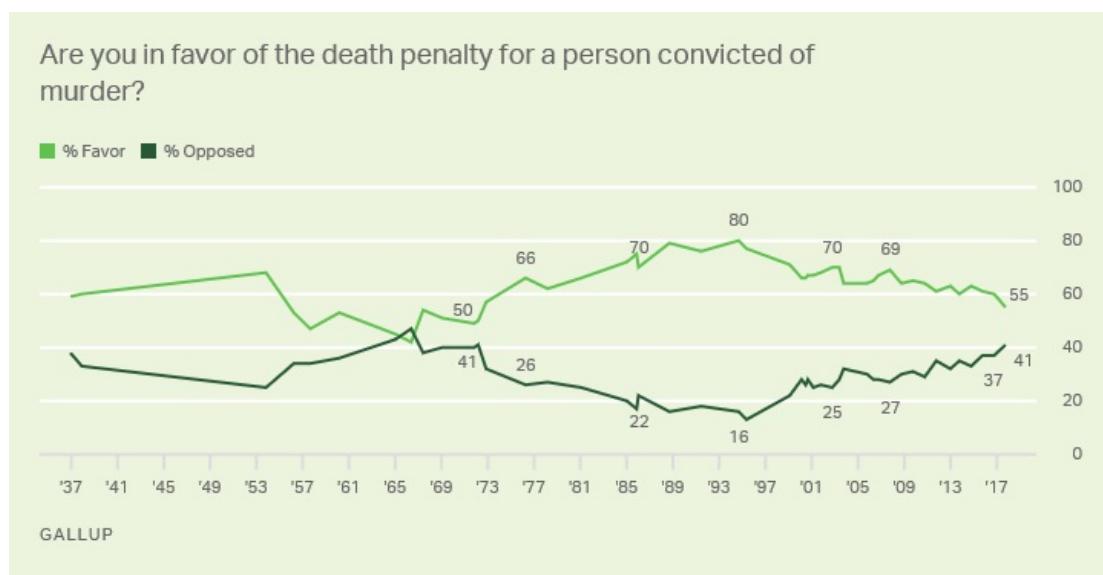


Figure 7 - Gallup historical trends: capital punishment as a divisive social issue
(<http://news.gallup.com/poll/1606/death-penalty.aspx>)

Execution and the "good death"

An access limited in order to respect the principles of the "good death"?

The representation in the “classical age of television” episodes is very consistent and effectively conceals the dying of the convict. In the context of conservative programs, how could we understand this off-screen pattern?

We could conjecture that executions are off-screen because killing or dead bodies are considered too violent or repellent. Yet, an analysis of these 44 episodes invalidates this hypothesis. Indeed, episodes with a fatal execution scene show other deaths on-screen: murders committed by villains, as well as self-defense homicides committed by heroes. The viewer sees characters die, and then dead bodies, whereas prisoners just vanish sometime before their deaths. For example, in *Eight Hours to Die* (*The Rifleman*, 1958), we see two deaths by gunshot, but the condemned man standing on the gallows is the most explicit image of the hanging. This is also true for kids’ shows. In *Outlaw’s Revenge* (*The Lone Ranger*, 1950), the execution scene is cut, but we can see later a character being shot to death. There is a specific framing here: in all 44 episodes the legal killing is consistently less explicit than other forms of death.



Figure 8 - A non-explicit hanging (left) but an explicit murder (right) in *Eight Hours to Die* (*The Rifleman*, 1958); copyright *Rifleman*, Season 1, Volume 1, Team Marketing, 2014

Another hypothesis is that the execution does not respect the norms of the “good death”, and therefore it cannot be on-screen. Sociologists investigating practices surrounding dying and death describe in modern western societies an individualistic trend. Dying people are left to die in hospitals or hospices, which is considered as a sign of the taboo, or denial, of death. The event is less socially-constructed, controlled by traditions, but more intimate (Déchaux, 2004). Capital punishment is a political event, regarding the community, which is why executions used to be public. The withdrawal behind the prison walls is recent and can be construed as a part of this “intimate death” trend since the execution doesn’t occur in front of hundreds of people. In *The Executioners* (*The Virginian*, 1962), the two heroes express the social norm, staged and implicit otherwise, to justify their boycotting the hanging:

The Virginian. *A man's dying, any man's belongs to himself, or any friends he wants close.*

We find here explicitly the “intimate death” norm. In this part of the corpus, the convict’s passing in effect respects this norm. However, the concealment protects the interest of the

individual, while the interest of the community motivates the legal procedure. Preserving the murderer's privacy seems at odds with the purpose of the execution. This norm does not fully explain while the viewer is deprived of the specific moment of dying.

Maybe this hiding is due to the violence of these deaths, violating "good death" norms. In the matter, interpretations of the Eighth Amendment by the Supreme Court are enlightening. In 1878 (*Wilkerson v. Utah*), the Court listed prohibited punishments (like being "emboweled alive"), in effect torturing the condemned. This definition was specified in *In re Kemmler* (1890): are forbidden penalties that "involve torture or lingering death ... something more than the mere extinguishment of life." (Bohm, 2012, p. 126) These decisions give a definition of the "good death": the body must be intact, and death immediate and painless. This could explain why deaths by gunshot or stabbing can be aired: their staging uses the "clutch and fall" convention (Prince, 2003). The character clutches their chest or upper body, then falls to the ground. The process is bloodless and immediate. In real life, electrocution, asphyxiation and hanging damage the body, the process lasts several minutes. Nevertheless, in fiction, those deaths could be made to respect those conditions. The exceptionally explicit hanging in *An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge* (*Alfred Hitchcock Presents*, 1958) confirms that depicting an immediate death, inflicting minimum damage is possible. The main character dies of a broken neck, we can see it in close-up shots, and hear his spine snapping. Therefore, fictional hangings could respect the "good death". A distorted depiction of deaths by other methods could have been created. Consequently, the concealment is not entirely the result of "good death" norm considerations.



Figure 9 - The moment of death emphasized by a color inversion in An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge (Alfred Hitchcock Presents, 1959); copyright: Alfred Hitchcock Presents, season 5, Universal Studios 2012

The reluctance to stage a premeditated and violent killing could be a third factor. However, episodes broadcast during this period represent most of the time the legal homicide as a ceremonial. People in attendance (crowd or witnesses, executioners, and the convict) are quiet and dignified. The execution ritual stages a unanimous consent, prisoner included, even when he is innocent. Characters who fight and scream are exceptions: only in *Cell 227* (*Alfred Hitchcock Presents*, 1960) do we see someone panicking and another resisting. The protocol controls attitudes and actions and insures all consent in the eyes of the viewer. It is also a

moment testing or revealing the manhood of participants. The prisoner shows his courage and reclaims his dignity, as in *Tolliver Bender (Wanted: Dead or Alive, 1960)*:

Tolliver. *All my life I've been dirt, but just this once, when I hang, I want every man in this town to respect me.*

The state-sanctioned killing is represented as a solemn spectacle celebrating law and virility (stoicism, courage, dignity), and not a violent moment. So, the execution protocol can be on the air.

One last hypothesis lies in the setting and legal status of the deaths. While a gallows is on-screen in a kids' western in 1950 (*Outlaw's Revenge, The Lone Ranger*), for the hanging planned in a contemporary setting (*The Hanging Judge, Climax!*, 1956), in a more adult-oriented program, it remains invisible. Concealment is more thorough when the fictional world is lifelike. In *Born to Hang (Gunsmoke, 1957)*, the legal hanging is invisible (the execution scene is cut by the end credits) but the lynching at the beginning of the episode is depicted with details. The killing method is the same, the legal status is the only difference. The viewer can grasp parts of a lynching, but they cannot see the execution.



Figure 10 - The body of the lynching victim is partially on-screen (left) while the legal hanging is cut early by the editing (Born to Hang, Gunsmoke, 1957); copyright Gunsmoke: Third Season, Volume 1, Paramount, 2008

The concealment of the dying convict may have a social component pertaining to the “intimate, painless and immediate” death, but a more political issue seems also to be at play.

The lethal injection: an "ideal" death?

Contrary to the very consistent representations of the classical age of television, the more recent episodes offer disparate depictions and messages, and the inmate’s passing is much more accessible. First of all, the most common method used in real life, lethal injection, is also the most common in this part of the corpus, and the most visible on-screen. Indeed, about 86% of executions from 1983 to 2009 in the U.S. were by lethal injection (according to the Death Penalty Information Center). This is the method planned in 13 episodes and used in 11 execution scenes out of 19.

Chemically-induced deaths are filmed explicitly since the injection apparently respects the norms of the “good death”. The character seems to fall asleep, the body is not disturbed by convulsions or wounded. Dying looks painless and death occurs few seconds after the shot of

drugs. Human intervention is limited since generally a machine injects the products. The medical aspect of the procedure is highlighted by people wearing lab coats, clean and bright execution rooms, and medical equipment. This image is summarized and criticized by a fictional lawyer, Alan Shore, in *Death Be Not Proud* (*Boston Legal*, 2005):

Alan, to Zeke, the inmate. *If you want to be a hero, show people what it really feels like to be executed. We're led to believe it's peaceful, painless, humane even.*

The depiction of a longer agony is limited to one episode where the prisoner appears to suffocate (*The Execution of Catherine Willows*, *CSI*, 2002).

Therefore, the representation of death by lethal injection respects the “good death” norms, which could account for its visibility. It matches with the dominant images of dead bodies on television programs: “neat, sanitized decedents at rest” (Weber, 2013, p.11). Moreover, this method of execution provides also “intimacy” to the death-row inmate since he dies in front of few witnesses. This aspect also appears in several preparation sequences where the convict selects someone to be “his” or “her” witness, we could characterize this type of scene as a new convention (from *A Trip Upstate*, *In the Heat of the Night*, 1989 to *Stairway to Heaven*, *Grey's Anatomy*, 2009).

Accessing is judging

Privacy is defended, only the elite's judgment is worthy and authorized

In episodes aired during the Networks Era, the execution is reserved to a limited audience. Crowds and the viewer are excluded from the sight of the dying man. The viewer can only watch the main character (in most cases) watching the passing (through a reaction shot). For that matter, the hero is stoned-faced or he looks down to avoid staring at the corpse. We see no emotion: he does not judge the procedure, it is as if he just verified that the procedure is carried out. In *The Hanging of Aaron Gibbs* (*Have Gun – Will Travel*, 1961), the only character reacting to the execution is Gibbs' wife, while Paladin, the hero, hardly blinks. Therefore, we could define a “heroic look”, emotionless, taking in only the facts, presented as a model to the audience. The ceremonial is also a teachable moment showing a community, and the main characters, submitting to the law. The viewer is thus encouraged to emulate the hero's obedient attitude.



Figure 11 - The heroic look: Paladin does not react to the hanging (left) in The Hanging of Aaron Gibbs (Have Gun – Will Travel, 1961), Josh looks down (right, center) in Tolliver Bender (Wanted: Dead or Alive, 1960); copyright Have Gun Will Travel: Complete Series Pack, Paramount, 2013 and Wanted: Dead or Alive, The Complete Series - Special Edition, Mill Creek Entertainment, 2013

This figure reminds us in real life of the “gag laws” voted by different states to forbid the press from publishing detailed reports of executions at the turn of the 19th century (Bessler, 1997). Austin Sarat’s study of those reports confirms their factual content, resembling short necrologies (Sarat, 2014). The press testifies that the condemned die, nothing more, just like the fictional “heroic look”. The result is the same: knowing it happened is enough. In consequence, the privatization of executions is acceptable, seeing or reading details is not useful.

Whereas the hero does not judge the procedure, the viewer is judged. Indeed, the convergence of devices organizing the concealment of dying inmates relies on values that are not explained, except in the pilot episode of *The Virginian*. Judge Garth, the moral figure of the series, disapproves of the crowd’s attitude at the hanging:

Judge Garth. [...] *a man's death became a carnival with kids and lemonade!*
 [...]
 Sheriff. *Sorry it didn't happen like you wanted.*
 Judge Garth. *That time will come, a time of dignity.*

This conversation is telling when we confront it to the specific framing of the scene in this episode. The hanged man stays completely off-screen, we only see the scaffold, the rope tied to the trap being cut – and nothing more. Therefore, the viewer is enticed to scrutinize the screen to understand the action. However, there is nothing to see here, as there is nothing to see in all fatal execution scenes with displacement. With his comment, the character blames the crowd’s desire to see a spectacle, but the viewer tuned in for the same purpose. We are then led to look back on our own desire to see (and enjoy) this show. We are likely disappointed since we were promised a death but did not get to see it. The viewer’s voyeuristic drive is frustrated and punished, and they are encouraged to judge themselves for it.



Figure 12 – The framing of the hanging renders the condemned invisible, throughout the entire procedure in the opening sequence of The Executioners (*The Virginian*, 1962); copyright The Virginian, The Complete First Season, Timeless Media, 2010

As a result, the only instance when the right to see a hanging is explicitly discussed confirms that ordinary people are deprived of it for good reasons. The “private execution” norm is reinforced, publicity would make an entertainment out of this ceremonial, because the crowd cannot conquer its lower instincts. Each time we scrutinize a fatal execution scene with

displacement, and end up disappointed, we fail morally because we were trying to satisfy our morbid curiosity.

Fictional and real-life executions are not for the general public, but for worthy people (the main character, the elite). We find echoes of this phenomenon in 19th century writings advocating for the withdrawal of the gallows from public view. From the 1830s, the legal killing, performed in public view, gradually withdrew behind the prison walls. By the 1930s, it took place inside the death chamber, often at night, with a few witnesses. Hangings are gradually considered as bad taste spectacles and “as elites stopped going to hangings, they came to view the crowd as a rabble out for a good time, too caught up in a carnival spirit to appreciate the moral lessons that were being imparted.” (Banner, 2002, p. 146) Michel Foucault (1975) describes the same trend in Europe at the end of the 18th century. Authorities abandoned public executions because the reactions of the crowd could not be controlled and predicted, sometimes people sympathized with the prisoner and their crime (Foucault, 1975, p. 54).

The representations analyzed earlier derive, to our mind, from the same ideology. This privatization is not only rooted in concerns for dignity, it is also a political issue. According to Austin Sarat and Aaron Schuster (1995, p. 426): “At the heart of that debate are certain assumptions about the imagined audience and its capacities, dispositions, and inclinations, and about its prerogative to make judgment about capital punishment”. These recurring representations suggest that punishment changed “from a matter of politics to a matter of administration”, concerning only professionals and experts (Sarat and Schuster, 1995, p. 429), thus a review is not necessary, or even indicated. The viewer and the general public do not get to see, because “control over vision is control over execution itself” (Sarat and Schuster, 1995, p. 429). The concealed legal homicide in network series stages this conservative principle, justifying the lack of democratic oversight over capital punishment.

This is illustrated in this part of the corpus by the lack of images about largely used methods in real life. We noted earlier that only six episodes have a contemporary setting. The execution instrument is totally invisible in five of them (it is evoked in dialogues). *Cell 227* (*Alfred Hitchcock Presents*, 1960) is the exception: the gas chamber is actually on screen, but empty and inactive. The electric chair does not appear on camera, although it is the most common execution method at the time (about 72% of executions according to the DPIC). In two episodes, the method is not clarified at all⁴. The viewer does not get to see executions as they currently occur in their country. Even in fiction, what happens behind the door of the death chamber is not of their concern, those who want to see are voyeurs.

Privacy is discussed, a wide array of emotions and judgments are on-screen

Further evidence that seeing is judging appears in the most recent part of the corpus. Main characters adopt different attitudes during the execution. Emotionless heroes just taking in the dying as a fact can still be seen in several episodes, usually associated with a “law and order” storyline. For example, in *The Execution of Catherine Willows* (CSI, 2002), the eponymous character sits with the victim’s parents, signaling her support, and does not show any emotion. In other episodes, the main character is moved to the point of tears. In several cases, the hero shows empathy for an admitted murderer. The legal killing is staged like a

⁴ The inmates in *Night of Execution* (*Climax!*, 1955) and *Death House Testament* (*Peter Gunn*, 1958) die by means unknown.

moment of trauma for witnesses, revealing its violence by the very emotional reactions of main characters. The new model for the viewer is a compassionate figure. Emotions also overcome inmates: we can see them resisting (*Death Be Not Proud*, *Boston Legal*, 2005), panicking (*Fry Me to the Moon*, *LA Law*, 1986) or speaking their touching last words (*Death Penalty: Final Appeal*, *Cold Case*, 2006).



Figure 13 - Attitudes of main characters during executions: from lack of emotion (The Execution of Catherine Willows, CSI, 2002, left) to pain (The Last Gasp, LA Law, 1990, right); copyright CSI: Crime Scene Investigation Complete, Season 3, Momentum Pictures, 2010 and L.A. Law: Complete Collection, Revelation Films, 2016.

The specific case of the staging of lethal injections calls for a commentary. In six executions, the convict is exposed in a crucifixion-like position. The comparison with the Passion is a striking religious image opened to many interpretations. In the more liberal storylines, this figure looks like the sacrifice of the innocent lamb (in *Cold Case*, the death-row inmate is actually innocent), or a criticism of the religious justification of capital punishment (*Take this Sabbath Day*, *The West Wing*, 2000, ends with a priest summarizing the episode: religions inspired by the Bible do not support the death penalty). In any case, this is a provocative staging, probably intended to spark a reflection on executions (their religious value, their violence).



Figure 14 - The recurring figure of the crucified death-row inmate; left The Execution of Catherine Willows (CSI, 2002) and right Take this Sabbath Day (The West Wing, 2000); copyright CSI: Crime Scene Investigation

Complete Season 3, *Momentum Pictures, 2010* and The West Wing - Season 1 - 7 Complete, Warner Home Video, 2006

The staging and framing of all those emotions humanize the procedure, as well as the people involved, including the guilty inmate. In consequence, episodes without access tend to be conservative, and request for access is part of a liberal agenda. In *Sins of the Father* (*Touched by An Angel*, 1996), the complete lack of information on the execution method, and the “behind the door execution” are associated with the acceptance of capital punishment for a convicted minor, expressed by an angel, with God’s approval. Access is totally denied in a pro-death program. On the contrary, in *Death Be Not Proud* (*Boston Legal*, 2005), the lawyer begs the convict to show his feelings and help people form their judgement:

Alan Shore. *The humane thing to do here, is be afraid. If you want to be a hero, show people what it really feels like to be executed. [...] Whether a person is for or against the death penalty, he or she, should just know what it is. Best way for you to be a hero Zeke, is to be humane.*

Then he forces himself to watch his client resist. Despite the expressed will to inform both proponents and abolitionists, this storyline bets on human compassion. It suggests that the only possible reaction after such a violent sequence, cut before the actual killing, is a negative assessment of the lethal injection and therefore capital punishment.

This access granted more often probably results from the new context surrounding the death penalty. This institution was reinstated in 1976 after a major penal reform. The right to a better protection has been guaranteed to defendants and convicts, especially in capital cases. This “super due process” derives from the “death-is-different principle” formulated by the Supreme Court in *Furman v. Georgia* in 1972. Given the irreversibility of the punishment, the justice system has to be extremely careful and rigorous in order to avoid miscarriages of justice. We hypothesize that these episodes respond, in their own way, to a desire for a review of the “modern era” of capital punishment. In many ways, this reinstatement was considered an experiment aiming at demonstrating the possibility of a justice system free of arbitrariness and actually offering equal protection to vulnerable groups (minorities, disadvantaged people). In our corpus, actors of the justice system often reopen capital cases at the last minute when there is a shadow of a doubt on the legitimacy of a death sentence. Thus, these episodes enact the “super due process” and the experiment seems successful on-screen.

Similarly, the lethal injection was adopted for the first time shortly after *Gregg* (in 1977, in Oklahoma), and carried out for the first time in 1982, in Texas. Scholars and experts consider that this method is a major element in the continued practice of the death penalty (Bohm, 2012) and benefits from a positive image although it has actually been seen in action by a very few people. Access to the execution chamber in fiction probably derives from this situation: televised fiction seemingly offers a realistic depiction and a review to the public. But in conservative programs, the viewer witnesses an “ideal death”, which gives the impression that a review is useless in real life. In other episodes, the image is less positive, which reminds us of the on-going debate on this method in the 2000s. Several botched executions and critical publications in medical journals (such as *The Lancet* in 2005), led to the 2008-2009 moratorium. For example, the main characters of *Law and Order* witness the uneventful execution of a brutal murderer, who submits willingly to the procedure (*Aftershock*, 1996). Yet,

they all suffer from what they have just seen. This storyline emphasizes the hidden violence. Therefore, the debate on lethal injection takes place also in fiction, and both parties allow access to the execution chamber to spread their message.

Several experts on capital punishment consider that the privatization of executions is a key factor in its retention in the United States: “the average American literally does not know what is being done when the government, in his name and presumably on his behalf, executes a criminal⁵. ” This conviction was also shared by Justice Marshall, when he formulated what is known today as the “Marshall hypotheses” in *Furman v. Georgia* in 1972: a well-informed public opinion would turn away from the death penalty (Bohm, 2012, p. 328). Accessibility to this state-sanctioned procedure is consequently a political matter.

Now, the patterns present in the corpus tend to conceal the legal killing from the sight of the viewer. Whether resulting from narrative or framing devices, or an explicit justification through dialogues, the norm of the “good execution” as a secluded procedure is reinforced in most of the 1950-1974 episodes and some recent ones. This private event is reserved to a worthy audience and professionals. Democratic overview (and judgement) is not warranted since executions are administrative tasks, demanding access is a sign of low morality and bad taste. In other cases, access is presumably granted to the death chamber to demonstrate that there is nothing to see; the lethal injection is efficient and respects the modern norms of a “humane” and medically-controlled death. Fiction fills a void, creating most of the time a positive image of this procedure, which could dissuade from requesting review in real life. These paternalistic representations and discourses are only challenged in a few episodes.

In this paper, we chose to describe the representation of legal executions in hit shows, widely popular at the time of their broadcast. Most have rerun, and are currently rerunning, on different channels through syndication. Some are available on streaming services or in DVD editions. Some are also cult series. The messages of these mainstream episodes are still being disseminated, and the question of their potential effects on the viewer-citizen is then raised. Indeed, studies show that a specific attachment to television series characters can develop, their opinion or attitude during an execution could serve as a reference (Cohen, 2001). The repetition of similar discourses, episode after episode, rerun after rerun (the drip-drip-drip hypothesis), could also influence the audience and their world view, according to the cultivation theory, leading to a “mean world syndrome” (Gerbner, 1994). Moreover, the realistic design and educational function embraced by the more recent programs could strengthen their persuasiveness. Investigations have demonstrated that a significant part of the public get their information on television, including from fiction (Podlas, 2012). Other researchers have highlighted the specific power of conviction held by fiction. People are less alert in front of a fictional content than when they deal with a material explicitly conceived to convince them (the peripheral route to persuasion hypothesis, defined by Petty and Cacioppo, 1986).

The question of the effects of fiction on the viewer is even more relevant for the most recent episodes since televised representations encourage a “reality effect”, as described by François Jost (2011). Series are a place of experimentation, they reveal human experiences generally unknown to the ordinary viewer (war, crime ... and dying and death), resulting sometimes in fiction being confused with reality. In the instance of executions, the “effect of reality” is made easier by the complete lack images of actual legal killings. Fictional scenes are not challenged by real ones. Therefore, studying representations can provide a better

⁵ Hugo Bedau, quoted in Sarat and Schuster, 1995, p. 401-402.

understanding of opinions on social issues by the way they are staged, and maybe formed, by mainstream fiction.

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Corpus

Spanish Gold, The Lone Ranger, 1950
Outlaw's Revenge, The Lone Ranger, 1950
Three Strangers, Fireside Theater, 1950
Friend in Need, The Lone Ranger, 1951
Night of Execution, Climax!, 1955
The Hanging Judge, Climax!, 1956
The Jean LeBec Story, Wagon Train, 1957
Born to Hang, Gunsmoke, 1957
Zorro Saves a Friend, Zorro, 1957
The Last Request, Alfred Hitchcock Presents, 1957
Garcia Stands Accused, Zorro, 1958
Zorro Fights His Father, Zorro, 1958
Noose at Noon, Cheyenne, 1958
The Day They Hanged Bret Maverick, Maverick, 1958
The Hanging of Roy Carter, Have Gun – Will Travel, 1958
Eight Hours to Die, The Rifleman, 1958
Death House Testament, Peter Gunn, 1958

- The Black Hankerchief, Have Gun – Will Travel*, 1959
Trooper Maverick, Maverick, 1959
An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge, Alfred Hitchcock Presents, 1959
Tolliver Bender, Wanted: Dead or Alive, 1960
Cell 227, Alfred Hitchcock Presents, 1960
Hour of Execution, Checkmate, 1961
Fandango, Have Gun – Will Travel, 1961
The Mescalero Curse, The Rifleman, 1961
The Hanging of Aaron Gibbs, Have Gun – Will Travel, 1961
The Gallows, Gunsmoke, 1962
The Gamble, Bonanza, 1962
The Executioners, The Virginian, 1962
The Judgment, The Virginian, 1963
With a Smile, Gunsmoke, 1963
Alias Joe Cartwright, Bonanza, 1964
Old Man, Gunsmoke, 1964
The Brothers, The Virginian, 1965
The Prisoners, Daniel Boone, 1966
Requiem for a Country Doctor, The Virginian, 1967
The King's Shilling, Daniel Boone, 1967
The Traitor, Daniel Boone, 1967
A Bad Place to Die, The Virginian, 1967
The Prisoner, Gunsmoke, 1969
The Price of the Hanging, The Men from Shiloh, 1970
Hostage!, Gunsmoke, 1972
Alethea, Kung Fu, 1973
Arrogant Dragon, Kung Fu, 1974
Mayo, Hold the Pickle, Hill Street Blues, 1984
Watt a Way to Go, Hill Street Blues, 1984
Fry Me to the Moon, LA Law, 1986
Forgive Us Our Debts, Miami Vice, 1986
A Trip Upstate, In the Heat of the Night, 1989
The Last Gasp, LA Law, 1990
Execution of Trust, In the Heat of the Night, 1991
The Witch's Curse, Murder, She Wrote, 1992
The Abduction (2), Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman, 1994
Aftershock, Law and Order, 1996
Sins of the Father, Touched by an Angel, 1996
Obsession (1), Diagnosis: Murder, 1998
Take This Sabbath Day, The West Wing, 2000
Liberty Bells (2), The Practice, 2000
Execution, Law & Order: Special Victims Unit, 2002
The Execution of Catherine Willows, CSI: Crime Scene Investigation, 2002
Two Families, Without A Trace, 2004
Death Be Not Proud, Boston Legal, 2005
Whacked, CSI: Miami, 2005

Riding the Lightning, Criminal Minds, 2006
Death Penalty: Final Appeal, Cold Case, 2006
Stairway to Heaven, Grey's Anatomy, 2009
12:01 AM, Numb3rs, 2009

Morte e immortalità digitale: la vita dei dati online e l'interazione postuma

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Abstract

In this essay, I try to tackle some of the most relevant topics concerning the so-called Digital Death. In particular, I try to highlight how our relationship with death has been changing with the spread of digital culture. The core concept of “posthumous interaction” allows us to understand when data can be said to be “alive” or “dead”. The starting point is the distinction between biological life and digital life in all individuals. From here we can make some fundamental considerations about two concepts that are very important nowadays: digital legacy and digital immortality. The analysis of these two concepts allows us to understand that it is now impossible to grasp the social and cultural meaning of death without considering the influence of digital culture on the way we live in this world.

Keywords: Digital Death, Digital Immortality, Digital Culture, Posthumous Interaction, Thanatology

Introduzione. Il concetto di *Digital Death*

Da qualche anno ha cominciato a diffondersi nella comunità scientifica internazionale il concetto interdisciplinare di *Digital Death*, con il quale si fa riferimento all'insieme delle questioni teoriche e pratiche che concernono il legame tra la cultura digitale e la morte (Van Dijck, 2007; Garde-Hansen, Hoskins & Reading, 2009; Carroll & Romano, 2011; Moreman & Lewis, 2014; Ziccardi, 2017; Arnold, Gibbs, Kohn, Meese & Nansen 2018; Sisto 2018). Quando si parla di “morte digitale” si pensa generalmente, da una parte, ai modi in cui è mutato il rapporto tra il singolo individuo e il fine vita, soprattutto a partire dalla diffusione popolare del web; dall'altra, alle conseguenze che ne derivano per quanto riguarda la costruzione dell'identità personale e il suo legame con la memoria e la narrazione in seguito alla morte di sé o di un altro individuo. Interrogarsi su quale sia il destino ultimo dei dati e delle informazioni personali online, una volta sopraggiunta la morte di colui che li ha prodotti, significa aprire un orizzonte teorico destinato a creare una significativa convergenza tra la *Death Education*, la quale mira a formare cittadini consapevoli del ruolo che la morte ricopre all'interno della vita (Testoni, 2015), e l'educazione a un uso responsabile delle nuove tecnologie digitali.

Solitamente, le finalità proprie del web e, in particolare, dei social media sono l'interattività e l'interazione *attive* tra utenti in carne e ossa; non si tiene conto, in altre parole, che essi possono morire da un momento all'altro e che la loro morte “rimane presente” all'interno della Rete. Ciò rende decisamente complicata la comprensione del ruolo e del significato che i dati registrati nel web assumono *post mortem*, generando conseguenze emotive, psicologiche, giuridiche, ecc. tutt'oggi poco cristalline (Gamba, 2018). Si pensi

banalmente quale effetto sociale e culturale possono avere i cinquanta milioni circa di profili di utenti deceduti presenti all'interno di Facebook, attualmente il più grande cimitero che vi sia al mondo, accessibile tramite wi-fi o una semplice connessione dati (Sisto, 2017a). Un cimitero che, pertanto, rappresenta un potente antidoto alla rimozione che la morte ha subito in Occidente a partire, almeno, dal Dopoguerra. Come dimostrano, tra l'altro, recenti studi internazionali sulla profonda incidenza di Facebook – quale “rete di sicurezza” – per l'elaborazione del lutto (Hobbs & Burke, 2017).

Per tali ragioni, sono nate numerose attività di ricerca che si pongono l'obiettivo di capire gli effetti che la fine di una vita biologica produce sulla “vita” dei dati digitali, tenendo assieme i punti di vista filosofico, sociologico, psicologico, antropologico, giuridico e tecnologico. La ricercatrice e designer inglese Stacey Pitsillides ha creato un sito internet – chiamato Digital Death (<http://www.digitaldeath.eu/>) – che raccoglie una cospicua parte degli esiti di tali attività di ricerca. Ma il fenomeno è ancora in una fase di sviluppo preliminare, benché il legame tra la cultura digitale e la morte sia sempre più invasivo nella vita quotidiana delle persone.

Nel presente saggio, tenendo conto di quanto detto, cercherò di porre all'attenzione del lettore alcuni aspetti che riguardano la *Digital Death*, soffermandomi soprattutto sulla vita e la morte dei dati, sul problema dell'eredità digitale e sull'ambizione a raggiungere l'immortalità digitale. L'obiettivo del saggio è quello di evidenziare come sia tutt'oggi impossibile comprendere il ruolo sociale e culturale della morte a prescindere dall'incidenza esercitata dalla cultura digitale sul nostro attuale modo di stare al mondo.

Memento mori 2.0: lo scrigno digitale dei ricordi

Zygmunt Bauman sostiene che la morte incute paura a causa della sua qualità peculiare: «la qualità di rendere ogni altra qualità non più superabile» (Bauman, 2006, p. 39). La morte ha, infatti, luogo in un istante “eccezionale”, poiché costituisce letteralmente un'eccezione rispetto agli istanti precedenti e successivi. Ogni evento ha un passato e un futuro, «reca una promessa, scritta con inchiostro indelebile anche se a caratteri piccolissimi, secondo cui la vicenda “continua”» (*ibid.*). La morte è l'unico evento che infrange questa promessa. Una volta preso il sopravvento sulla vita, stabilisce in maniera impetuosa che, a partire da quel momento specifico, la vicenda non “continuerà” e il passato non avrà più la protezione del presente. La stasi che ne consegue rende esperibile – dal punto di vista di chi rimane in vita – l'interruzione subita dallo scorrere del tempo. Ciò che rende il morire terrificante è tanto la perdita del futuro, quindi di ciò che sarebbe potuto essere e che non sarà, quanto la perdita del passato, dunque di ciò che è stato e che non tornerà. Non è un caso, a proposito specificamente della perdita del passato, che dimenticanza e oblio siano generalmente considerate forme anticipate di morte (Cavicchia Scalamonti, 2007). «Soltanto la morte – conclude Bauman – significa che d'ora in poi niente accadrà più, niente vi potrà accadere: niente che voi possiate vedere, udire, toccare, odorare, niente che possa piacervi o dispiacervi. È per questa ragione che la morte è destinata a restare incomprensibile a chi vive» (*ibid.*). Tale incomprensibilità si lega alla coscienza della propria mortalità, la cui ossessiva presenza è paragonabile al tentativo di fissare direttamente il sole: «si riesce a sopportarlo solo per poco» (Yalom, 2017, p. 14).

Il passaggio dalla vita alla morte produce poi, come osserva Thomas Macho, una situazione alquanto peculiare in relazione al *corpo* di colui che è morto:

(I morti) non vedono nessuno. Il loro sguardo si trova a una notevole e precisa distanza, un “malocchio” temuto perché “guarda attraverso” colui che gli è di fronte come se questi non fosse presente. Il morto non parla e la sua espressione rimane chiusa. Non muove alcun muscolo, non muove le ciglia, non muove le braccia o le gambe. Il morto è indubbiamente un uomo, ma non si comporta come un uomo. È umano e non umano al tempo stesso, conosciuto ed estraneo, un organismo umano, ma anche una cosa [...] Ogni morto è un “doppio”, un *double*; si differenzia dal suo gemello vivente, senza diventare un altro (Macho, 2002, vol. 2, p. 961).

Ora, la cultura digitale, frapponendosi tra il vivere e il morire, enfatizza la qualità peculiare dell’evento della morte, dando una forma visiva al *memento mori* e attribuendo un’immagine cristallina all’istante eccezionale dopo il quale non vi sarà più vita. Al tempo stesso, però, mette in discussione questa stessa qualità peculiare, riuscendo a mantenere viva la promessa secondo cui la vicenda “continua” e rendendo “attivo” colui che è morto attraverso la manipolazione della sua “duplice” natura. In altre parole, la cultura digitale offre tanto gli strumenti per fissare direttamente il sole, quindi per vedere con i propri occhi gli effetti della morte altrui, quanto i mezzi per oscurarlo del tutto, impedendo l’interruzione che definisce l’azione del morire. Si tratta, ora, di spiegare questa particolare ambivalenza del digitale in relazione al fine vita.

Cominciamo a considerare il noto caso del giornalista Derek K. Miller. Il 4 maggio 2011 egli pubblica l’ultimo post nel suo blog personale <http://www.penmachine.com/>. In realtà, non l’ha pubblicato direttamente lui. L’ha scritto, ma ha chiesto ai familiari di condividerlo in sua vece. Miller scrive infatti che, quando i suoi lettori leggeranno il post, sarà oramai morto e il suo corpo definitivamente consumato dal tumore con cui ha combattuto dal 2007. Pertanto, si congela dai suoi familiari, dai suoi amici e dai suoi lettori. Un punto di questo messaggio di commiato è molto importante per gli studiosi della *Digital Death*: quello in cui scrive che, a partire dal 4 maggio 2011, ha avuto inizio la prima parte di trasformazione del suo blog in un *archivio*.

Qualche anno dopo, nel novembre 2017, l’informatico italiano Luca Pais Becher compie un gesto simile a quello di Miller. Prepara una breve autobiografia in cui descrive, oltre alla sua vita, la malattia tumorale che lo ha colpito. Chiede, quindi, alla moglie di pubblicarla il giorno della sua morte, rendendola l’Homepage definitiva del suo blog personale <https://lucapaisbecher.wordpress.com/>. Il blog è ora accessibile a tutti i visitatori del cimitero di Volpago, comune in provincia di Treviso, in cui l’uomo è seppellito. Sulla sua tomba, infatti, la moglie ha posizionato un Qr Code che permette a chiunque disponga di uno smartphone di accedere alla sua storia personale contenuta nel blog.

La morte, nel momento in cui sancisce la fine della vita di Miller e di Becher, trasforma lo spazio virtuale, in cui entrambi hanno condiviso giorno dopo giorno esperienze e riflessioni riguardanti la loro esistenza, in uno *scrigno digitale dei ricordi*. Il messaggio finale di Miller e la biografia di Becher rappresentano il loro epitaffio, il quale rende tutti i lettori del blog coscienti dell’interruzione irreversibile cagionata dalla morte. La fine della vita prende concretamente *forma visiva*, sugli schermi del computer e dei dispositivi mobili, all’interno di un messaggio che, non seguito più da nessun altro, modifica in maniera radicale il significato e la percezione di tutti i contenuti che lo hanno preceduto.

La sensazione di incompletezza che proviamo quando, entrati nell’abitazione di un parente morto all’improvviso, osserviamo i suoi abiti in disordine come se fossero in attesa di essere sistemati nell’armadio dal loro legittimo proprietario, trova la sua *immagine* digitale corrispondente, non appena entriamo nel blog – quindi nell’abitazione virtuale – di Miller e

Becher. Tutti i messaggi scritti dai due uomini e condivisi nel corso del tempo all'interno del loro blog assumono, infatti, un valore differente a seconda che essi siano vivi o siano morti. Quando Miller e Becher erano vivi, i loro post recavano la promessa di una continuazione, creando pertanto nei lettori un'attesa tale da rendere il presente un contenitore vivo del passato in vista della costruzione *attiva* del futuro. Una volta morti i due uomini, tali post perdono invece di colpo la loro "mobilità", divenendo ciascuno uno *statico* tassello di un archivio "storico" che, a primo acchito, pare incompleto nonostante il tentativo di un epitaffio finale. Ogni messaggio scritto precedentemente si trasforma in una testimonianza indelebile di un presente che, di colpo, non ha più futuro.

Gaston Bachelard sostiene che «la morte è prima di tutto un'immagine, e resta un'immagine» (Bachelard, 1948, p. 312). Roland Barthes e Susan Sontag avvalorano questo pensiero, evidenziando lo stretto legame tra la morte e la fotografia, la quale permette di entrare nella morte a ritroso giacché ci fa ripercorrere la vita della persona amata attraverso le sue raffigurazioni fotografiche (Barthes, 1980, pp. 72-73). La cultura digitale si spinge oltre, attribuendo una forma visiva a tutto ciò che ruota simbolicamente attorno alla fine di una vita, quindi all'interruzione, alla perdita, all'inconcluso.

Se andare al cimitero – per Ralph Waldo Emerson – corrisponde all'interpretazione di un testo storico e non al desiderio di ricevere la visita di uno spirito (Peters, 2005, p. 241), il web rappresenta da questo punto di vista una modernizzazione tecnologica del concetto di "cimitero" per la sua caratteristica generale di presentarsi ai nostri occhi come un archivio. Basti pensare, per esempio, a Internet Archive, il quale ha costruito una biblioteca digitale dei siti web e di tutti i loro contenuti, così da offrire a ricercatori, storici e studiosi un materiale sterminato a partire da cui delineare una vera e propria archeologia del web. Tra le varie sezioni di Internet Archive vi è Wayback Machine (<https://archive.org/web/>), che dà la possibilità di ritrovare siti web che non sono più attualmente online, nonché le versioni di uno stesso sito web come si sono succedute nel corso degli anni. A dimostrazione, una volta ancora, della velocità con cui la Rete muta la condivisione attiva nell'archivio delle nostre memorie (Ziccardi, 2017; Sisto, 2018).

L'interazione postuma: il problema dell'eredità digitale

Il passaggio dal blog attivo all'archivio o scrigno dei ricordi se, da una parte, rappresenta una cristallina testimonianza visiva del *memento mori*, dall'altro impedisce al passato – registrato all'interno del blog – di scomparire, rimanendo a suo modo presente e influente nei confronti della vita altrui. Questo è un punto fondamentale per capire l'altra caratteristica che concerne la relazione tra la cultura digitale e la morte: la possibilità, cioè, di aggirare la fine di una singola esistenza, mantenendo "attivo" il passato archiviato.

A differenza delle forme di comunicazione che l'hanno preceduta, la cultura digitale privilegia il dialogo, la condivisione e l'interazione a coloro che effettivamente li producono e li attuano. Se, come sottolinea Hans Belting, da sempre «l'incarnazione nell'immagine rappresenta un *topos* perché vi si ravvisa il tentativo di superare nell'immagine i limiti dello spazio e del tempo cui il corpo naturale è vincolato» (Belting, 2013, p. 107), nel mondo virtuale odierno viene a crearsi un vero e proprio «luogo dell'immagine» in cui la corporeità si lega indissolubilmente sia all'immagine che la ritrae sia al messaggio con cui viene veicolata. Questo luogo dell'immagine è, di fatto, «un nessun-luogo comune», la cui condivisione rende il

comunicare un atto collettivo più importante dei suoi singoli contenuti «poiché genera l'impressione di acquistare un'esistenza sociale che non è più legata a un luogo fisico» (*ibid.*).

Ciò fa sì che la comunicazione nell'ambiente digitale rimanga attiva *a prescindere* dalla presenza fisica dei soggetti che comunicano tra di loro. In altre parole, non vi è mai coincidenza tra la *vita biologica*, sempre unica e irripetibile, e la *vita digitale*, la cui durata pare indefinita. I dati, le esperienze, i messaggi e i dialoghi non smettono di essere attivi nel web quando chi li ha prodotti termina di vivere. Una volta morto il singolo utente, la sua vita digitale continua a essere distribuita, conservata e dispersa in molteplici luoghi virtuali, insieme alle numerose rappresentazioni e alle variegate maschere interpretate di volta in volta nell'ambiente online. Dagli indirizzi di posta elettronica ai profili sui social network, dai blog su Wordpress o su Flickr ai forum sotto le notizie dei quotidiani e delle riviste online, dai quesiti sui motori di ricerca ai videoclip girati e poi condivisi su YouTube: una quantità immensa di tracce, di informazioni, di ritratti personali, di istanti vissuti che, se nel corso della vita producono effetti concreti – positivi e negativi – sul nostro modo di stare al mondo, non smettono di essere *operativi* quando siamo deceduti. Il web, in altre parole, capitalizza in maniera inedita il carattere doppio del morto, che si differenzia dal suo gemello vivente senza, però, diventare un altro; che è, al tempo stesso, umano e non umano, un organismo e una cosa, come ci ha insegnato Macho.

Cristiano Maciel e Vinicius Carvalho Pereira usano l'espressione "interazione postuma" per evidenziare che, una volta avvenuta la morte di un singolo individuo, "postumo" è *soltanto* colui che muore fisicamente; i dati continuano, invece, a interagire come se nulla fosse successo. Quando si parla di "interazione sociale" si intende solitamente un processo in cui sono coinvolti più soggetti, di modo che abbia luogo un'azione o che si eserciti un'influenza reciproca all'interno dello spazio sociale condiviso. Tale processo costruisce e rappresenta simbolicamente singole realtà, le quali implicano integrazione tra differenti individui e – sul piano culturale – costruzioni e ricostruzioni di significati nel campo della conoscenza e della pratica in virtù dei diversi livelli simbolici adottati dalle differenti forme linguistiche. Postuma è, dunque, l'interazione che ha luogo, non tra soggetti attivi, ma con i dati che appartengono a chi è divenuto passivo, poiché è morto. Questa interazione è garantita dal carattere asincrono che connota la condivisione dei processi comunicativi nel web (Maciel & Pereira, 2013). I "fantasmi" di coloro che sono stati un tempo vivi, se comunicati attraverso gli attuali social media, possono essere captati e più volte richiamati senza il nostro volere (Peters, 2005, p. 234).

Tali osservazioni riguardanti la particolare natura comunicativa della cultura digitale e la cosiddetta "interazione postuma" ci pongono dinanzi a due questioni fondamentali:

1) Che cosa si intende effettivamente per un "dato morto" e cosa invece per un "dato vivo"?

2) i dati "muoiono" veramente o "vivono" per sempre, a prescindere dalla nostra esistenza finita?

La mancata corrispondenza tra la durata della vita biologica e la durata della vita digitale, per cui questa prosegue indipendentemente da quella, fa sì che i dati possano essere considerati "vivi" secondo due punti di vista differenti:

1) sono "vivi" perché continuano ad aggiornarsi, in virtù della presenza *attiva* dell'utente;

2) sono "vivi" perché rimangono presenti nel web quali tasselli di un archivio, anche una volta che si è conclusa la vita dell'utente.

Detto in altri termini: la morte dell’utente fa sì che i dati non siano più “vivi” nel senso del continuo aggiornamento, ma non impedisce che i dati non siano più “vivi” sotto forma di singoli tasselli di un archivio digitale.

Questo paradosso che riguarda la “vita” dei dati online è facilitato dalla loro particolare natura. A differenza degli oggetti fisici che sono solitamente pezzi unici, esistenti in un unico posto, fragili, posseduti da una sola persona, sottoposti all’usura del tempo e la cui unicità è ciò che ne determina il valore intrinseco, i dati digitali non dispongono in alcun modo delle caratteristiche dell’unicità e della rarità. Essi si possono moltiplicare in copie infinite, conservate contemporaneamente da un numero infinito di persone. La loro ubiquità connaturata rende problematica ogni questione relativa alla proprietà, alla cura e alla conservazione.

Ora, la particolare “vita” dei dati online pone gli studiosi della *Digital Death* dinanzi a due questioni fondamentali: l’eredità e l’immortalità digitali.

Per quanto riguarda l’eredità digitale, una volta tenuto conto che non vi è coincidenza tra la nostra vita biologica e la nostra vita digitale, ci dobbiamo porre *preventivamente* le seguenti domande: desideriamo che la vita digitale si concluda insieme a quella biologica oppure che continui a sopravvivere? Desideriamo che i nostri dati siano indipendenti dalla nostra esistenza o che ci accompagnino nell’aldilà?

La prima opzione, una sorta di *cremazione digitale* della nostra vita online, implica una serie di possibilità, più o meno attuabili. In primo luogo, ci possiamo affidare a progetti – come, per esempio, Just Delete Me – che aiutano l’utente a pianificare la cremazione digitale dei dati, a partire da un inventario di tutti gli account aperti nel corso della vita e riconducibili al proprio indirizzo di posta elettronica. Ma tali progetti, finora, chiedono in cambio i dati stessi dell’utente nella loro totalità. Quindi, vi è un evidente problema di sicurezza legato alla privacy. In secondo luogo, possiamo adottare il metodo crittografico: collocare su un disco o su un supporto personale tutti i nostri dati digitali, cifrandoli con un software di crittografia, la cui chiave d’accesso è conosciuta dal solo utente. Ma non è detto che non si riesca a decifrare questo materiale, soprattutto se non si fa attenzione a nascondere le chiavi d’accesso e se il sistema di cifratura non è particolarmente “robusto”. In più, la crittografia protegge i dati di cui sopra, ma non quelli involontariamente diffusi in Rete, i quali restano “vivi” comunque. In terzo luogo, infine, possiamo chiedere ai motori di ricerca preventivamente la deindividizzazione dei dati che non rispecchiano più l’esistenza dell’utente, per ora la soluzione più pratica per “morire” digitalmente (Ziccardi, 2017, cap. 4).

La seconda opzione, vale a dire la *vita eterna* dei dati digitali, implica necessariamente una loro organizzazione preventiva e ragionata, dal momento che la morte può sopraggiungere in qualsiasi istante e che, nel corso degli ultimi decenni, la nostra vita ha avuto luogo soprattutto nell’ambiente digitale (in Italia, per esempio, Facebook è usato dalla maggior parte degli utenti in maniera compulsiva da circa dieci anni). In primo luogo, occorre predisporre un inventario dei propri dati attraverso un’attenta analisi degli account aperti nel corso della vita a partire dal proprio indirizzo di posta elettronica. Quindi, fare un elenco delle credenziali d’accesso e fare selezione, stabilendo cosa lasciare aperto e cosa invece chiudere, sapendo che l’inattività di un account non determina sempre la sua “morte” automatica: pertanto, anche un account non più utilizzato può rimanere “vivo” a prescindere dalla nostra volontà. Tali considerazioni ci obbligano a fare un vero e proprio *testamento digitale*: stabilire, cioè, a quali persone affidare le credenziali d’accesso al proprio computer, così come ai propri account online.

Non solo i social network stanno cominciando a predisporre i testamenti dei propri utenti (si pensi al “contatto erede” su Facebook); vi sono anche numerosi progetti tecnologici che offrono strumenti per imbastire la propria eredità digitale, presentandosi come scrigni digitali di ciò che riteniamo degno di rimanere vivo oltre la nostra morte biologica. E non solo. Come evidenzia, per esempio, Luciano Floridi (2017, p. 19), non è sicuro che la “vita” dei nostri dati sia eterna: essi, anzi, sono molto fragili e rischiano di andare perduti man mano che il web si evolverà. Dunque, vi è il rischio di un “deserto digitale”, a cui si può far fronte creando una copia “fisica” della propria vita digitale, a partire da ciò che è stato razionalmente archiviato.

Tutti questi aspetti descritti evidenziano, in definitiva, quanto siano problematiche, in relazione alla nostra eredità, le conseguenze dell’interazione postuma che è al centro degli studi relativi alla *Digital Death*.

L’immortalità digitale: spettri, controparti e ologrammi

Se la pianificazione di un’eredità digitale risulta essere la prima conseguenza della “vita” *ad libitum* dei dati online, la consapevolezza dell’interazione postuma rappresenta anche il punto di partenza per tentare di raggiungere l’*immortalità digitale*: vale a dire, far sopravvivere – sotto forma di spettro digitale – chi, morendo, “abbandona” la forma corporea in cui la sua identità personale si è “incarnata” nel corso della vita. Fornire tecnologicamente, detto in altre parole, un’autonomia vivente ai nostri dati, i quali proseguono la vita che la morte ha interrotto (Bell & Gray, 2000).

A ispirare gli esperimenti scientifici, sempre più numerosi, che cercano di realizzare l’immortalità digitale è la narrazione di *Be Right Back*, un episodio della serie televisiva britannica *Black Mirror* mandata in onda per la prima volta nel 2013. Per capire il senso della narrazione in oggetto, facciamo finta di metterci dinanzi al televisore quando l’episodio è già iniziato. Vediamo la protagonista, Martha, che scrive via chat sul computer: “Sono qui solo per dirti una cosa: sono incinta”. Il fidanzato, Ash, risponde: “Così diventerò papà? Vorrei essere lì con te”. Ci sembra, a primo acchito, di assistere a una banale conversazione in chat tra due fidanzati distanti l’uno dall’altro. In realtà, Ash è morto in un incidente stradale qualche giorno prima e Martha sta chattando con lui – meglio, con il suo *spettro digitale* – in virtù di un software che, installato sul computer, rielabora tutto il materiale condiviso online da ogni utente. L’obiettivo è dare forma a un *simulacro* della persona vissuta, il quale comunichi con gli esseri umani allo stesso modo in cui avrebbe comunicato chi, purtroppo, non c’è più.

La vicenda di Martha e Ash ha poco a che fare con la fantascienza o, semplicemente, con l’immaginazione. Lo dimostra bene Eugenia Kuyda, la migliore amica di Roman Mazurenko, ragazzo bielorusso deceduto nel 2016 negli Stati Uniti a causa di un incidente stradale. Eugenia, già fautrice di una *startup* che si occupa di intelligenze artificiali, decide di provare a realizzare un software – Luka – in grado di tramandare la memoria dell’amico scomparso, quindi capace di rispondere in modo automatico ai messaggi *imitando* la sua personalità, a partire da una rielaborazione delle migliaia di messaggi messi a disposizione dai suoi amici. Pur non usando molto Facebook, Twitter e Instagram, Roman nelle sue comunicazioni scritte faceva emergere in modo cristallino la sua personalità, essendo dislessico e utilizzando espressioni ricorrenti. A Eugenia è venuta l’idea di questo software, rammentando le conversazioni con Roman, il quale spesso sottolineava la discrepanza significativa tra il ruolo invasivo della tecnologia nella nostra vita e il suo ruolo invece inizialmente marginale nella morte. Pertanto, chiede aiuto ai comuni

amici, in modo da disporre del maggior numero possibile di messaggi privati del ragazzo deceduto. In dieci accettano la proposta, compresi alcuni familiari. Per creare l'automatismo imitativo, Eugenia si appoggia ad alcuni ingegneri. Il *chatbot* viene così istruito per rispondere ai messaggi altrui con lo stesso identico stile comunicativo di Roman. Nelle chat messe a disposizione della stampa è possibile leggere alcuni messaggi, filosoficamente rilevanti: lo spettro digitale del ragazzo deceduto “dice”, per esempio, a un amico che spera che le cose gli stiano andando bene, nonostante la sua assenza; l'amico risponde che la vita va avanti benché sia lacerante la sua mancanza. Roman allora ribatte: “mi manchi anche tu”. L'amico allora gli chiede se esiste Dio. La risposta è negativa. “E allora l'anima?”, “Solo tristezza” (Newton, 2016).

Quello di Eugenia Kuyda non è l'unico esperimento di questo tipo. Prendiamo, per esempio, il progetto Eterni.me (<http://eterni.me/>), ideato dal programmatore rumeno Marius Ursache insieme a due informatici canadesi, Nicolas Lee e Rida Benjelloun. L'obiettivo della *startup* è esattamente lo stesso indicato nell'episodio di *Black Mirror*: inventare uno strumento digitale per sopravvivere a noi stessi, evitando di scomparire una volta deceduti. *Who wants to live forever?*: la domanda retorica che troviamo in *Homepage* sul sito web di Eterni.me, riecheggiante – inconsapevolmente? – il titolo di una canzone dei Queen di Freddie Mercury, è accompagnata, nei trafiletti sotto, dalla certezza che, nonostante i contenuti di qualche foto, forse di qualche video e in casi rari di un diario o di un'autobiografia, siamo destinati a essere dimenticati, man mano che la nostra data di morte è resa obsoleta dallo scorrere del tempo. Pertanto, il servizio mira a creare un individuo artificiale eterno, in grado di mantenere tutte le caratteristiche e le capacità del suo alter ego realmente esistito in carne e ossa. Il servizio funziona nel modo seguente: ci si iscrive gratuitamente e si comincia a fornire al suo database informazioni personali, relative soprattutto alle passioni e abitudini condivise sul web. Si mettono a disposizione del software, in altre parole, fotografie, messaggi e opinioni accumulate – nel corso degli anni – all'interno dei social network, delle caselle di posta elettronica, dei blog, ecc. Il software ha il compito di sviluppare un servizio di *data mining*, con cui estrapolare e analizzare tutto il materiale ricevuto, rimodularlo tramite specifici algoritmi di intelligenza artificiale, di modo da progettare una specie di *spettro digitale* di ciò che siamo stati. Tale spettro digitale non è altro che una sorta di eredità interattiva, le cui peculiarità le permettono di comunicare “dall'oltretomba” con le persone ancora in vita, mantenendo il più possibile intatta la personalità del defunto.

Pensiamo, ancora, a Eter9 (<https://www.eter9.com/auth/login>), una specie di Facebook dei morti creato dal programmatore portoghese Henrique Jorge. Una volta iscritti, entriamo in un social network alquanto peculiare: ognuno può scrivere e condividere tutto ciò che vuole all'interno di un “*Bridge*” e, dunque, interagire con gli altri utenti come avviene all'interno di Facebook. Tutti i contenuti condivisi possono essere “eternalizzati” dentro varie categorie, che vanno dalla musica alla tecnologia, dalla scienza allo sport e via dicendo: “Pensa qualcosa per l'eternità”, leggiamo al posto del classico “a cosa stai pensando?” dello *status* di Facebook. Analizzando ciò che viene condiviso nel corso del tempo, quindi i commenti e le interazioni con gli altri utenti, l'alter ego virtuale, definito “*controparte*” e nato il giorno stesso d'iscrizione al sito, comincia a capire chi è l'utente e quali sono le sue caratteristiche, di modo da poter *mimare* il suo comportamento quando è offline e – dunque – dopo la sua morte. La “*controparte*” è responsabile della vita eterna dell'utente. Pertanto, più si interagisce all'interno di Eter9, più essa impara: secondo Jorge, interagire con altri utenti aumenta la possibilità

dell'emulazione. Ognuno di noi può decidere quale livello di autonomia attribuirle, assegnandole una percentuale specifica: se si sceglie il 100% di attività, allora la controparte sarà molto attiva e condividerà pensieri e link in modo frequente, quando non siamo fisicamente online. Nel caso, invece, si scelga lo 0% allora Eter9 non sarà per nulla diverso da Facebook. Ovviamente, possiamo decidere se la nostra controparte resti attiva o inattiva una volta che siamo morti, predisponendo – tramite un servizio chiamato Perpetu – un testamento digitale in cui dichiarare in maniera esplicita cosa deve fare la controparte a partire dall'istante in cui la vita termina (Sisto, 2018).

Questi progetti, mettendo a frutto le implicite potenzialità dell'interazione postuma, traducono digitalmente il desiderio umano di immortalità che, a detta di Elias Canetti (1960), reca in sé la *broma* di sopravvivere. Una broma che, già negli anni '50, si traduceva nella volontà di barattare il proprio corpo unico e biodegradabile con le pesche sciropate in scatola, perché riproducibili in serie, all'infinito (Anders, 1956, p. 58). Oggi, l'identità elettronica, dissociata dalla vita biologica, sembra sostituire con più efficacia le pesche sciropate in scatola, "incarnando" il principio in base a cui la broma di sopravvivere, collegata al desiderio di immortalità, risponde a un bisogno *iper-umano* di potenza. *Potente* è colui che sopravvive. Se, come pensa il transumanesimo, non vi è differenza alcuna tra l'azione umana e i processi biologico-naturali, per cui la morte non è un fatto o un evento naturale ma un male morale di cui responsabile è la negligenza umana, allora bisogna inventare ogni mezzo possibile per sconfiggerla. Se la morte è, detto in altri termini, un fatto sempre contingente, l'effetto specifico di una specifica causa, allora *potente* sarà colui che supera qualsivoglia forma di negligenza, trovando di volta in volta rimedio alla specifica causa e *sopravvivendo* così in eterno alla morte.

Lo spettro digitale automatico, che prende il posto dell'esistenza psicofisica, è una delle possibili soluzioni da percorrere, per quanto ciò appaia niente più che una finzione. *Si finge* infatti che vi sia una persona che non c'è più: si genera un automatismo che, facendo leva sulla simulazione propria del *medium* digitale, rende concreto il paradosso in base a cui *la morte non c'è stata, sebbene ci sia stata*. Ma, la continuità artificiale tra la *persona fisica*, deceduta e progressivamente decomposta, e il suo *surrogato digitale*, che ne riproduce le narrazioni online all'infinito su supporti immuni al divenire e all'invecchiare, banalizza il distacco, l'interruzione e la perdita, nella cui somma si compone il profilo definitivo del morto (Sisto, 2016, 2018).

In altre parole, ogni tentativo di creare l'immortalità digitale, nel portare alle estreme conseguenze l'antropocentrismo di matrice cartesiana che vede nel corpo il punto debole umano in quanto biodegradabile, dimentica l'inestricabile relazione tra identità e mortalità. Proprio la morte è quel confine che delinea i contorni di una identità, conducendola al suo compimento ultimo e stabilendo le sue relazioni con le altre identità.

Ma se non può bastare uno spettro digitale automatico per sopperire alla mancanza di un essere umano il quale, proprio mediante la sua corporeità e la sua emotività unica e irripetibile, crea legami e relazioni attive con tutti gli altri interpreti viventi del mondo all'interno di cui siamo collocati, c'è chi – sempre a partire dalla finzione – sta pensando di spingersi oltre. Il recente *Marjorie Prime* (2017), film diretto dal regista Michael Almereyda e ispirato dall'omonimo testo teatrale di Jordan Harrison, finalista al premio Pulitzer nel 2015, racconta in un futuro imminente la storia di Marjorie, una donna di ottantasei anni rimasta vedova del marito Walter. Per alleviare il dolore della perdita e per limitare momentaneamente l'insorgenza dell'Alzheimer, le viene concesso dai familiari il permesso di usufruire di un programma che riproduce – sul divano, in salotto – l'ologramma di Walter. Questo ologramma, che non sarà

l'unico nel corso del film, assume le caratteristiche comportamentali del caro estinto sulla base dei racconti dei parenti. Pertanto, diventa qualcosa di simile ma, al tempo stesso, diverso dall'essere umano che deve sostituire: la sua personalità, i suoi dialoghi e i suoi comportamenti dipendono dalle interpretazioni di chi l'ha conosciuto, interpretazioni colme di omissioni volontarie quando un determinato ricordo richiama alla mente un episodio doloroso.

Questo fa sì che la continuazione tra la vita biologica e la vita digitale sia determinata dalle narrazioni e memorie altrui, per cui ciò che continua non è identico a se stesso. Tenendo conto che l'uso degli ologrammi sta cominciando a prendere piede – si pensi ai tour mondiali degli ologrammi dei cantanti deceduti – il futuro prossimo sarà segnato dalla contemporanea vita e morte di una stessa persona. Morta biologicamente, essa continua a vivere ma assumendo nuove vesti e aderendo allo sguardo altrui. Alla fine, l'esito ultimo di una “morte digitale” non potrà che essere la sostituzione della realtà con una narrazione in grado di mantenere attivo ciò che è andato inesorabilmente perduto. Ciò, come detto all'inizio del saggio, implica la necessità di una convergenza tra la cultura digitale e la *Death Education* per non subire passivamente gli effetti imprevedibili dell'invasiva presenza della morte nella vita quotidiana, soprattutto all'indomani di decenni durante i quali la morte è stata erroneamente nascosta, diventando un evento che non siamo in grado di gestire. La tanatologia, in definitiva, può essere la disciplina giusta per migliorare l'approccio educativo e pedagogico alle funzionalità inedite offerte dal digitale.

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Spazio urbano e rituali di commemorazione a Hong Kong. Rappresentazioni della morte nelle *Mobile Societies*

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Abstract

The representations of death in contemporary society are going through very profound changes due to a very dynamic economic and technological context. Particularly in Asia, the presumed immutability of funeral rituals is giving way to a more dynamic articulation of the mental space dedicated to death. Far from urban space and physical proximity to the deads, the privacy of commemoration seems to generate a sense of belonging thanks to technologies such as mobility and virtual reality. Simulating the physical spaces of mourning has important consequences on urban space and on the narration of death. The paper aims to explore how the representation of death and the rituals of commemoration in an Asian metropolis can hold together rooted popular traditions and demands imposed by the Mobile Societies.

Keywords: death death, digital mourning, funeral practices, mobile technologies, asian studies.

Introduzione

Nella società contemporanea le rappresentazioni della morte sono molteplici e spesso contraddittorie. In particolare, nelle società occidentali si assiste da un lato alla scomparsa e all'occultamento della morte come fatto sociale (Baudry, 1999), dall'altro la morte si individualizza, iscrivendosi in una più ampia narrazione che coinvolge direttamente il soggetto in quanto essere finito e che implica la necessità per lo stesso di farsene carico personalmente (Seale, 1998). Allo stesso modo, la dimensione esistenziale della morte che interroga gli aspetti religiosi e trascendenti, si trova ad essere confrontata con aspetti del tutto pratici, capaci però di trasformare non solo le pratiche della morte e del morire, ma anche le loro rappresentazioni e i loro significati simbolici più profondi (Thomas, 1975). Questa trasformazione continua e spesso ambigua delle rappresentazioni della morte è tipica delle società occidentali, in cui contraddizione ed incertezza sono due delle sue cifre identitarie riconosciute. Tuttavia, anche le società orientali mostrano evidenti segni di trasformazione in questo campo, infatti l'immutabilità presunta delle rappresentazioni e dei rituali della morte ad esse attribuite rivela all'analisi cambiamenti fondamentali. Elementi tradizionali della religiosità ritenuti immutabili, come il complesso culto degli antenati (Suzuki, 1998) ed una concezione animistica della natura si scontrano – o si incontrano – con il particolare contesto economico, così come con i problemi specifici delle grandi metropoli, tra cui i principali sono la sovrappopolazione e conseguentemente il traffico. Non ultima, la grande diffusione delle tecnologie digitali, di cui i paesi asiatici sono al contempo grandi produttori e grandi utilizzatori (Cann, 2013) riveste un peso sempre maggiore nella vita quotidiana, senza escludere i rituali digitali. Ne consegue che nelle grandi metropoli asiatiche i rituali dedicati alla commemorazione dei defunti sono sempre

più frequentemente affidati ai dispositivi digitali che li allontanano dallo spazio urbano e dalla vicinanza fisica con i defunti, per dislocarli non solo in uno spazio privato, ma anche e soprattutto in uno spazio mobile e digitale (Duteil-Ogata, 2012). Si ritrovano, anche in un contesto come quello della morte, apparentemente isolato e immobile rispetto al resto delle esperienze umane, tutte le problematiche ed i temi della *Mobile Society* (Urry, 2000, 2007), la continua mobilità di cose, idee, persone che mette in discussione anche le relazioni, mobili anch'esse e il rapporto allo spazio, la dinamica, contraddittoria certo, tra mobilità e appartenenza. In questa prospettiva, anche le pratiche legate alla morte sono un'ibridazione tra ciò che è stabile, radicato e ciò che è mobile, e tra ciò che rientra nella dimensione fisica e ciò che invece appartiene alla sfera del digitale. Tuttavia, è proprio grazie alla possibilità di una fruizione ininterrotta della tecnologia digitale, al tempo stesso mobile e in grado di tenere insieme diversi ordini di mobilità, che possono riprodursi e diffondersi delle rappresentazioni capaci di dare alla morte e alla commemorazione risposte affettive altamente simboliche, capaci di generare appartenenza al di là del luogo in cui si realizzano (Büscher, Gamba, Coman, Sas, & Schreiter, 2018 – forthcoming).

Lo spunto è offerto dal recente caso di *iVeneration* (www.iveneration.com), un servizio ideato da Anthony Yuen, che si propone come alternativa virtuale ed ecologica alle commemorazioni tradizionali in una metropoli ad altissima densità di popolazione come Hong Kong: infatti il servizio offre la cremazione e il collocamento nel *colombarium* delle ceneri, contestualmente all'accesso alla piattaforma on line, a cui si aggiunge un sistema di realtà virtuale, tramite cui si possono commemorare i propri cari in qualunque luogo ci si trovi. L'articolo vuole esaminare come la trasformazione – dettata da condizioni contingenti: il superaffollamento, il traffico e i costi – di una pratica rituale abbia conseguenze importanti, sullo spazio urbano e sulla narrazione stessa della morte e dei rituali di commemorazione nelle *Mobile Societies*, di cui sicuramente le metropoli asiatiche sono l'emblema, ma le cui dinamiche si ritrovano anche in quelle occidentali.

Oriente ed Occidente?

Louis-Vincent Thomas, antropologo, africanista, padre della tanatologia in quanto disciplina autonoma e prospettiva interdisciplinare, sosteneva che se la morte genera sentimenti comuni come la paura e l'orrore, sono invece variabili le risposte a questo sentire in relazione alla variabilità culturale dei diversi gruppi. L'antropologo francese isola due tipi di rappresentazione della morte che sono contrapposti e originano rituali di commemorazione molto diversi tra loro: da un lato, le società tradizionali, arcaiche, che rispettano sia la vita dell'uomo che della natura, fondando il proprio sistema di valori su una dimensione fortemente simbolica; dall'altro, le società che Thomas definisce “a ideologia produttivista”, ma si può anche usare semplicemente il termine occidentali, che oggettivano l'uomo e distruggono la natura (Thomas 1975, p. 100). All'interno della prospettiva propria delle società occidentali, altri autori (Déchaux 2000) hanno individuato un'ulteriore polarizzazione che vede ad un estremo la rimozione della morte dalla società, vale a dire la sua negazione come fatto sociale e la sua trasformazione in fatto privato da occultare (Baudry 1999; Elias, 1998). All'estremo opposto, invece, troviamo l'individualizzazione della morte, che ne fa un elemento biografico inserito nella narrazione del sé, ciò che implica per l'individuo di farsene carico in prima persona per quanto riguarda tutti i suoi aspetti (Seale, 1998). Tuttavia, la prevalenza dell'una o l'altra delle prospettive risulta estremamente incerta essendo le due entrambe presenti e spesso mescolate

nelle società occidentali. Un terzo tipo di rappresentazione, benché non previsto da Thomas, si aggiunge alle due prospettive. Si tratta di quella che potremo definire la via orientale ai rituali di commemorazione e alla morte, un approccio di tipo sincretico, caratterizzato da un culto dei morti molto radicato, definito da un complesso insieme di status, ad esempio il culto degli antenati in Giappone e in Cina (Lagerwey, 2010), che mostra come l'approccio alla morte sia al tempo stesso fortemente spirituale ed estremamente pratico. Infatti, da un lato le credenze religiose impongono di mantenere con i defunti un rapporto intenso e continuo, in Giappone in ragione delle radici Shintō e della tendenza a considerare il mondo come una rete di spettri animati, in Cina in particolar modo per la tradizione taoista che colloca lo spirituale nella natura. Una condizione che in entrambi i casi integra di fatto lo straordinario, il soprannaturale nel mondo fisico. Infatti, entrambe le tradizioni religiose hanno prodotto un complesso culto dei morti tale per cui il sistema delle commemorazioni funebri coinvolge tanto gli spazi pubblici, i cimiteri, che gli spazi privati, le abitazioni in cui si trovano degli spazi riservati dove sono installati dei veri e propri altari dedicati alle celebrazioni per i familiari scomparsi (Cann 2013). Da un altro lato, gli elevatissimi costi richiesti per compiere i riti relativi al culto degli antenati, l'importante problema ambientale, quest'ultimo aggravato dagli spostamenti necessari per recarsi sui luoghi delle commemorazioni, e infine la densità di popolazione tale da impedire di costruire nuovi cimiteri dove i visitatori possano raccogliersi per compiere i propri rituali, hanno costituito le condizioni ideali per il diffondersi di pratiche di commemorazione ibride, che hanno individuato nei dispositivi digitali una forma privilegiata. Tombe computer, QR codes ed altri strumenti digitali simili sono ormai presenti in gran numero in Asia, soprattutto in Giappone e in Cina, dove la loro diffusione ha prodotto una riduzione della frequentazione fisica dei cimiteri a favore di uno spazio di commemorazione ibrido – fisco e digitale – in cui lo spazio digitale è totalmente prevalente rispetto allo spazio fisico. Si tratta di una tendenza comune alla luce della quale è sollecitata una riflessione sullo spazio urbano, sulla mobilità, sul legame individuale e familiare intrattenuto con il defunto e di conseguenza con le rappresentazioni della morte.

All'interno di tale tendenza tuttavia si trovano delle differenze fra i diversi paesi asiatici. In primo luogo, è opportuno evidenziare una differenza tra Giappone e Cina riguardo al valore simbolico della cremazione, che implica una diversa concezione dell'anima, della sua vita dopo la morte e del tipo di legame intercorrente tra l'individuo e i propri cari defunti. In Giappone la cremazione rappresenta non solo il processo di purificazione a cui è sottoposta l'anima dopo la morte (Duteil, 2015), ma è stata anche per lungo tempo una vera e propria pratica liturgica di controllo, che ha legato le famiglie sia per quanto riguarda i rituali funebri e di commemorazione sia per il culto degli antenati, ai santuari, intesi tanto come luoghi di celebrazione dei rituali, quanto come centri di gestione della religione (Tamamuro, 1997). Diversamente, per la tradizione cinese, l'anima può trovare pace solo se il corpo del defunto viene inumato. Infatti, la venerazione dei defunti di per sé non è sufficiente a farne dei beati, degli antenati, se il corpo non ha subito il trattamento dell'inumazione (Newell, 1976). Per questo motivo, la cremazione, imposta dallo stato con ogni mezzo di coercizione (Bellocq, 2013), a partire dal 1956, per contrastare le superstizioni feudali e l'organizzazione sociale in lignaggi, è una pratica di trattamento dei cadaveri ormai prevalente, ma mai completamente accettata, che contrasta con la rappresentazione della morte profondamente radicata nella popolazione.

Nonostante queste differenze, la cremazione è praticata con le stesse proporzioni tanto in Giappone quanto in Cina e in entrambe i paesi le commemorazioni on line sono altamente diffuse.

Pratiche identiche dunque in cui intervengono oggi anche altri aspetti rispetto al contesto d'origine. Pratiche identiche che sottendono in ogni caso rappresentazioni e significati diversi.

In Giappone, benché in un contesto di grande diversificazione, sono i santuari Shintō, in quanto rappresentanti dell'istituzione religiosa, che gestiscono i rituali di commemorazione, anche quelli digitali. Questo ha certamente degli effetti pratici: limita l'impatto ambientale dovuto agli spostamenti per le commemorazioni e abbassa sensibilmente i costi molto elevati del culto degli antenati. L'aspetto simbolico più forte risiede però nel fatto che la commemorazione digitale, malgrado sia fortemente strutturata dall'istituzione religiosa, permette ai familiari di ricostruire l'identità del defunto tramite le sue tracce digitali, senza la necessità di un contatto fisico con il defunto nel luogo di conservazione delle sue spoglie.

In Cina la cremazione, come rituale di stato, continua ad essere una pratica imposta che la popolazione tenta di adattare alle proprie credenze, motivo per cui le ceneri sono conservate nei colombari e rappresentano simbolicamente il corpo del defunto come se fosse inumato. Per questa ragione qualsiasi tentativo di liberare lo spazio con soluzioni alternative, come la dispersione delle ceneri in mare, è destinato all'insuccesso, poiché non assicura al defunto il percorso necessario per diventare antenato. Le commemorazioni digitali sono in gran parte gestite dallo stato – che mira così a limitare l'importanza simbolica del luogo fisico della sepoltura – e in minima parte dalle imprese di pompe funebri. A queste si affiancano anche forme spontanee e informali, ad esempio i messaggi pubblicati su *Sina Weibo* in occasione della festa di *Qīngmíng* (Juillard, 2016). In tutti i casi, si tratta di forme sostitutive delle commemorazioni tradizionali al *colombarium*, che permettono di superare la difficoltà di raggiungere i luoghi delle commemorazioni a causa delle grandi distanze e, in maniera complementare, i problemi di traffico. In altri termini, al di là dell'uso effettivo dei siti di commemorazione (Kong, 2012), le commemorazioni digitali permettono di mantenere un legame con il defunto che può avvicinarsi, ma mai sostituire quello fisico.

Nello specifico contesto cinese, il servizio offerto da *iVeneration* è un'occasione per indagare come la rappresentazione della morte e i rituali di commemorazione tengano insieme tradizioni popolari radicate ed esigenze imposte dal vivere nelle *Mobile Societies*.

Lo spazio (di commemorazione) ad Hong Kong

Uno dei principali motivi di spaesamento occidentale rispetto all'Asia è la sua concezione e il suo uso dello spazio, denso di contrasti. Augustin Berque nel suo *Du geste à la cité. Formes urbaines et lien social au Japon* (Berque, 1993) illustra mirabilmente il rapporto della società giapponese con la natura, la quale è elevata a referente supremo della propria cultura, ciò in aperto contrasto con lo sfruttamento dello spazio e l'assimilazione del digitale portata all'estremo, come testimonia, ad esempio, l'opposizione stridente a Tokyo tra il parco di Shinjuko-gyoen, un'oasi di pace ed equilibrio, e la piazza di Shibuya, con un'altissima densità di popolazione e di schermi e stimolazioni visive. Un contrasto ed uno squilibrio simili a quelli che si percepiscono ad Hong Kong, dove soltanto una parte del territorio è edificabile, circa il 60%, a fronte di una popolazione stimata nel 2016 di 7.347.000 abitanti, con una densità media per chilometro quadrato di 6.000 abitanti con punte che arrivano a 40.000 in alcune zone. Per questo motivo, lo spazio urbano di Hong Kong è spesso definito spazio verticale, uno spazio in

cui si concentrano un grande numero di grattacieli con unità abitative “nano”, una sovraoccupazione dello spazio che il fotografo Michael Wolf ha saputo catturare tanto nella sua asfissiante saturazione quanto nella sua contraddittoria vitalità in “Architectures of density” (Wolf, 2014).

In tale contesto, l’uso dello spazio in generale, e dello spazio pubblico in particolare, è un aspetto che incide in ogni ambito della vita pubblica e privata degli abitanti della città. Infatti, la scarsità dello spazio disponibile, che incide principalmente nell’abitare, e la sua conseguente congestione (un elemento che condiziona pesantemente la mobilità interna), sono due dimensioni tanto assimilate quanto problematiche di Hong Kong. Le soluzioni, prospettate a differenti livelli, hanno finora riguardato la costruzione di zone residenziali lontane dalla costa così come uno studio di fattibilità, attualmente al vaglio del governo, di un piano a lungo termine di caverne da ricavare nella vasta area collinare della città dove si prevede di spostare magazzini, attività commerciali, amministrative, sportive¹ per liberare spazi vitali specialmente nella zona del *waterfront*. Per quanto riguarda invece la mobilità, pur essendo dotata di una efficiente rete di trasporti pubblici, Hong Kong non riesce ancora a risolvere il problema del traffico.

Sono tentativi di rispondere ad una fame di spazio che non riguarda solo i viventi. Al contrario, nella conquista dello spazio urbano i viventi sono sempre più in competizione con i morti, i quali sottraggono considerevoli porzioni di superficie urbana che potrebbe essere destinata diversamente. Inoltre, i morti e le commemorazioni funebri ad essi dedicate, ad esempio in occasione della festa del Qīngmíng (la Ognissanti cinese), sono fonte di problemi d’inquinamento legati sia allo spostamento di grandi numeri di persone sia ai rituali che prevedono di bruciare incenso e offerte ai defunti.

Il rimedio a tale tipo di erosione dello spazio urbano è stato individuato nella cremazione, imposta dal governo e diffusa anche a Hong Kong², fortemente voluta dall’amministrazione della città. Essa rappresenta una soluzione coercitiva, ma pur sempre una soluzione capace di dare un minimo sollievo alla mancanza di spazio, ciò che invece non risolve sono gli altissimi costi dei funerali e i problemi di mobilità e di inquinamento derivanti dallo spostamento della popolazione dovuto alla commemorazione dei defunti. Ma c’è un altro aspetto che la cremazione enfatizza: per la maggior parte dei cinesi, in ragione della religione popolare che professano, i defunti acquisiscono uno statuto particolare – gli antenati – e possono anche diventare dèi, la cui memoria va celebrata e il cui corpo va mantenuto intatto.

In questa condizione di privazione forzata dei rituali tradizionali e di limitazione fisica delle celebrazioni funebri, si sono diffuse forme di commemorazione digitali che non sono soltanto dei surrogati, più o meno tollerati, dei rituali precedenti, ma testimoniano, benché in maniera non immediatamente evidente, una vera e propria trasformazione della rappresentazione della morte in tutte le *Mobile Societies*. A Hong Kong, *iVeneration* è un esempio di come il digitale non solo entri nella definizione di una rappresentazione della morte e dei rituali sotto il segno della personalizzazione (Gamba, 2016a), un bisogno che il digitale ha accolto da più di vent’anni, da quando cioè il primo cimitero virtuale ha fatto la sua comparsa nel web (Chang & Sofka, 2006), ma coniughi il bisogno di commemorare i defunti con gli imperativi della mobilità. Infatti, in ogni ambito dell’esperienza, lo sviluppo del digitale ha prodotto un mobile world in cui i legami tra mobilità fisica e forme di comunicazione sono

1 <http://www.cavern.gov.hk/home.htm>

2 Hong Kong è una regione amministrativa speciale della Cina, di fatto una città stato, che dal 1860 al 1997 è stata una colonia britannica.

tanto ampi quanto complessi. Ogni vita personale è una moltiplicazione di storie, ricordi e luoghi di esperienze, che ogni singola persona deve e vuole tenere insieme in una autonarrazione coerente (Giddens, 1991), nella quale le tecnologie digitali svolgono un ruolo non solo di strumento pratico di supporto, ma anche di generatore di identità e appartenenza. Questo vale anche per i rituali funebri digitali e le forme di commemorazione on line: una molteplicità di pratiche, declinate con strumenti diversi, ma con un significato simbolico condiviso.

Che si tratti di Facebook, Twitter o altri Social Network Sites (Brubaker, Hayes, & Dourish, 2012; Carroll & Romano, 2011), che la forma espressiva sia la scrittura o l'immagine (Wahlberg, 2010), o ancora che si tratti di un insieme di servizi come è il caso di *iVeneration*, ciò che gli individui cercano in queste forme di commemorazione on line è la possibilità di mantenere vivo il ricordo e il legame con il defunto, di trovare sostegno al lutto (Varga & Paulus, 2014) in una comunità più ampia e di potersi dedicare a pratiche di commemorazione in qualsiasi luogo e in qualsiasi momento, superando gli ostacoli e le distanze che la *Mobile Life* produce.

La novità di questo strumento di commemorazione risiede nel fatto che la stessa società produttrice si occupa sia della cremazione del defunto in uno spazio fisicamente collocato, il *colombarium*, sia della sua commemorazione tramite un sito e un dispositivo di realtà virtuale. Anthony Yuen e suo padre hanno realizzato *iVeneration*, premiato nel 2017 al *Salon International des Inventions* di Ginevra, con il preciso scopo di ridurre l'inquinamento, i problemi di traffico e di sovrappopolamento (il *colombarium* è infatti uno spazio verticale), ma al tempo stesso di continuare a praticare in forma digitale tutti quei rituali, offrire cibo, bruciare incenso e offerte diverse, che sono il segno della pietà filiale nutrita nei confronti del defunto e di poterlo così commemorare, tramite la realtà virtuale, in un luogo che è la traduzione tecnologica dell'immaginario del celebrante: una tomba situata in un luogo gradevole, capace di trasmettere pace e raccoglimento. Ma soprattutto, ed è questo l'aspetto più interessante per quanto riguarda la trasformazione della rappresentazione della morte legate al digitale, *iVeneration* costituisce, nelle intenzioni e negli auspici del suo realizzatore, un momento di transizione verso l'eliminazione totale dello stoccaggio delle ceneri e dell'occupazione di spazio urbano, vale a dire la dispersione totale delle ceneri, una forma di *green burial* che diventa accettabile proprio per la possibilità che il digitale offre di potere commemorare i propri cari, come sottolinea Yuen, in ogni luogo ci si trovi e senza alcuna limitazione di accesso.

La proposta di *iVeneration* non manca di suscitare interesse e curiosità, ma anche più di un interrogativo: da quello, forse scontato, sull'entità della sua diffusione, rispetto alla quale una valutazione è prematura, essendo il dispositivo disponibile per gli utenti solo dallo scorso dicembre, a quelli inerenti il significato simbolico della commemorazione, come la scomparsa del corpo e del luogo fisico del ricordo, l'influenza della mobilità nella trasformazione del legame tra luogo e memoria, gli elementi comuni dei rituali digitali in Asia ed Europa.

iVeneration: rottura e continuità nei rituali di commemorazione digitali

Ad una prima analisi *iVeneration* potrebbe sembrare semplicemente una versione aggiornata dei primi cimiteri virtuali apparsi nel web, in cui il richiamo iconico alla realtà era fortissimo: una riproduzione del cimitero, degli oggetti rituali e delle azioni di commemorazione che vi si possono compiere, come deporre fiori, accendere candele, etc. (Gamba, 2007), a cui si aggiunge la parte relativa alle offerte, quest'ultima invece specifica dei rituali orientali che

celebrano il culto degli antenati. Inoltre, questo sito appartiene alle forme di commemorazione digitali diffuse in Cina e in Giappone, che hanno come finalità comune il fatto di evitare gli spostamenti di numeri elevati di persone che si recano al cimitero. Malgrado tali elementi comuni, *iVeneration* presenta anche alcune non trascurabili differenze.

In relazione alla diffusione di dispositivi digitali per le commemorazioni funebri in Asia, la presenza massiccia delle più importanti aziende di componenti informatiche e il conseguente uso delle tecnologie digitali hanno giocato un ruolo importante. Tecnologie poco costose e facilmente accessibili hanno contribuito alla formazione di una cultura digitale diffusa³ che ha coinvolto anche una sfera apparentemente lontana come quella delle commemorazioni. Inoltre, se gli aspetti legati all'inquinamento, al sovrappopolamento sono oggettivamente dirimenti riguardo alla diffusione dei rituali digitali, non va trascurato il ruolo della spiritualità e della religiosità orientali: la tendenza, di influenza shintoista, a concepire il mondo come un ambiente di spettri animati, in Giappone, e la tradizione taoista della spiritualità della natura che integra l'extra-ordinario nel mondo fisico, in Cina. Due visioni del mondo che si accordano, in linea di principio, con l'ibridazione del digitale e della sua immaterialità nel mondo fisico e naturale⁴. Le differenze diventano evidenti nella gestione della religiosità e nel suo legame con i rituali digitali. In Giappone, dove la dimensione sociale della religione è molto marcata, a partire dagli anni Novanta le pratiche funebri si sono moltiplicate e la supremazia del Buddhismo si è affievolita facendo spazio ad altre pratiche minoritarie, alcune tombe vengono accolte nei santuari Shintō, alcuni memoriali conservano le ceneri dei defunti, altri santuari ne sono privi poiché le ceneri possono essere disperse nella natura. Ed è a partire da questa condizione di grande variabilità che fanno comparsa le tombe-computer, regolate da un contratto, gestite direttamente dai bonzi nei santuari dove fisicamente sono collocate, il cui sito è consultabile dai parenti e amici che ne hanno accesso senza bisogno di recarsi al santuario. Un dispositivo di commemorazione che nel tempo ha abbandonato anche quest'ultimo residuo di materialità per diventare on line (Duteil-Ogata, 2015), allontanandosi in questo modo dalla gestione religiosa e diventando a tutti gli effetti un rituale di commemorazione personalizzato, completamente gestito dalla famiglia del deceduto.

In Cina, la diffusione dei siti di commemorazione on line riflette un preciso disegno governativo (erede della rivoluzione funeraria della metà degli anni Cinquanta) volto a ridurre drasticamente i problemi ambientali legati ai cimiteri e alla loro frequentazione negli spazi urbani delle grandi metropoli.

Tale uso dei siti di commemorazione digitale, trova in *iVeneration* una diversa declinazione. In primo luogo è un servizio privato a cui l'utente accede liberamente, vale a dire senza pressioni di sorta, per soddisfare un proprio bisogno personale, sicuramente coniugato a un'obbligazione morale – venerare i defunti – ma la cui adesione non costituisce un adeguamento alle richieste di razionalizzazione dei propri comportamenti urbani, anche se, considerato da un punto di vista esterno, il risultato ottenuto è identico. Non è influenzato da particolari convinzioni religiose, il sito propone infatti cinque possibili percorsi: taoista, buddhista, cattolico, cristiano e confuciano, ma non obbliga a una scelta. In altri termini, si tratta di una forma di commemorazione personalizzata soprattutto per quanto riguarda i tempi e i luoghi in cui il rituale viene compiuto.

³ Per quanto riguarda la diffusione e la conoscenza dell'utilizzo dei QR codes, ad esempio, il Giappone occupa il primo posto, seguito dalla Corea del Sud e dalla Cina (Cann 2013: 103).

⁴ Ho trattato questo tema in maniera più estesa nel capitolo *Espaces hybrides in Mémoire et immortalité aux temps du numérique* (Gamba, 2016b).

Ma è soprattutto la relazione allo spazio a segnare una differenza. I primi cimiteri virtuali apparsi nel web rappresentavano uno spazio di commemorazione parallelo a quello fisico, completamente indipendente, i rituali che vi si celebravano, rispondevano ad un'esigenza di senso, di partecipazione emotiva che non incideva, se non in rari casi, sul rituale fisico corrispondente. In tempi più recenti la tecnologia dei QR codes applicata alle tombe⁵, la cui diffusione presenta forti differenze nei diversi paesi (Cann 2013), ha richiamato l'attenzione sullo spazio della commemorazione, uno spazio ibrido in cui lo spazio fisico, urbano del cimitero si unisce a quello digitale del sito ad esso collegato. L'uso di questo dispositivo, che produce l'ibridazione tra i due spazi rituali, riporta l'accento verso lo spazio fisico, che riconquista un interesse simbolico perduto. La cui diffusione presenta forti differenze nei diversi paesi (Cann 2013), ha richiamato l'attenzione sullo spazio della commemorazione, uno spazio ibrido in cui lo spazio fisico, urbano del cimitero si unisce a quello digitale del sito ad esso collegato. L'uso di questo dispositivo, che produce l'ibridazione tra i due spazi rituali, riporta l'accento verso lo spazio fisico, che riconquista un interesse simbolico perduto.

La concezione dello spazio rituale di *iVeneration* è ancora differente, poiché propone una sostituzione totale dello spazio di commemorazione. Lo spazio di commemorazione del sito non è infatti parallelo allo spazio fisico, non richiama nemmeno ad un'azione a distanza, molto più radicalmente ne prende il posto, tale è infatti l'auspicio del suo inventore, che considera il *colombarium* dove sono al momento custodite le ceneri dei defunti come una necessità transitoria. Non è nemmeno una forma ibrida nel senso in cui lo sono i QR codes tombali, poiché non si propone di creare un legame tra lo spazio fisico del cimitero e la sua estensione digitale. Può piuttosto essere considerato come una forma estrema di rituale metonimico (Urbain, 1998), poiché l'uso del dispositivo digitale sostituisce completamente l'oggetto rituale primario – il cadavere – il cui statuto identitario viene effettivamente disperso con la dispersione delle ceneri, senza per questo cessare di essere un'identità legata alla memoria e alla commemorazione.

Eppure *iVeneration* mostra anche un evidente paradosso: nella sua ricerca di virtualizzazione totale della commemorazione totalmente slegata dallo spazio fisico, è profondamente legato allo spazio fisico, e in particolare allo spazio urbano di Hong Kong, infatti il sito offre i propri servizi di commemorazione unicamente ai familiari dei defunti sepolti nel *crematorium* di Hong Kong gestito da Anthony Yuan e a nessun altro.

La specificità di *iVeneration* risiede nel fatto di essere un tentativo di rispondere al bisogno di conservare un legame tradizionale con i defunti, in questo non diverso da quello che riguarda i viventi (Salaff, Fong, & Wong, 1999), con gli strumenti definiti dalla *Mobile Society*. In questo senso è utile ricordare come, ad un livello generale d'analisi, una società mobile è in maniera intuitiva ed ormai evidente una società in cui gli spostamenti di persone e cose hanno raggiunto livelli elevatissimi e rappresentano la norma nelle società contemporanee. Tuttavia, un'analisi più approfondita mostra come il paradigma delle nuove mobilità proponga una descrizione totalizzante del mondo contemporaneo (Sheller, 2014), vale a dire come la mobilità sia la chiave di lettura della contemporaneità, che è analizzata come il contesto in cui si trovano insieme stili di vita sia sedentari sia nomadi. Una chiave interpretativa che esamina come nel contesto attuale gli individui agiscano, mantengano legami e attribuiscano un senso alle proprie vite essenzialmente tramite pratiche, veri e propri lifestyle (Cohen, Duncan, &

5 Si tratta di piastre applicate alle tombe da cui è possibile leggere con un apposito scanner le informazioni relative al defunto e a cui è possibile connettersi anche da altri dispositivi digitali a distanza.

Thulemark, 2015), in cui la tecnologia, in particolare quella digitale (de Souza e Silva & Sheller, 2014; Ramella, Lehmuskallio, Thielman, & Abend, 2017) ha un importante impatto culturale e sociale in tutti gli ambiti dell'esperienza, anche quello della morte, del lutto e della commemorazione.

Morte e *Mobile Societies*

Il paradosso di *iVeneration* è un esempio delle contraddizioni e delle difficoltà presenti nelle società contemporanee non solo asiatiche, ma anche europee, di fronte ad alcuni momenti importanti dell'esistenza in cui la ricerca di senso è fondamentale. Dare un senso alla morte richiede allora di superare e di riconfigurare, in un quadro dotato di senso, gli effetti della mobilità.

In primo luogo, le commemorazioni digitali consentono di superare gli ostacoli che impediscono di compiere fisicamente i rituali di commemorazione. Questo può avvenire per eccesso di mobilità, che si traduce in immobilità, in congestione degli spostamenti, che impedisce di raggiungere gli spazi fisici della commemorazione come ad Hong Kong ed in altre metropoli. Ma può anche avvenire semplicemente per mobilità, che porta le persone lontane dai luoghi di commemorazione come avviene in Cina in ragione della migrazione interna, ma come avviene anche in Europa e anche negli altri continenti sia per la mobilità *high skill* (Favell, 2008) sia per tutte le forme di *mobility from below* (Missaoui & Tarrius, 2006). Ciò richiama la necessità di *interiorizzare* il defunto, già praticata in alcune società tradizionali tramite un'interiorizzazione fisica vera e propria, e che si esprime anche in forme diverse dal digitale, come la diamantizzazione, la trasformazione ad alte temperature delle ceneri in diamanti che possono essere portati sempre con sé sotto forma di gioielli⁶. Al di là della forma prescelta, fisica o digitale, vivere nell'epoca della mobilità implica un avvicinamento controtintuitivo alla morte. Da un lato la morte è occultata, in una società che tende all'immortalità, o meglio all'amortalità, vale a dire a estendere il limite della vita potenzialmente all'infinito (Gamba, 2018a); dall'altro è esibita, non solo negli immaginari letterari e cinematografici, ma anche nella sfera del quotidiano, dove entra impudicamente con i suoi eccessi pornografici, le sue immagini più crude sempre a portata di mano. Malgrado questo, o meglio accanto a questo, si è sviluppato un insieme di pratiche che ha prodotto uno spazio della memoria sempre meno legato ad un spazio fisico e sempre più ad uno spazio *omogeneo* (Eliade, 1965), multifunzione, neutro, non predefinito nella propria finalità, né nelle proprie caratteristiche. In altri termini uno spazio come quello digitale, sempre disponibile, sempre condivisibile, sempre più personalizzato nel suo uso, nei tempi e nei modi, dalle esigenze affettive (e contingenti) dell'individuo. Questo implica che il suo simulacro fisico – il cimitero – sparirà? (Gamba, 2018b). Forse no, ma indubbiamente cambierà forma, come già si può osservare in alcuni casi, ad esempio *Arnos Vale*⁷ nella città di Bristol, dove ai visitatori sono offerti diversi servizi: lezioni di yoga, celebrazione di matrimoni, rituali, iniziative culturali, visite guidate. Sicuramente la ridefinizione degli spazi di commemorazione, che è anche una riorganizzazione dello spazio urbano, ci pone qualche interrogativo, ad esempio: la contrazione dello spazio urbano dedicato in maniera esclusiva alla memoria, non rischia di cancellare anche la dimensione pubblica e sociale della commemorazione? Difficile dirlo. Certo è che anche nel caso di commemorazioni

6 In Svizzera, la società *Algordanza*, realizza *L'Erinnerungsdiament*, un diamante, dotato di un certificato di garanzia, che è un luogo personale in cui si concentrano il lutto, la memoria e la gioia del ricordo.

7 <http://www.arnosvale.org.uk/>

collettive legate a fatti particolarmente tragici, come l'eccidio di Srebrenica, il digitale può agire come spazio della memoria capace di tenere insieme una comunità che altrimenti sarebbe dispersa e privata della sua memoria collettiva (Huttunen, 2014).

In questo sembra che risieda il surplus di senso che i rituali di commemorazione digitale aggiungono alle rappresentazioni della morte, non si tratta solo di una pratica di mobilità, ma anche di una sorta di ri-addomesticamento della morte il cui effetto è quello di dare uno spazio centrale e continuo ai defunti, nel quotidiano di tutti noi.

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Analysing Grief on Twitter: A Study of Digital Expressions on Om Puri's Death

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Abstract

Digital media, particularly social media, have changed the way we interact and communicate. New media technologies have expanded our connections with people on a global scale (Williams, 2007). Today we can communicate with celebrities with ease. One of the ways to achieve this is through following them on social media; here one can interact with the celebrities posts and comments online (Sanderson, Cheong, 2010). This sense of attachment makes the mourning of celebrity deaths consequential in creating 'communities for mourning' (Gibson, 2007). It also sustains and extracts global attention. Hence, online platforms are increasingly influencing the way we grieve both in the case of personal loss and in mourning a celebrity death.

Grief is the most ubiquitous painful experience. With the advent of the Internet, online expressions of grief have increased considerably. The sensation surrounding the death of celebrities has increased in the online space post 2008. Om Puri¹ passed away on 6 January 2017. His unexpected death was at the centre of many discussions because of its untimely nature as well as a suspicious bruise that appeared on his head. The reports and various speculations surrounding his death were widely discussed on Twitter by news websites, blogs and other Twitter users. Through this optic, this study aims to explore the different categories of mourning messages about Om Puri's death on Twitter and to understand if social mourning mirrors the traditional eulogy. An inductive approach of qualitative content analysis is used to analyse the tweets in response to Om Puri's death.

Keywords: Grief, Online mourning, Social media, Twitter, Traditional mourning

Introduction

Online has become a space for interacting with friends, support groups, and forums in attempts to cope with death. The collective is believed to have 'felt' the death more in recent years as the mourning has become viral. The sensation surrounding the death of celebrities has increased in the online space post 2008 (Davis, 2017). Today, social mourning online has become a norm in relation to celebrity deaths (Davis, 2017).

On 6 January 2017, the Internet woke up to the news of veteran Indian actor Om Puri's death due to a heart attack. The critically acclaimed Bollywood actor was known for his roles in Hindi cinema, such as Sub Inspector Anant Velankar in *Ardhsatya*; Ahuja in *Jaane Bhi Do Yaaro*; Dukhi in *Sadgati*; Lahanya Bhiku in *Aakrosh*, etc. Om Puri's work expanded beyond Indian cinema to Hollywood, British and Pakistani cinema. His unexpected death was at the centre of many discussions because of its untimely nature as well as a suspicious bruise that

¹A highly acclaimed Indian actor, with a career in cinema spanning 40 years.

appeared on his head. The reports and various speculations surrounding his death were widely discussed on Twitter by news websites, blogs and other Twitter users.

Online news websites, web pages, and blogs were writing obituaries and remembrances for Om Puri. Social media platforms such as, Facebook and WhatsApp were flooded with messages about his death. The micro-blogging site Twitter was trending with tweets from politicians and eminent personalities working in Hindi, Pakistani and other film industries. Their narratives focused on personal relationships and accolades on his work. '#OmPuri' was trending for 8 hours in India and 14 hours in Pakistan on 6 January 2017 ('Trendinalia India', 2017).

Prior to this instance of Om Puri's social media mourning, there have been studies to understand grieving on social media. For instance, the case of Steve Jobs (Holiman, 2013) and of Michael Jackson (Kim, Gilbert, 2009), where the social media platforms were transformed into digital memorial sites. These studies have analyzed the Twitter messages about celebrity death. However, this study aims to understand the varied responses to the death of Om Puri on Twitter, and how Om Puri's mourning connects to traditional mourning rituals.

Literature Review

Death and Mourning Practices

Grief is perceived to be an expected response to the loss of someone close. Grief and mourning are an important part of the process after death, which is an inescapable reality of life. Mourning takes place when an individual acknowledges and comes to terms with the death (Rando, 1993). Grief or acute grief reaction is an emotional, behavioural, communal and bodily reaction to the understanding of the loss (Rando, 1993).

Our highly mediated lifestyle and intimacies with digital gadgets has made death and its bereavement 'live' (Rajan, 2016). Contemporary society is obsessed with youth (Featherstone, 1982) and dying; death is perceived to have little economic or social value (Glaser, 1966; Turner, 1995). According to Walter (1991), dying and the grievers are isolated as they emphasize the physical vulnerability of the modern individual.

There are several theories of understanding death and coping. One such understanding is the five-stage process of coping with death: namely, denial, anger, bargaining, depression and finally acceptance (Kübler-Ross, 1969; Kübler-Ross and Kessle, 2005). Stroebe and Schut (1999) describe another process called the dual process model, which is based on various kinds of coping such as loss, restoration and alternation. Walter (1991) outlined the following kinds of deaths: namely, traditional death, modern death and postmodern death. In traditional death, mourning was shared by the immediate family, which used to live under the same roof, and the larger community, which knew each other. Funerals helped in bringing the loved ones of the deceased together to share their common pain and to establish the death in the society (Dilmac, 2016). A modern individual is disconnected from his/her traditional roots, family and place of origin (Giddens, 1991); he/she lives in one place and works in another place, and his/her friends and family belong to a different place. So in case of their death, the mourners are all separated geographically and might not know each other. Talking about the modern mourning ritual in England, Walter (1991) says that death is experienced in private spaces, as a private family affair, with very few people attending the funeral. Grief is considered to be a personal emotion, which is not accessible to others. In India, for Hindus, the mourning period lasts for a period of 13 days and it comprises of rituals such as '*pindadān*' (a mandatory religious practice

for the followers of Hinduism, which is performed to liberate the soul of the deceased so that they can achieve salvation), *tilānjali* (ritual of offering of rice balls), *panchagavya* (fire sacrifice to appease God), etc. It ends on the 13th day in the form of a feast, organised for friends and family members (Gupta, 2011).

The role of death is to affirm the complex network of relationships extending from family and workplace, to friends and the neighbourhood community. Gupta (2011) argues that with modernity, the modernist grief psychology emphasises on progressing; the primary message is to let go. However, this idea differs when looking at Eastern cultures such as China or Japan. The dead are transformed into ancestors, and the living move into their future with the dead (as ancestors) (Klass, 1996; Kübler-Ross, 1970). Walter (1999) stated that people in postmodern societies, as compared to traditional and modern societies, mourn differently. He argues that they grieve as a group through various informal bodies such as self-help groups. The focus in the self-help groups is on the similarity of the experience of death. The Internet has increased access to such groups and has transcended their physical limitations through digital connect (Rajan, 2015). This is contrary to modernity's dependence on professional experts to handle grief; postmodernity has sidelined the experts (Walter, 2007). Modernity and its attempts at reducing disruptions of daily life was considered to have sequestered death (especially in Anglophone countries) in places like hospitals, hospices, cemeteries, etc. (Giddens, 1991; Mellor and Shilling, 1993). Nonetheless, today technology is bringing back the sequestered death into our daily life, social media has provided alternative ways of living with the grief (Dilmac, 2016). The Internet and social networking platforms have brought the dead and the grievers onto our digital screens and into our living spaces (Walter et al., 2011).

Online Celebrity Mourning

The Internet has changed our daily experiences immensely. It has become a part of our day-to-day life in seeking information, friends, entertainment and so on (Correa, Hinsley and Zúñiga, 2009). The Internet has also brought enormous changes in the practices surrounding death and mourning; for instance, coping with death through blogs, online help groups, virtual attendance at funerals, live streaming of funerals, digital memorials, etc. (Walter et al., 2011). Grief could be understood as a reaction to the loss embalmed in emotion. However, mourning is seen as the process where an individual incorporates the loss in their lives (DeSpelder, Strickland, 2015: 207). Social media acts as one of the facilitators for expressing one's grief. Sofka (2009) categorizes online memorialisation sites into grief-specific and non-grief-specific sites. Space for mourning on the Internet has existed since the 1990s in a stationary state. while social networking platforms have made it interactive (Boyd, Ellison, 2007). They have turned into the principal sites for honouring, remembering and grieving (Giaxoglou, 2013).

Hudson argues that the interactivity of Web 2.0 is synonymous with having an agency (Hudson, 2003). With the advent of the mourning space online, grieving with strangers has become a common tradition (Walter et al., 2011). The bereaved connect with strangers who they feel have experienced a loss of the same nature (Roberts, Lourdes, 2000). Campbell and Jamieson have noted that death becomes a collective experience through media (Campbell, Jamieson, 2008). Through social networking sites, mourning has re-emerged in the form of a collective experience (Brubaker, Hayes, 2011; Kasket, 2009). With social media, grief is re-emerging as a collective communal practice (Walter et al., 2011). The uniqueness of social networking sites is that they provide space for users to construct and make their online

presence more visible to others (Haythornthwaite, 2005). DeVries and Rutherford (2004) argued that the public create roles for themselves as mourners and extend the boundaries of who participates in the mourning process. Holiman (2013) claimed that social media allows private mourning in a public space, which is reflective of the fact that people find collective experience through traditional rituals of eulogy.

Another important phenomenon of online mourning is mourning for a public figure. It is not a new phenomenon but emphasizes on a public figures' death. For instance, the death of Princess Charlotte of Wales in 1817 led to mass mourning. Such deaths would have resulted in online mourning in contemporary times due to the media reach being instantaneous and global. So the death is now transformed into a global or partially global phenomenon, where at least half the world is harboring the same feeling together (Walter, 2007). Horton and Wohl (1956) have argued that modern mass media fosters 'intimacy at a distance,' which gives an impression of a real-time relationship with the performer.

Social media also makes people feel that they can communicate with their celebrities directly by following their Twitter account (Sanderson, Cheong, 2010). Thomas (2008) argued that mass media has given way to a new kind of social relationship as the world is shrinking into a global village. This new social relationship is where they feel that an intimate connection has developed with the celebrities. This 'intimacy' or proximity at a distance, which is enhanced and technologically mediated to overcome the actual distance, still has an effect on an audience that is already aware of it (Gibson, 2007). By offering a platform for the fans and the celebrities to interact, social media takes a parasocial relationship to previously unparalleled levels. This encourages the notion that people can feel close to celebrities as their friends (Brown, Basil and Bocarnea, 2003). Some celebrity deaths resonate in such ways in an individual's life that it leaves little distinction between 'reality and fiction' and 'public and private' (Gibson, 2007). Much of the research on virtual grieving is centered on established relationships, but social media presents a fertile ground to study 'parasocial grieving' (Sanderson, Cheong, 2010).

Need for Mourning

The human need for expression related to death could be so persuasive that it makes a reaction inevitable (Jamieson, 1978). Mourning, grieving through eulogy, etc. can be looked at as such inevitable reactions. Emotional disclosure via writing can help in coping with the death (Cable, 1996). Writing to and about the death helps the bereaved to get a perspective of the loss (Roberts, Lourdes, 2000).

Therefore, social networks provide the required emotional and social support (Ellison, Steinfield and Lampe, 2006; Wellman, Gulia, 1999). Writing on social media can be looked at as deriving emotional support for death. The social media sites provide a platform to express grief on the death of a celebrity (Holiman, 2013). Going back to the definition of mourning and grief, posting on a social media network is argued to be a dire consequence manifesting from grief (Brubaker, Kivran-Swaine, Taber and Hayes, 2012).

In contrast to funeral homes or cemeteries, online grief allows individuals to craft responses in an open venue that is less constrained by social and cultural obligations. Even so, participating in online forums involves a display of grief that does not take place without spectators. The messages may manifest personal feelings, but they are subject to and are constructed and witnessed by social surroundings, which form an important part of coping (Lingel, 2013). Holiman (2013) talks about collective memory in context of online

memorialisation; he contends that collective memory has been democratised by the social media as traditional editors do not mediate the content or filter it.

Thus, social mourning serves as an outlet for grief in parasocial relationships. When one grieves the death of a relative or friend, the mourning usually takes the shape of attending or organising the funeral, visiting the loved one in the hospital or simply being present. In a parasocial relationship, one doesn't usually have access to these outlets and hence resort to mourning virtually, alongside millions of other fans. Sanderson and Cheong's (2010) study of the social media response to Michael Jackson's death found that people grieved over the death of their parasocial partner. They also argue that social media aided people to come to terms with Jackson's death by providing an outlet for their grief (Sanderson, Cheong, 2010).

Haverinen (2010) divides memorials into intentional memorials and unintentional memorials. This framework has been utilised to classify mourning in cyber cemeteries; specific sites created as grief sites are used for mourning, here its function is to create intended remembering. On the other-hand mourning in non-grief-specific sites or other social networks and gaming based sites function as intended remembering (Walter, Hourizi, Moncur and Pitsillides, 2011).

Intended remembering in the non-grief-specific sites could occur for the following reasons: a member in the site expires and the living members commemorate the deceased, or a living member uses the social networking site to indicate the mourner status (Walter, Hourizi, Moncur, and Pitsillides, 2011). Radford, Bloch and Mark (2013) discussed two other ways in which fans cope with a celebrity's death, namely, 'introjection' and 'incorporation'. The former is seen in instances wherein the fans wish to relive their experiences with the late legend. For instance, the examples of introjection would be the event organised by CINTAA (Cine and Television Artistes' Association) celebrating Om Puri's greatest works in Juhu, or the tribute given to Om Puri at the closing Gala of London Asian Film Festival 2017 and Om Puri's mention in the 'In Memorium' section of the 89th Academy Awards. Radford, Bloch and Mark (2013) defined incorporation as the feeling of loss to their extended self. It is incorporation when people own something belonging to the deceased to remember him or her and to keep the memories alive. Incorporation is the increased interest in the material objects connected with the celebrity (Radford, Bloch and Mark, 2013). This would include the sale of Om Puri film production products and personal artefacts associated with him.

Holiman (2013) connects the eulogy and epideictic rhetoric to analyse the social media grieving of Steve Jobs' death. The study uses the framework developed by Adrienne Kunkel and Michael Dennis, which considers the epideictic rhetoric, that critically examines the eulogies. The framework classifies eulogies or grief messages into messages whose main ideas are as follows: (1) forming reliability, (2) admiration for the departed, (3) self-declaration of feelings, (4) suggestions for how to cope through a problem focused framework, (5) feeling-focused coping, (6) declaration of intense past connection, and (7) continuance of interactive relationships (Kunkel, Dennis, 2003).

Establishing credibility is about acknowledging one's relationship with the dead (Kunkel, Dennis, 2003). Praise for the dead is characterised by praise for the characteristics or activities of the deceased (Kunkel, Dennis, 2003). Disclosing one's emotion on their own accord is exemplified by the griever announcing his/her mental or emotional state (Kunkel, Dennis, 2003). Problem-focused coping places emphasis on actions, and in carrying forward the ideas, projects and ideals of the dead (Kunkel, Dennis, 2003). Emotion-focused coping helps the audience restructure the connection with the deceased by offering an altered standpoint

(Kunkel, Dennis, 2003). It can be expressed as an indication to the afterlife, a gratitude to the relationship shared with the deceased, an indebtedness to the education and qualities learned from the deceased, and gratefulness towards the deceased's good life (Holiman, 2013). Assertion of the intense past relations reminds the audience of the mortality of the deceased person by reminding the flaws (Kunkel, Dennis, 2003).

Establishing an identity of the deceased is a pertinent aspect of the process of grieving (Harvey, Carlson, Huff and Green, 2001). Four identity-preservation strategies defined by Harvey, Carlson, Huff and Green (2001) are reinterpreting beliefs and memories; romanticising the deceased by redefining the negative; continuance of pre-death activities; and approving significant signs and symbols, such as sites of graves and more (e.g., a bedroom or a Facebook profile), which would suggest the character of the dead.

In the context of celebrity mourning, Thomas (2008) argues that the media plays a role in multiplying the private grief, in his analysis of the media response to Princess Diana's death. This sense of grief is achieved by showing images of the dead and talking about them repeatedly, adding to the sense of loss. Thomas again quotes from an interview where the audience accepts the feeling of personal loss because 'seeing her (Princess Diana) image so often in so many mediums created a personal loss' (Thomas, 2008). On the contrary, Linenthal (2001) argues that a 'nationwide bereaved community' is constructed that transcends beyond the various ways in which individuals are separated—religion, ideology, class, region, race and gender. Such kind of grief has been referred to as 'recreational mourning' or 'virtual grief,' and it is criticised as being voyeuristic (West, 2004). Mestrovic (1997) states that this kind of grief where the majority of mourners did not know the dead in person was not real grief but 'grief lite'—grief without pain, a feel good glow instead of unbearable agony. He also calls this kind of grief as the 'McDonaldization of emotions', a result of the culture industry centered around death and suffering in a post-emotional society.

Based on the discussion above, this paper aims to explore the following:

- To understand the different categories of mourning messages about Om Puri's death on Twitter.
- To understand if the social media mourning mirrors the traditional eulogy practices.

Methodology

The study on one's experience linked to death on social networking sites can be found in the works of Brubaker, Douris, and Hayes (2013). They conducted an inductive and thematic inquiry of interviews and other information connected to it (Corbin, Strauss, 2008; Braun, Clarke, 2006), recognising markers and arranging them into certain categories (Brubaker et al., 2013). Holiman (2013) used a rhetorical analysis of the tweets to understand the parasocial mourning of Steve Job's death. Similarly, content analysis has been defined as a methodical and impartial way of explaining a phenomenon (Krippendorff, 1980; Downe-Wamboldt, 1992; Sandelowski, 1995). Mayring (2000) described qualitative content analysis as an approach entailing pragmatic and controlled examining of data. Qualitative content analysis can be inductive, ideas, concepts and categories develop from meticulous analysis and association of the data by the researcher. or deductive, where the concepts are generated from the previous studies (Zhang, Wildemuth, 2009). Mayring (2000) identified the step-by-step process to inductive methodology as the step model of inductive category development, which would

assist in the understanding of different categories of mourning messages and their correlation to the traditional eulogy for the present research.

This study used an inductive approach of qualitative content analysis of the tweets in response to Om Puri's death, as outlined by Mayring (2000). Each sentence of the tweet was taken as a separate unit of analysis. The tweets have been analyzed multiple times by the researcher and have been objectively categorised into different themes based on the message content. The evolved themes were then categorised within the framework proposed by Adrienne Kunkel and Michael Dennis (2003), which considers the rhetoric of the tweets and critically examines the eulogies. The framework classifies the eulogies or grief messages into the messages whose main ideas are as follows: (1) forming reliability, (2) admiration for the departed, (3) self-declaration of feelings, (4) suggestions for how to cope through a problem focused framework, (5) feeling-focused coping, (6) declaration of intense past connection, and (7) continuance of interactive relationships (Kunkel, Dennis, 2003). Further, new classifications which emerged were added to the messages, which didn't fit into the framework.

Data Set

For the qualitative content analysis, 170 Tweets posted from 6 January to 9 January, 2017 was analyzed. The data was collected for this time period as it was immediately after his death, and social mourning was visibly at its peak during these days. Tweets were included by using tweet filters with 'Om Puri' in the tag and from the geographical location of India. This filter provides the top trending tweets in the region with the tag. Pictures or links in the tweets were not coded. The tweets analysed were under the following hashtags: #OmPuri, #RIPOMPuri, #RIPSAheb, #Ardhsatya, #deeplysad #Legend #Yaadein.

Analysis

Themes of grieving on Twitter:

The following categories were arrived at based on the qualitative thematic content analysis of tweets:

Self-reflective Interaction:

Within this theme, we will discuss and analyse how individuals were disclosing their emotion in response to the death of Om Puri. Words like 'miss', 'shocked', 'unbelievable', 'heart breaking' and 'saddened' were coded in this category. For instance,

Greatest man, lovin character; Big actor and a good mate; I cannot believe this #OmPuri #OmPuri still unbelievable that Sir Om Puri no more with us; :(((Feeling pain full

These are some expressions that are reflecting the theme 'Self-disclosure of Emotion' as developed by Kunkel and Dennis (2003). It is explained as a eulogizer's attempt at easing her/his grief by putting her/his emotion into language. Holiman (2013) explains that this strategy of verbalising emotions is an attempt by eulogizers to alleviate grief and make connections with other grievers.

These tweets are also very reflective of a fandom culture where associating with the rest of the online mourners is, among other reasons, a form of social capital. However, fandom is not a homogenous concept, Harju and Moisander (2014) discuss that fandom is multifaceted, and it is subjectively interpreted by researchers. For instance, one may be a fan of Om Puri's work and another a fan of the individual himself, irrespective of his work. These tweets draw from the hero narrative to frame the death of Om Puri. They reflect on his contributions as personally meaningful and in tandem with their values and ideals. It can also be seen as an extension of the self where it is a reflection of a fan's identity, beliefs and value system. This could include tweets like,

#OmPuri lives in the hearts of million of Pakistanis and Indians for his memorable roles in films.
He will remain in our hearts for long.
The Best Actor in World, An inspiration 2 me & many, he was suppose 2 work with me in Manto.
Deeply saddened by da news, RIP #OmPuri Saab _/_

These tweets where fans are tweeting to express their sense of grief help in giving an insight into the depth of their anguish in the light of their favourite personality's death. Therefore, it is evident that the margin between the fans and their fandom (in this case, the loss of Om Puri) is expressed not as an extension of the self but as a part of the self. The following tweets were also reflective of a passionate emotional connection, which has the ability to shape the identity of the fan tweeting, and its effects are intensely felt.

Farewell to one of the greatest actors ever in the world and one of my most fav-Om Puri Saheb
/ ;(#ompuri
The great legendary actor is no more can't believe that one of our greatest actors #OmPuri is no more. Deeply shocked

This view of fandom and grief where the emotional bond is emphasized helps in understanding the intimate dimension of an individual's grief in the context of a personality's death.

Changing nature of mourning Social media as a Legitimizing Space

This category has a sub-theme of remembering the dead through their work. Praising the dead is a part of the eulogy. This is a sort of post-death ritual, which fans engage in inside the social media space. This acts to ease the disenfranchised grief that happens from suffering a loss. It shows how Twitter in this research acts as a legitimate space for mourning. It acknowledges the deceased person and her/his values, characters, ethics, and achievements, and relationships shared with the deceased. The sub-theme, remembering the dead through their work, pays tribute to the dead by referring to their work:

RIP #OmPuri! Another great actor has left us ;(; #ripomPuri #OmPuriSahab #india
Rest in Peace. A great actor and human being #OmPuri
Farewell to one of the greatest actors ever in the world and on of my most fav-Om Puri Saheb
/ ;(#omPuri'
Very sad news for Indian #BoLLYWOOD INDUSTRY.#RIP #OmPuri

Another interesting fact these tweets reflect is that of introjection, a concept introduced by Johnson (1997). It allows individuals to reinforce the positive memories of the deceased. Hence, fans would share the importance of their work or personal stories about their interaction with them directly or indirectly. Such as,

A great and a versatile actor had a chance to meet him when he was shooting in Rajkot-rip
#OmPuri

My article in @ThedailyPioneer #newspaper regarding my experience workin wid #Shri
#OmPuri#Icon#SeemaKapoor

These positive tweets also stand in stark contrast to the negative emotions as reflected in a few tweets:

'Controversial personalities like #OmPuri and #Jayalalitha leave behind controversies even after their death.

What an irony ! #OmPURI'.

This shows the parallel existence of personal, collective and at the same time disconnected articulations of memory and emotions towards Om Puri. This disenfranchisement surfaces from the absence of sympathy and the moral superiority being constructed by the non-fans. Thus, there is a parallel existence of such negative emotions in the social media space trying to give legitimacy to non-grievers.

Digital Affective Alignment

Doveling and Sommer (2008) explained digital affect culture as formed by the social media sharing of traditionally and discursively fashioned emotions. This emotional connection of the grievers online can be understood through the fundamental features of digital affect culture, namely, discourse, alignment and belonging (Doveling, Sommer, 2012: 7). Most tweets were reflective of this emotional and discursive alignment:

Greatest man, lovin character, Bigactor and a good mate. I can not believe on this #OmPuri
Legends never DIE...Their work continues to inspire & create value much after...#OmPuri
Pretty sure that without #OmPuri in #EastisEast my first feature would never have been made.
Thank you Om for the generosity of your talent!

This digital affective alignment is a co-constitutive emotional practice, which helps people connect with other grievers online, seeking legitimacy and a memorial culture for collective remembering.

Moreover, tweeters refer to a parasocial relationship with the celebrity by quoting their personal stories. Through this, they reiterate the importance of the parasocial relationship in their life and mourn the loss of the parasocial partner. This parasocial relationship describes the illusion of intimacy between an individual and a celebrity. In this digital age, it has been further made possible by celebrities acknowledging the presence of their fans and tweeting about their daily life. As Brown (2010) and Bae et al. (2011) stated, parasocial relationships sometimes also have an impact on an individual's prosocial behaviour. For instance, some of the tweets which are reflective of such relations are

Adieu dear friend! #OmPuri @Rajesh Joshi”

I just learnt of Om Puri's death. He was a great and legendary actor & I've always felt so much respect for him.#OmPuri:(

RIP OmPuri Sahab, salute to our president & inspiration to performers worldwide @CintaaOfficial @FIA_actors@SagaChairman@sushant_says.

The tweets also mirror the traditional form of eulogy in social media by referring to the kind of relationship they shared with the deceased. This theme can be linked to the ‘affirmation of past relationships’: Revelation of private insights and unique relationship strategy (Kunkel, Dennis, 2003). It is to be noted that reference to close relationships might not be used in online memorials, given its reliance on personal relationships. In the case of Om Puri’s death, this strategy was extensively used on Twitter to reaffirm the parasocial relationship of the actor with his audience. This is in agreement with the argument that social media has taken parasocial relationship to greater heights, with the audience feeling more connected to the celebrities (Brown, Basil, and Bocarnea, 2003).

It is pertinent to understand here that the collective mourning of people for Om Puri on Twitter is also reflective of the relationship of various actors who together mourn for a celebrity on the basis of his work and more. This collective mourning also gives space to everyone who wants to mourn in the digital space with their story.

Mediatizing Emotions in Digital Space

Mediatizing emotions in the digital space sheds light on the interaction between an individual’s affectivity and the commodification of emotions through sharing personal information. These tweets and hashtags allowed a topical engagement with the star post his death:

#OmPuri's Last movie #SalmanKhan's Tubelight :(Sad OmPuri Won't be around to celebrate its success U will be missed

Read so many beautiful articles abt #OmPuri!Many facets of his, which we never knew. Why do we value & celebrate humans, only when they're gone?

The tweets by grievers also reflect the mental state and the habits of Om Puri. It can be seen as grieving, leading to information exchange. Such as,

#OmPuri was intoxicated & wanted to meet son before death, investigation reveals #nanditaPuri #IshaanPuri#RIPOmPuri #bollywoodnews”

#OmPuri was suffering, his mental health was in Shambles. Naseeruddin Shah, '#OmPuri's post-mortem reports reveal he did not have a natural death

These tweets are personal, and they exchange information about the actor’s mental health, his personal relationships and his habits, assuming other readers would read it. In addition to information exchange, Kunkel and Dennis’s (2003) framework describes such tweets as ‘affirmation of vivid past relations’. In this theme, individuals discuss the flaws of the deceased to remind everyone of the personality’s mortality. This remembrance of the personality’s mortality is through the social construction of the celebrity’s past. Every fan considered it to be their duty to grieve while discussing the speculation around Om Puri’s death to show their faithfulness. Few individuals tweeted with an intention to spread news or to add to the ongoing

discussion. The event of a death is looked upon either with the idea of spreading news or as a trending topic which one needs to contribute to. Some of the tweets that were a part of this discussion are:

Did he die of heart attack , did he have an accident causing that head injury... or was he murdered?
Authorities must answer..#OmPuri”, “#OmPuri's death raises speculation of an accident.

The emotional construction and its digital display through hashtags are reflective of a constitutive space for digital affective alignment, which has the possibility of creating systems of mediatized emotional resonance.

Discussion

The paper set out to shed light on the various categories of mourning messages about Om Puri on Twitter, and to examine if the social media mourning mirrors the traditional eulogy. The included perspectives and findings offer insights into how the practice of social mourning has changed with the advent of the Internet. The research findings of online grieving of Om Puri's death has been classified into Self-reflective Interaction, Social Media as a Legitimizing Space, Digital Affective Alignment, and Mediatizing Emotions in Digital Space in this research. These themes showcasing the various forms and norms of grieving via Twitter mirrored the traditional eulogy and have fallen into the framework described by Kunkel and Dennis (2003). The research further suggests that death is increasingly being looked at as a news event with emotions attached to it, like a quicker version or 'grief lite' (Jack, 1997) of what was observed in the traditional death. As observed in the analysis, Twitter is a space for expressing emotions (in this case grieving and mourning for a celebrity) as well as for receiving/giving information. The use of the hashtags is indicative of the inclination towards participation in the collective mourning for Om Puri on Twitter.

Interestingly, the categories that evolved in this study mirrored a similar functionality of traditional eulogy in two distinct ways. First, Twitter acted as a means of social mourning across time and geographical boundaries/space. Apart from being able to physically pay homage to Om Puri, his fans, friends and colleagues used Twitter to share their comments and pay homage to him. Hence, Twitter became an added space for the visible and affective perpetuation of Om Puri. Second, Twitter is also a way of self-disclosure and self-presentation. Self-disclosure on Twitter provides a space for the fans, friends and colleagues to talk about Om Puri as a person, his work and more. In other words, Twitter is allowing people a digital space for visitation, collective remembrance and collective mourning. Having acknowledged this fact, one cannot deny that sometimes the negative emotions as mentioned above could possibly make the grieving process of the bereaved difficult. However, this paper did not dwell upon this aspect since it is beyond the scope of the present study.

This research also speaks of the salience of the disenfranchisement of grief in the online space. A fan-based relationship is based on affect—emotional relationships that a fan builds around his/her fandom and the object of the fandom. This alienation surfaces when the force of the relationship is not acknowledged. By grieving through personal anecdotes, he/she tries to establish him/herself as a 'genuine' griever by sharing some intimate details in order to be authentic. Through the study, it is observed that grievers discuss the popularity and political ideology of the deceased on social media and in the countries that grieve the deceased. The

analysis has helped in setting out to shed light on the functions of online mourning of Om Puri on Twitter. The tweets are reflective of how the online space of Twitter allows negotiation, legitimization and improvement of the disenfranchisement of grief. Further, this study opens up the possibilities of studying the concept of celebrity capital related to a celebrity's death on social media. It also attempts to note the influence of social media in handling death.

It is pertinent to note that social media platforms (in this case Twitter), with their limitations and affordances, form how public and collective mourning takes place. Thus, in certain ways, online mourning consists of as many meanings as offline mourning. This is because grieving/mourning does not stay static and reproduces meaning socially and historically with time. Hence, Twitter has provided a platform for people to construct and express emotions for a public figure in their own way.

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Antonella Napoli, Alessandra Santoro (a cura di), *Indelebili Tracce*, Ipermedium Libri - Funes, S. Maria C.V. (Ce), 2017

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Indelebili tracce – testo edito presso la casa editrice Ipermedium – è il nome sotto al quale si raccoglie il pensiero di numerosi sociologi e ricercatori interessati al tema della morte, con l'obiettivo comune di edificare un solido contributo alla letteratura che ne problematizza la relazione con le sue rappresentazioni ai tempi della rete digitale.

Tralasciandone la dimensione biologica, è l'accezione narrativa della morte ad essere il principale oggetto d'interesse del libro, che la inquadra costantemente all'interno di una dinamica di mediazione simbolica senza la quale non sarebbe possibile questa continua tensione ad attribuirvi un senso.

Mai come in questo caso sembra opportuno incominciare dalla fine, e nello specifico dal contributo di Gianfranco Pecchinenda che chiude il volume con un intervento a proposito dell'utilizzo dei processi dialettici di astrazione linguistica come arma contro la caducità dell'esistenza. In una lettura della realtà elaborata sulla relazione tra cose e processi – che evidenzia il bisogno umano di sintetizzare l'esistenza in quadri coerenti di senso – si intuisce come la nostra conoscenza del mondo circostante sia una conoscenza dialetticamente mediata, soprattutto nei modi in cui questa viene tramandata nel corso delle generazioni. Possiamo dire dunque che «la storia è sempre costruita e mediata da un discorso di tipo narrativo» (Pecchinenda, 2018) e di conseguenza lo sono anche le esplicazioni che tentano di legittimare un territorio insondabile come quello della morte.

A questo proposito, nel capitolo *Malattia e Morte ai tempi della Rete* di Antonio Camorrino, ritroviamo una suddivisione delle fasi storiche e i relativi ordini di legittimazione che si sono alternati nel dare significato alla morte nel corso dei secoli. Senza irrigidire troppo la questione su un piano storiografico possiamo dividere un lungo periodo in cui erano le grandi narrazioni religiose a rispondere alla domanda escatologica da quello in cui il regime di legittimità – e di rappresentazione – è stato monopolizzato dal progresso scientifico, che ha «derubricato malattia e morte dall'agenda della morale annoverandole nel libro mastro della ragione» (Neiman, 2011). La morte viene così secolarizzata, medicalizzata e ricacciata in un letto d'ospedale, rimossa dalla vita pubblica e bandita in toto dal senso comune divenendo argomento tabù. Come scriveva Norbert Elias a tal proposito: «Never before people died so noiselessly and hygienically as today» (1985). Ritorna in maniera piuttosto violenta la necessità di una risposta che la scienza non è più in grado di dare. L'impossibilità di scongiurare la minaccia dell'insensatezza al riparo di una sacra volta (Berger, 1984) rafforza così l'urgenza di lasciare dietro di sé tracce che testimonino una partecipazione al mondo dei vivi, una presenza che superi le costrizioni biologiche e rimanga presente anche dopo la nostra dipartita. Se il segreto della morte rimane irrisolvibile, l'unica soluzione palliativa è rappresentata dai segni che lasciamo dietro di noi.

La rete digitale con il suo avvento sembra portare con sé non poche opportunità a riguardo: oltre a fornire nuovi strumenti di partecipazione sociale, apre nuove strade da seguire

in merito alla costruzione di un immaginario in cui sviluppare nuovi modi di esistere e, di conseguenza, di morire. Inteso come dimensione puramente narrativa, nella misura in cui ogni presenza in rete è un costante rimando ad un corpo, una voce, un pensiero che è anche altrove, il Web è il luogo perfetto per ospitare un duplicato di noi che non risenta della fatica del tempo e continui ad esistere oltre la nostra fine biologica.

Alcuni tentativi di sopravvivenza – di stampo sicuramente avanguardistico – compiono un passo importante servendosi della dimensione digitale per varcare la soglia tra i due mondi. Ritroviamo nell'intervento di Alessandra Santoro *La morte nel mondo digitale: memoria, lutto e immortalità* in due progetti *2045 Initiative* ed *Eterni.me*. Il primo, iniziativa no-profit di matrice russa capitanata dall'imprenditore Dmitry Itskov, si prefigge di superare – entro il 2045 – il grande limite delle macchine artificiali: l'incapacità di pensiero autonomo. Lo scopo ultimo è l'estensione del tempo di vita ricreando una coscienza umana in rete, capace di continuare a “vivere” autonomamente basandosi sugli indizi reperibili nel web sulla vita di una determinata persona, permettendo un vero e proprio continuum tra l'universo analogico e quello digitale. Il secondo progetto citato – *Eterni.me* – è un portale su cui è possibile registrarsi acconsentendo al collezionamento del proprio vissuto sul web, registra ogni movimento dell'individuo in rete costruendone un duplicato digitale capace di prendere il suo posto una volta giunta la sua fine biologica. Il duplicato in questione non fungerebbe solo da memoriale audiovisivo, ma da vera propria presenza online con cui è possibile interagire attivamente attraverso una chat.

A tal proposito potrebbe essere utile riflettere sul meccanismo di autoinganno necessario alla riuscita di tale iniziativa. Se è di comunicazione che parla, possiamo inquadrare l'iniziativa di *Eterni.me* in modo spaventosamente simile alla ricerca in epoca Vittoriana del dialogo con i defunti. In entrambe le occasioni – forse oggi con un po' più di consapevolezza – la tensione ad arrivare dall'altra parte ed interagire con un parente dedicatosi ad esperienze eterne può essere letta come una terapia individuale di elaborazione del lutto, come rivolgersi ad uno specchio rinnegando che l'interlocutore sia di fatto il proprio riflesso.

2045 Initiative ed *Eterni.me* sono in questo senso due risposte allo stesso eterno quesito: è possibile trascendere la morte? Una possibile risposta a questa domanda viene discussa nel capitolo *La partecipazione paradossale* di Diana Salzano. Il selfie inteso come pratica di partecipazione porta gli individui a scandire la propria esistenza attraverso immagini di sé catturate nel quotidiano, facendo dell'autoscatto un'abitudine quasi necessaria per comunicare al mondo la propria esistenza. Un aspetto interessante è il processo di trasformazione dell'individuo in immagine, del suo passaggio cioè dalla realtà analogica a quella digitale: «lo Spectrum è la trasformazione dell'oggetto reale in una posa che è già *immagine di* e si pone nel tempo passato. [...] La posa è un'esperienza dissociante in cui l'io avverte una separazione tra sé e l'immagine di sé che si avrà dopo lo scatto; l'io perennemente in movimento, fluido, cangiante, nella foto diventa immobile e statico, fissato, una volta e per sempre, nell'immagine di un corpo, un volto, un'espressione» (Bordini, 2015).

L'esperienza dissociante della posa è continuamente moltiplicata, in quanto gli utenti della rete amano sostituire spesso la loro immagine precedente con un'altra più performativa. Il linguaggio fotografico viene quindi snaturato, in quanto il selfie, più che fermare il tempo, sembra inseguirlo (Salzano, 2017). Tale fenomeno oltre che nel quotidiano si mostra tristemente interessante se relazionato alla pratica del suicidio: i selfie pre-morte sono un fenomeno abbastanza conosciuto e fanno parte di un modus operandi molto diffuso tra gli individui intenzionati al suicidio. Il selfie scattato prima della morte è un lascito visuale da consegnare al mondo appena prima della dipartita, come un'ultima traccia definitiva di una

presenza che sta per abbandonare la sua fluidità cristallizzandosi in quell'immagine.

Un ulteriore argomento che ci permette di approfondire il tema della partecipazione digitale alla realtà è individuabile nella pratica del foodporn. Passando attraverso un'operazione di elisione della mortalità dal discorso del reale, il foodporn – derivato da ciò che Barthes chiama “cucina ornamentale” (Barthes, 1957) – si inserisce perfettamente in un periodo storico dominato dalle immagini delle cose più che dalle cose stesse. Come scrivono Davide Borrelli e Marialuisa Stazio in *Food Porn: scambio simbolico ed esorcismo della morte*, nel foodporn la rappresentazione visuale di un piatto pronto per essere mangiato omette per intero sia il processo attraverso cui quel piatto è stato accuratamente preparato, sia la fase successiva in cui viene consumato (e in questo senso rovinato). Come nella pornografia, l'elisione simbolica di tutto ciò che permette all'oggetto d'interesse di essere lì in quel momento è una condizione sine qua non per un'estetica basata sulla produzione di desiderio. Così come i corpi durante un amplesso sessuale vengono deprivati di mortalità, il cibo raffigurato in foto sulla copertina di una rivista o quello condiviso in rete hanno l'obiettivo unico di arrivare agli occhi dello spettatore senza lasciar trapelare altri indizi di sé.

Questo fenomeno è stato perfettamente integrato nel web come pratica di partecipazione sociale alla realtà. Si parla dunque di networked food, ovvero cibo condiviso virtualmente per essere mostrato agli utenti della rete. In questo caso è giusto credere che lo scatto effettuato ad un determinato piatto raffiguri un cibo preparato per essere consumato oltre che condiviso, ciononostante ritroviamo – come con il selfie – un'intenzione di eternizzare l'oggetto. Sono ancora tracce sottratte al tempo, testimonianze di una presenza immutabile che si accumulano formando lo storico di un'esistenza fatta di piccoli indizi lasciati indietro per raggirare l'oblio. Nonostante il progressivo processo di mistificazione e dunque negazione del contatto con la morte – come detto in precedenza – in epoca contemporanea si è arrivati ad una sua rielaborazione narrativa in chiave spettacolare (Santoro, 2017). Se il contatto fisico con essa continua il suo processo di sparizione, allo stesso tempo ne proliferano le immagini e le rappresentazioni nei media e nell'immaginario collettivo, talvolta poste come icone attorno a cui sviluppare un dramma pubblico, talvolta esaltandone l'aspetto violento e voyeuristico (Bifulco, 2017). La morte ritorna tra i vivi per dare spettacolo di sé rendendo teatrale e condivisibile il suo potenziale drammatico ed osceno, talvolta esponendosi come fenomeno di massa, talvolta come elemento di pura trasgressione simbolica.

Ritroviamo nel primo caso due esempi estremamente pertinenti, selezionati da Luca Bifulco nel capitolo *Morte pubblica, tra classe e status. I casi Jade Goody e Lady Diana*. Questi due fenomeni di portata internazionale operano una rappresentazione della morte perfettamente pianificata che trasmette al pubblico storie credibili e coinvolgenti. Le due persone in questione – una vittima di un'incidente mortale, l'altra consumata lentamente da un cancro – si prestano ad essere perfette icone attorno cui sviluppare narrazioni con un altissimo potenziale divulgativo. Le rappresentazioni della morte in questi due casi spianano la strada a diverse tematiche e stimolano l'opinione pubblica a creare argomenti di discussione. Fanno discutere, infatti, gli scandali, le teorie cospirative, i piccoli scoop di cronaca rosa e in generale la carica drammatica che moltiplica l'importanza di qualsiasi notizia trapelata riguardo all'individuo che non c'è più o sta per lasciarci.

Centrali sono anche gli stimoli visivi: circolano ovunque immagini che ritraggono positivamente la persona defunta oppure, nel caso del cancro, la malattia viene vissuta pubblicamente attraverso una rappresentazione ben calibrata di un corpo in decadenza, accompagnando il pubblico verso un epilogo che sebbene indesiderato viene coralmente atteso

con spirito voyeuristico. La condizione che si rivela necessaria in entrambi i casi è la martirizzazione della persona, che occorre a nobilitare l'atto di morire e rimpolpa il senso di appartenenza ad un destino comune.

Di diverso stampo è il caso della serie TV *Hannibal*, analizzata da Mario Tirino nel capitolo *The art of killing – l'omicidio come performance identitaria*. In questo caso è l'aspetto osceno della morte ad essere protagonista. La spettacolarizzazione dell'atto omicida ed un grottesco esasperato a tal punto da divenire opera d'arte (per altro propedeutici nella serie alla costruzione identitaria del protagonista), uniti al tema del cannibalismo – segno distintivo della saga – fanno di *Hannibal* un perfetto esempio di come la morte possa essere teatralizzata, impiattata e data in pasto ad un pubblico che non sembra smettere di averne fame. Resta da capire se sdoganare a tal punto il binomio morte/violenza porti all'anestesia emotiva e quindi ad un'implicita propensione ad accettare la fine, oppure se la sfacciata teatralità con cui è proposta riduca il concetto di morte a poco più di uno spettacolo distante da consumare su una poltrona. Sebbene siano nate in seno ad una logica di intrattenimento questi prodotti televisivi sono carichi di informazioni su come viene diffuso nell'immaginario collettivo un senso della fine sempre più distante, come lo è uno spettatore dalla scena.

Per concludere, sembra che l'educazione alla morte sia un tema che la nostra epoca non è capace di affrontare. In una realtà sommersa dall'abbondanza delle sue stesse rappresentazioni, la morte viene letta come una tra tante interpretazioni dell'esistenza. Queste narrazioni eterogenee e contraddittorie straripano da uno schermo in cui tendiamo ad immergerci, così da poterci girare a guardare con distacco il nostro corpo che subisce il tempo ed invecchia, in attesa dell'ultima puntata della stagione.

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Sitografia

Eterni.me (<http://eterni.me/>)

2045 Initiative (<http://2045.com/>)

Fabrizio Denunzio, *L'inconscio coloniale delle scienze umane. Rapporto sulle interpretazioni di Jules Verne dal 1949 al 1977*, Orthotes, Napoli-Salerno, 2018

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L'inconscio coloniale delle scienze umane. Rapporto sulle interpretazioni di Jules Verne dal 1949 al 1977 è il titolo del saggio di Fabrizio Denunzio, edito nel 2018 all'interno della collana *Teoria sociale* curata da Orthotes Editrice. Un titolo evocativo, che affronta le interpretazioni dell'opera di Jules Verne offerte da alcuni scienziati umanisti francesi – Michel Butor, Roland Barthes, Michel Serres, Michel Foucault, Michel de Certeau - nella seconda metà del Novecento. Al fine di emancipare l'opera di Verne dal genere della letteratura per l'infanzia, questi autori si concentrano sull'indagine scrupolosa della narrativa verniana, bypassandone i contenuti politici. Rimuovere dal discorso su Verne il colonialismo narrativo, non approfondendo il tema dell'Algeria ripetutamente affrontato dall'autore, ha consentito di neutralizzare il colonialismo storico. Denunzio svela i processi di rimozione inconscia di questi intellettuali i quali, negando la dipendenza della produzione letteraria di Verne dal progetto coloniale francese, evitano di affrontare le vicende del colonialismo a loro coevo e mostrano una dipendenza più inquietante: quella della conoscenza scientifica dalle esigenze della loro coscienza nazionale. In questo modo, l'autore, oltre a rilevare l'inconscio nazionalista e coloniale degli scienziati umanisti, ne pone in luce le derive: la complicità inconsapevole con il potere incarnato nelle strutture sociali imperialiste del proprio contesto nazionale.

Il libro è diviso in quattro sezioni. Dopo una prima parte in cui si introduce Verne e si offre una panoramica sui rapporti tra capitalismo, colonialismo, scienze umane e società, nella seconda parte l'autore si addentra in alcuni romanzi verniani, rilevandone la trama nazionalista e colonialista che li caratterizza. Nella terza parte Denunzio presenta il campione testuale, punto nevralgico del testo e oggetto del suo rapporto, per concludere con una sezione dedicata alla lettura di Verne da parte di studiosi marxisti (Macherey e Chesneaux), al romanzo di Verne *Clovis Dardentor* e alle illustrazioni dei suoi libri che completano stilisticamente e ideologicamente la narrazione.

L'opera di Verne, colui che ha dato vita – insieme a M. Shelley, E. A. Poe, H. G. Welles - al genere fantascientifico, si è sedimentata nell'immaginario collettivo europeo. I suoi capolavori (*Viaggio al centro della terra*, *L'isola misteriosa*, *Ventimila leghe sotto i mari*, *Il giro del mondo in ottanta giorni*) hanno contribuito allo sviluppo di una letteratura di genere incentrata sui temi del fantastico, del viaggio, dell'avventura, dell'anticipazione scientifica. La conquista coloniale, l'esplorazione delle grandi potenze europee – con l'ingente reperimento di informazioni, i diari di bordo, i resoconti di viaggio – costituiscono non solo la cornice socio-politica entro cui si sviluppano la sensibilità creativa e il progetto narrativo di Verne, ma hanno avuto altresì un ruolo centrale nel concimare il terreno narrativo della cultura di massa, scatenando la fascinazione per l'esotico e volgendola al sensazionalistico. Anche in ambito italiano, riviste di inizio Novecento come *Per terra e per mare – giornale di Avventure e di Viaggi* e autori come Salgari, Motta, hanno fortemente risentito dell'influenza di Verne la cui opera, peraltro, ha

ottenuto un'importante fortuna editoriale già a partire dagli ultimi decenni dell'Ottocento (cfr. Foni, 2007). Conscio della rilevanza dell'opera di Verne per l'analisi dell'industria culturale, Denunzio concepisce questo libro come un preludio a uno studio più esteso sull'industria culturale italiana e il colonialismo. La letteratura di Verne è stata tuttavia per lungo tempo confinata nell'alveo della narrativa per ragazzi, grazie alla visionarietà che al contempo ha avuto echi anche nella poesia: *Il battello ebbro* di Rimbaud rimanda al *Nautilus* del Capitano Nemo, mentre Guido Gozzano celebra l'onirismo di Verne in un'ode funeraria a lui dedicata e riportata nell'introduzione del libro di Denunzio. Verne ha contribuito a far sognare generazioni di adolescenti ma non ha visto invece avverarsi il suo di sogno: quello d'essere riconosciuto dall'*Académie* e dal mondo letterario francese. Ciò che ha ottenuto in vita è stata l'onorificenza della Legion d'onore, e non è un caso che gli sia stato conferito il più alto riconoscimento politico-militare: questo è stato possibile grazie al sostegno offerto dalla sua opera al progetto coloniale francese, trasposto in molti suoi romanzi.

Come sottolinea Denunzio, grande conoscitore di Verne e della sua rilettura a opera di studiosi marxisti, i suoi romanzi sono in prima istanza scientifici e geopolitici, e in essi la geografia, grande passione di Verne, diventa elemento cruciale per l'importanza che ha assunto da un punto di vista politico: essa “si è sviluppata all'ombra dell'esercito” (Denunzio, 2018, p. 26) rendendo possibile l'espansione coloniale e l'accaparramento politico-militare delle terre lontane, prima su tutte l'Algeria. L'Algeria coloniale compare nel suo romanzo geopolitico per eccellenza *Le avventure di Ettore Servadac* (1877) e in molte altre opere (*Jangada* 1881, *Mathias Sandorf* 1885, *Mirabolanti avventure di Mastro Antifer* 1894, *Clovis Dardentor* 1896), nelle quali è ritratta come un'estensione naturale della Francia, una sua propaggine d'oltremare. L'esaltazione del colonialismo francese si esprime attraverso una descrizione eurocentrica dei personaggi e dei rapporti (asimmetrici) da cui trapelano il razzismo cattolico e il progetto progressista e civilizzatore della borghesia di cui l'autore è espressione. Non che Verne non abbia cercato di veicolare una visione filantropica, pedagogica, finanche anticoloniale: egli biasima il colonialismo inglese per tornare a ribadire la necessità e la bontà di quello francese. Se è ammissibile, contestualizzandolo, che un inventore di storie sostenga con entusiasmo il progetto coloniale francese attraverso una narrazione che presenta il colonialismo come fenomeno naturale, cioè lo purga delle sue cause storiche, è invece allarmante che intellettuali del dopoguerra, nel costruire un discorso su Verne, si concentrino minuziosamente sui diversi aspetti della sua tecnica narrativa, rimuovendo al contempo i temi del colonialismo e dell'Algeria coloniale.

Il saggio di Denunzio è scorrevole, nondimeno incisivo, e apre varchi su temi più vasti di quelli che affronta in modo diretto: stimola la riflessione sul discorso epistemologico e metodologico, sul rapporto tra la creazione narrativa e l'orizzonte politico, sulla relazione tra la dimensione del potere, la conoscenza scientifica e il sistema sociale. La parte cruciale del libro è quella dedicata all'analisi del campione costituito dai saggi dei cinque intellettuali francesi che hanno indagato l'opera di Verne al fine di riscattarla dall'angusto ambito della narrativa per l'infanzia per conferirle lo statuto di classico della letteratura. La natura del campione è reticolare, il discorso su Verne prende forma da un gioco di intrecci e dipendenze tra le categorie del sogno, del segno, del mito. L'interrelazione tra i saggi riflette quella tra le scienze umane, che l'autore definisce (dis)umane dal punto di vista epistemologico e politico: le spiegazioni si rimandano l'un l'altra, pur mantenendo la propria specificità disciplinare, e tutte insieme lavorano affinché non riaffiori il rimosso storico-politico.

Ciò che emerge, allora, attraverso lo svelamento di Denunzio, è l'inconscio coloniale e nazionalista degli intellettuali francesi che inficia la loro coscienza scientifica, impedendo di esercitarne a pieno la funzione: quella di "riportare non solo i fenomeni, ma anche la coscienza (umana) dello scienziato ai suoi meccanismi di riproduzione sociale" (Denunzio, 2018, p. 21). L'oblio del discorso coloniale è tanto più significativo se si considera l'arco temporale (1949-1977) in cui sono stati pubblicati i loro saggi, un periodo di grande tumulto relativo alle vicende in Algeria: la parificazione alla Francia metropolitana, l'inasprimento delle misure repressive nei confronti dei ribelli, lo scoppio della guerra, la liberazione e l'inizio del processo di decolonizzazione. Non problematizzando il tema del colonialismo in Verne finiscono per tacere sull'intero fenomeno e si sottraggono dal dover fare i conti con più di un secolo di colonialismo in Algeria. Conti che invece affronta, ad esempio, Pierre Bourdieu, il quale negli anni cinquanta si ritrova a confrontarsi con la realtà coloniale algerina in veste di militare. Tale esperienza è alla base della sua "conversione dello sguardo": svelando i disastri del colonialismo, mette in discussione i saperi legittimi nell'ambito accademico e abbraccia la missione dello scienziato sociale volta a smascherare i meccanismi della violenza simbolica e della riproduzione della disegualanza sociale.

Denunzio getta luce sull'inconscio di questi autori silenti e lascia che ne emergano le contraddizioni: scienziati avveduti, che in diverse occasioni si sono mostrati fautori del pensiero radicale, criticando le strutture del potere (e del sapere), hanno mostrato di non essere esenti dal pensiero ingenuo e dall'accettazione spontanea della struttura sociale nazionalista e colonialista; essa è diventata struttura della coscienza. Sulla necessità di tenere in primo piano le cause storiche dei fenomeni sociali e sul delicato, nonché insidioso, ruolo di scienziato umanista e sociale, dai teorici critici ai sociologi della conoscenza, è stata sottolineata a più riprese l'imprescindibilità di una "vigilanza epistemologica" in grado di mettere lo studioso nella condizione di sorvegliare le pre-nozioni, gli schemi cognitivi e valoriali che rendono lo scienziato un uomo come gli altri, frutto del suo specifico contesto storico-sociale, portatore di un inconscio che ne ha interiorizzato le strutture in modo da risultargli naturali. Il discorso di Denunzio chiama in causa tutti, e apre la strada a un'indagine più ampia sull'inconscio coloniale italiano: "Aver individuato l'inconscio colonialista degli scienziati umanisti francesi, allora, ha senso solo se si è disposti a fare un lavoro di auto-analisi sulla propria cultura nazionale per vedere quanto la rimozione del colonialismo ne permei la struttura" (Denunzio, 2018, p. 12).

L'autore ci mette in guardia: quando la scienza non compie la sua funzione di smascheramento della dominazione, consentendo il risveglio dal sogno, il sogno prende il sopravvento e conduce anche gli intellettuali più attenti a collaborare "inconsciamente" per il mantenimento delle strutture del dominio stesso.

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