

death drive, succinct version

taken from “Death Drive,” *Act for Libraries*. <http://actforlibraries.org/deathdrive/>

[QUOTE] The death drive defined by psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan does not describe literal death, but death within the symbolic order. After having rejected the symbolic order composed of language, conceptualization and categorization, however, the subject persists. Slavoj Žižek describes this existence as a living death: those who continue after refuting the symbolic order are essentially undead. And this mode of existence gives form to destruction — death in form — so that those subjects who come back to life after rejecting the symbolic universe come back anew; they are no longer the subjects who were part of the symbolic order.

This obscene continuation of life, a mockery of the symbolic order itself, is nonetheless still within the symbolic order, according to Lacan. But now the agent derives pleasure from pain: he or she has gone past the pleasure principle, the notion that people seek pleasure and avoid pain, inherent in the symbolic order. Thus, suffering or pain is now the means through which one experiences pleasure. The subject enjoys being rejected by the symbolic order, enjoys refusing the enjoyment offered within the symbolic order. For example, a subject who rejects capitalism will enjoy having less; a loner who has rejected companionship will enjoy his or her isolation. In essence, the symbolic order is resuscitated and reversed to satisfy the perverse — or negative — nature of the undead subject.

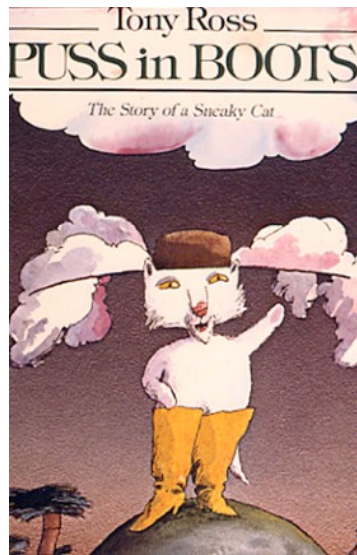
So the subject does not completely escape the symbolic order, he or she recreates it to satisfy an undying urge to continue: dead but alive; living yet dead. In other words, the death drive is obsession with continuation, not death itself, which is why it is the continuation that is important in conceptualizing the death drive: it is not the cessation of life but its continuation in the form of death. Because, at the core of all motivation, of all movement, is nothing. Therefore, when the symbolic order is destroyed, the nothingness of existence simply creates another one to honor the ceaseless drive to continue.

The death drive is a fate worse than death because even if the subject wants to, he or she cannot die, since the drive's process is impersonal. One is an eternal slave to endless movement, to continuation, and is thus passively immortal. And the symbolic order, and subsequently the subject him or herself, is constructed around this emptiness of motion, which is the void.

But, as the eternal void in motion, the death drive is also the breeding ground for all subjectivity and the symbolic order itself. So, at the end, the disintegrating symbolic order and subject meet their beginning: the nothingness in which all was and will be created. Therefore, there was nothing before there was something, literally, and this active nothing is the death drive. [END QUOTE]

Commentary

This is an extraordinary, succinct definition of the Lacanian-Freudian death drive, even more admirable in that it focuses on the issue of *form* — “death in form” — after a specific *moment* when the subject rejects the symbolic order but fails to die. In “coming back to life,” pleasure now comes from pain. I have called this the “Puss in Boots” paradox, a variation on Zeno's paradoxes of “too-late/too-soon” (also known as the Romeo/Juliet Dilemma). George Spencer-Brown has given a succinct mathematical description of this in his Ninth Canon of his *Laws of Form* (1969), which demonstrates that any distinction is simultaneously a double distinction with an infra-thin (ambiguous) space in between and that the outer shell of any concen-



tric series of frames reconnects to the innermost space of the series. This succinct description also has the virtue of connecting to readily understandable popular culture depictions of the death drive, such as the recent Netflix mini-series, *Russian Dolls*, whose POV characters are caught in a loop of events that are terminated by accidental death, only to find that they are resurrected again and again in the same location, to start a new sequence.

By emphasizing the relation to the Lacanian Symbolic, where one attempts and to some extent succeeds in *leaving*, one fails to leave fully; rather, one never really leaves, but the terms of staying have flipped. Now the only pleasure is to be found in pain, and this pain involves recognition of the horror of the predicament of this in-between situation of no escape. *Even though it may have been difficult to define this “undead” condition mathematically or philosophically, it is readily understood within the genre of popular culture, folklore, and ethnography in general.* Why? Because, I

would suggest, the death drive has *always* been the center-piece of mythology, folklore, and ethnology. The idea of the *soul* is that there must be some opportunity to *correct* what, within the Symbolic (the Law) has left little room for success. The soul is by definition sinful or, in more Lacanian terms, *lacking*. At the terminus of life there is a second chance, an opportunity to correct this lack, but here we must pay close attention to the function of the *trial* as a problematic situation where the undead must face the negative in order to achieve the positive, which comes in the form of a rest or release from the Symbolic’s tortures.

We must force ourselves to re-evaluate such ethnographical commonplaces, such as the *katabasis* (descent) theme, and re-assess their centrality to the death drive. This would be the true addition of ethnography to psychoanalysis that Freud sought in his partnership with Jung, but which was brought to nought because of Jung’s obsession with themes of union and harmony of opposites, which scholars have attributed to Jung’s problematic relations to his father. The picture ethnography and popular culture offer is clearer than clinical evidence and critical theory. The extremities of inside and outside give a graphical account of the death drive’s substitution of pleasure for pain within the Symbolic’s “no exit” policy. The *orthopsychics* of the interval between a literal death and a symbolic one are accompanied by an *orthographics* documenting the extimity (*extimité*) of inside and outside, where each term converts to the other in an “uncanny” or “quantum” correspondence.

As in the case of “Puss in Boots,” or the Romeo/Juliet Dilemma, folk wisdom seems to begin by assuming the universality of the death drive. In “Puss in Boots,” the youngest of three brothers is, after the father’s bequest has been divided up, finds that his share is not the father’s successful mill or other worldly wealth but the family cat. The necessity to accept lack is followed by the discovery of lack’s magical properties. The cat is able to reveal what has been invisible to everyone else, as shown in Tony Ross’s illustrated version of the story: the cat’s head, like other heads of beings connected to the *ingenium* of pure upward æther (the hat’s plumes become clouds), is the powerful self-replicating supplement that, in the Golden and other metallic ratios, produces the means of correct arrangement by means of a thoroughly *irrational* addition to a geometric condition. The ϕ of the Fibonacci series, 1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8 . . . , reveals its irrationality by resisting any good approximations, such as can be found for π in the number 3.1415926535897932384626433832795028841971. The lack of any really good approximation makes ϕ able to create such useful compact forms as the double spiral created by the seeds of a sunflower, for exam-



ple. This could be transferred metaphorically to the ability of a narrative or song to arrange its “tune” to create depth, complexity, and beauty.

So, while the condition of between–the–two–deaths may involve, as Žižek puts it, an endless cycle of returns to the same unbearable situation, it also involves conditions of beauty and, for the dramatic “rite of passage” that structures ritual initiations and individual re-births, the liminal space that affords cleansing, revelation, and transformation. In other words, the ethnographical function of orthographics is *orthopsychic* as a function of correction, forgiveness, and resurrection. The substitution of pain for pleasure has its obverse in the construction of an infinitely purer form of *jouissance* based on the seemingly interminable suffering imposed by orthographics. Not a bad deal, in other words.

Putting ethnography first instead of adding it in footnotes following critical theory or psychoanalytical analysis has the advantage of showing how this “not so bad” aspect of the death drive is not just more tolerable but actually desirable. It is what makes life worth living, in fact; and this is the upside of Heidegger’s Being towards Death, the Germanic preoccupation with death as the companion of transfiguration. Ethnography cannot follow clinical analysis either. Wasn’t it the Hysteric that forced Freud to recognize the primacy of the Œdipus Complex — the *drive* that, derived from the competition between maternal and paternal satisfactions of demand, was itself based on the more generic, pure form of the drive, in the compulsion to *fashion the form of negation* by rehearsing absence (in the famous “*Fort and Da*” example given by Freud’s grandson, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 1920)? Because Sophocles was able to produce this form completely in his criss-cross plot, we have from the beginning of literature the idea of how necessity follows from random contingency. So, when we realize, in Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, that the too–late–and–too–soon tragic ending relates generally and universally to falling–in–love’s paradox of fatalistic determinism (“we were bound to meet”) in the face of lovers’ universal experience of meeting–by–chance, we have the same formula *to which not just characters in literature must “return obsessively” but to which literature/myth itself must “return obsessively.”*

The definition of the death drive provided by the anonymous author of *Act for Libraries* is succinct, but even more efficient are the formulas given by ethnography, where in every case the death drive is accompanied by the *specific form* of the extimate. Within this form, the criss-cross of counter–inscription (the signature of Ernst Jentsch’s uncanny’s life–in–death and death–in–life), the twist of the Möbius band, and the externalization of the unconscious in Freudian–Lacanian theory all find their distinctive motif. Self-reference produces identical outcomes whether in the mathematics of regressive/irrational number sequences of the ethnographics of the *katabasis*/rite–of–passage. “Liminality” can be applied to any and all versions of the death drive, and the boundary that, in crossing, negates itself by doubling to create a micro–thin *poché* is the architectural/poetic answer to the age–old question of life’s relation to death.

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