



THE AESTHETICS OF THE FUNERAL IN GREEK TRAGEDY AND MEDIEVAL DANCES: AN ANTECEDENT OF THE SINISTER

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Abstract

The relationship between aesthetics and death has been as frequent as it has been complex. On the one hand, it is inevitable to account for all the representations of death linked to a previous theological scheme, of which art itself would be a reflection. Here we would have everything related to the *care of death*, concretised in the sepulchral sculptures that remind human beings of an ultraterrestrial destiny. In this sense, we have from the pyramids of Egypt to the stately pantheons of Pere Lecheise. On the other hand, nineteenth-century *sturm and drung* came to conceive of death as an incentive to life and an entity with a life of its own that is addressed precisely to the living, so that art came to show us a living figure, sometimes of great beauty, sometimes with a markedly macabre aesthetic that would come, in any case, to provoke reflection in the subject. From the macabre we would move on to the sinister understood as a Kantian judgement of taste. A judgement of taste on the sinister, a category understood as a bridge between the sublime and the macabre, from which a whole set of possibilities can be inferred: necromancy, necroeroticism. It is the possibility of eschatology to generate *aesthetic pleasure* for the contemplator. Death as an object of aesthetic contemplation.

Keywords

Death, Aesthetics, Funeral, Art, Contemplation

Introduction

In Greek tragedy, and also in later literature, the theme of the superiority of the subject who suffers misfortune is a commonplace. The characters of *Aeschylus*, but also of *Sophocles*, are invested with a unique dignity in that they accept their fate but at the same time remain steadfast in their moral determination.

I, in the shadows, can hear the city lamenting over this young woman, saying that, being the least deserving of all women, she is going to die in an unworthy manner for deeds that are most praiseworthy (Sophocles, 1973. P. 35).

This relationship of acceptance of death shapes the very essence of characters who, as in Greek Tragedy, we can find in philosophy

no one knows death, not even if it is, precisely, the greatest of all man's goods, but they fear it as if they knew with certainty that it is the greatest of all evils. (Plato, 2001..P. 122)

In this special relationship with Death of *special* men, such as Antigone or Socrates, we can see a positive view of death that, in some way, differentiates them from the rest of their peers. In the *Crito*, Socrates will come to define it as a *good of Hades* in which *the truly wise* dwell. And he goes so far as to describe death as a *marvellous gain* (2001). In this sense, the artistic representation of death in the Greek world is associated with a *good life*, that is to say, with the privilege of having been able to experience an excessive life.

As for the representations of funeral rituals, we can distinguish themes such as the "Prothesis" or exposition of the deceased, in which the deceased is bid farewell; this type of scene usually has a male protagonist, and with the passage of time undergoes a significant change. In archaic Greece, the presence of others, the public,

was crucial. That is why in scenes where there would supposedly be no witnesses, such as disputes between heroes, gods nevertheless appear to support each of the opponents.

II. The Sublime and Tragic Death.

In the specific case of Antigone, Antigone starts from pure desire. Her "no" is presented by Sophocles as irreversible, so much so that, if we read the tragedy carefully, we do not really know what it is that she rejects, nor what it is that she could consent to.

The traditional view of Antigone is based on the sacrificial myth, understood as a voluntary deprivation, in this case of life. However, we do not always delve into what Antigone's desire is overflowing, excessive, philosophical excess. And paradoxically, life-affirming.

Antigone's body is vividly present in the play, in her brother's body of course, but also in the multiple references to her adolescent body, projecting herself into a future body of woman and mother as a cultural and biological destiny that she will not fulfil, because it is part of the affirmation of her desire formulated as a negation.

Antigone does not make a pact with her desire. A desire represented by a corpse that she in no way wants to leave unburied, and offers us a paradoxical option that Greek thought was so fond of: that of the alliance between desire and a corpse, the image of death. Death is precisely what Antigone approaches, stimulated by her desire, which is a desire for life far removed from the destinies foreseen by power. A desire from the outside that is driven to death because it has no place in the discourse of power.

According to Žižek, Antigone's central dilemma lies not in her inclination towards death, but in the fact that the monstrosity of her action is concealed behind the character's aesthetic appearance. This monstrosity manifests itself in her exclusion from the community, while at the same time she becomes the symbol of those who fight and argue for the right to have a voice, to express themselves, to obtain justice and to be recognised as citizens (Žižek, 2017). With a powerful poetic vein, Hölderlin expressed the same, highlighting beyond her beauty, the heroic condition of the protagonist:

Surely the supreme feature of Antigone. The sublime mockery, to which sacred folly is the highest human manifestation, and here more soul than language, surpasses all the rest of her spoken utterances; and it is, moreover, also necessary to speak thus of beauty, in superlative, because the dignity in the attitude, among other things, it also lies in the superlative of the human spirit and heroic virtuousness (Hölderlin, 2014, p. 165).

III.-Medieval death dances

In the Middle Ages, we can contemplate death as an expected guest, as the logical outcome of a way of life, chivalry, or simply with a *familiarity* that has to do with domestication. In the sense of an event that can take place at any time.

"Death was familiar, close, in a certain way indifferent. One aspect of this familiarity was the coexistence of the living and the dead, which had not been the case in antiquity" (Aries, 1975.p. 34).

From the 14th and 15th centuries onwards, a fundamental event in the history of the relationship between art and death took place: the concept of representation. The artistic concept of representation dates from this period and coincides with the historical moment when death was most widely disseminated. Two meanings of death were sustained by art: on the one hand, the progressive degradation of the beauty of the idea of equality in the face of death.

On the other hand, there will be numerous representations interested in showing what awaits human beings after death. This is why we will see many representations of the *final judgement*.

From the 15th century onwards, the *ars moriendi* depicts the bed of the deceased seeking a good death, which becomes as important as a good life; the dying person is visited by demons and must avoid the final temptation (Tania Alba, 2015.p. 98).

Undoubtedly, the great artistic theme at this time will be that of *the dance of the death*

a succession of text and images presided over by Death as the central character-generally represented by a skeleton, a corpse or a decomposing living person. And, in a dancing attitude, he dialogues and drags one by one a list of characters usually representative of the most diverse social classes. (Infantes, 1997.P. 21).

The representation of Death becomes a symbol of death itself and of a whole set of discourses about it. To begin with, Death is from now on *death itself*. That is to say, it implies the centrality of the idea of finitude when thinking about life itself. The image of death takes on importance as an icon that represents an entity, what will soon be called *Santa Muerte*, and which will be the object of a cult in contemporary times, partly religious and partly mystical. The dancing Skeleton, which gradually approaches the subject, which in turn becomes a reflection of this image.

If in Classical Antiquity, death was a *present absence*, in the Middle Ages and early Modernity Death is an empty presence, a centrality that refers to an uncertain but certain future, and, above all, it is something we have to think about during life: *the memento mori*.

It is from this moment onwards that the sculptural representation of death no longer symbolises the peaceful, but the corruption of the body is shown with virulent realism, an ambivalent symbol not only of the fear of physical death, but also of life itself as a disease.

Alongside the competition of the sublime and the macabre, in the next instalment we will have to analyse in detail the genealogy of the sinister as a concurrence of aesthetic and psychological categories that account for Death as an artistic theme.

IV. Conclusions

There is an aesthetic experience of death, concretised in the presentation of the result of death, that is, of the *port mortem* body as the result of a *teckné* susceptible of being contemplated in terms of beauty or sublimity. It is the emergence of the macabre as an object of taste, of judgement of taste.

This *death that we like* may be the result of a symbolic operation in which the corpse, suitably prepared, represents a symbol of the values of a community. This is the case of the *tragic deaths* analysed in the tragedies of Antigone by Sophocles but also Medea.

In these cases, the object of contemplation that provokes an aesthetic experience is the tragic character's entire journey from the incident that triggers the conflict until the final death in the tragic catastrophe, foreseen beforehand. In this case the corpse of the protagonist has a purifying effect.

On the other hand, we have analysed the phenomenon of Death from the perspective of the ancient medieval dances, in which the aesthetic experience of the spectator is based on the provocation of fear. Through the dance phenomenon, we see how an intense mixture of sublimity is produced, due to the idea of eternity open on the subject that the dance movement presents the possibility of one's own death, which is presented, at the same time as terror, as a phenomenon that is relatively soon to come.

There is therefore a mixture of sublimity, terrifying fear and at the same time a certain humour (generally provoked by the scenography) that come to be associated with contemplation, delimiting and anticipating what will later be defined as the aesthetic category of the sinister.

In ancient times, the representation of Death is associated with the idea of an *absent presence*, insofar as it is presented to us as a certain possibility, albeit fluctuating according to our moral conduct.

In the Middle Ages, however, Death is present precisely through its presence as such, *as if it were alive*, dancing and allowing the contemplator to *see it*. If in Antiquity Death was present through its possibility or imminence, in the Middle Ages it takes over the spaces to be seen and heard, but it is no longer the possible death of the protagonist, but rather the generic death, *also that of the spectator*, and it is precisely this last idea that makes it a prefigurator of the future category of *the sinister*.

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