The Matrices of Black Humor and Death

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Abstract: The matrices of black humor and death, their cultural significance and connection to the social unconscious are discussed. My critical group analytic reading of war literature, film, music and fiction shows that sarcasm, gallows humor, destructive irony, the grotesque, cynicism and absurdist humor are used to communicate repressed fear of death. I propose that black humor breaks down the structure of the social unconscious and with it, societal prohibitions and constraints regarding death. This could explain the current fascination with the cult of death, which I link to the sublime. Enjoyment of and fixation on death/undead are rooted in the ideology of the white aesthetic. Black humor keeps the dreadfulness of death away from white. This is a function of the social unconscious. Since the social unconscious forms part of all matrices, analyzing and researching the matrix of black humor further is crucial for the study of black humor.

Keywords: Black humor, matrix, social unconscious, Holocaust, death

1. Introduction

Forms of black humor are powerful cultural phenomena. Transmitted amongst and across cultures, they constitute and become part of the Social Matrix, affecting individuals and (psychotherapy) groups. The matrix explains group, institutional and societal dynamics (Tubert-Oklander & Hernandez-Tubert, 2022). It is the hypothetical web of communication and relationships, the common ground, which determines the meaning of all events (Foulkes, 2018 [1964]). The metaphor *web* indicates that we locate ourselves symbolically and socially, and not only physically (Markley, 1996). One function of the matrix of black humor is to express issues surrounding death in a culturally accepted manner, I contend.

While the social experiences and practices of death differ across societies, we all know that we will die. Death becomes a *social problem*, which is particularly difficult to solve, because we find identifying with the dying too hard (Elias, 1985). Partially, because we are no longer used to death as people in the Middle Ages were, when birth and death were public events. Modern death, in contrast, is private (Ariès, 1976). Thus, although we are frequently exposed to violent and spectacular death via the media, death is rarely publicly discussed (Murray, 2007). Our need to turn away from death is justifiable, but excessive denial

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encourages neurotic anxieties about life and death (Abraham, 1977). As a result, we frequently experience death as something contagious and threatening. Therefore, the dead are kept at a distance due to fears that we could catch death. While fear is a universal, innate emotion, which has adaptive functions (Adolphs, 2013), when we become aware of the inevitability of our demise, this fear can become overwhelming. Resorting to black humor offers a means to deal with death anxiety, even though black humor has many functions.

In this article, black humor refers to humor that is grotesque, macabre, ironic, absurd, satirical, gallows, scatological, pornographic, cruel, paradoxical, bitter, sardonic and insensitive, or any combination of these. My purpose is to firstly demonstrate that black humor can be used to repress, deny, mock, dissociate from death and express socio-political criticism. Furthermore, it may function as a transitional object, or as a substitute for absent experiences of observing actual deaths, as well as being used to minimize fear of death, and/or as thanatological aesthetic entertainment.

Secondly, after briefly describing the matrices of black humor and death, I shall discuss these in relation to the social unconscious, which refers to cultural and social practices and norms, of which people are unaware. Even if these cultural constraints are perceived, they are denied, and if acknowledged, not taken as problematic (Hopper, 2003).

Thirdly, I shall offer a group analytic reading of selected war literature, film and music. I have focused on the Holocaust literature, because experiences of war form the most lasting memories (Jalland, 2006). Additionally, other films, a play and fiction were chosen as case studies due to their popularity. I shall argue that the matrices of black humor provide insight into how contemporary societies address death.

2. The Matrix of Black Humor

Roberts (1993) suggested that the mind comes into being through dialogue, which develops in the various group matrices within which the individual is a *nodal point* (like a neuron in the nervous system). *Matrix* stems from the Latin word *mater* (mother). It also means *womb* or a place of creation. Group Analysis holds that the group creates the individual. The matrix is the mold in which individuals are made (Weinberg, 2014). It is the psychic network of all individual mental processes, the psychological medium, in which people meet, communicate and interact (Dalal, 1998).

Group relationships and communications are not only interpersonal but also transpersonal. Consequently, group dynamics determine the development of the matrix and

vice versa. The interrelationship among group members is called the Dynamic Matrix. It creates group-as-a-whole phenomena and rests on the Foundation Matrix. The Foundation Matrix is linked to biological properties and based on the idea that we are all human, have the same qualities as a species and that society is founded on language and shared communication (Koukis, 2016). The Foundation Matrix connects individuals from different cultures.

The Personal Matrix is a complex system of intrapsychic processes, comparable to the neuron network in the brain (Weinberg, 2014). Bhurruth (2008) distinguished between the Personal, Dynamic and Social Matrix and compared these to Freud's Id, Ego and Superego. The Social Matrix might be particularly relevant for exploring black humor and death. It is the environment we find ourselves, from which our Personal Matrix is also derived. The Social Matrix becomes the perceptual viewpoint from which we relate to other matrices. Unsurprisingly, the Social Matrix includes both conscious and unconscious cultural, political and socio-economic phenomena. Our individual identity is permeated and formed by beliefs, rules, norms, expectations, values and attitudes in society. It includes ideas about black humor, which constitute the matrix of black humor.

Etymologically, black stems from swart (dark in color, wicked). In 1940, Breton (1997) coined the term *l'humour noir* to describe a certain dark, surreal style of comic writing. The word *black humor* only came into use after it was introduced by Friedman (1965). Black humor captures images of death and connects these with cheerfulness (Simpson, 1989). It is also associated with sharp, macabre and absurdist humor (White, 2019). Not necessarily funny, it often reverses societal norms. The "rottener" something is in a nation, the blacker its humor (Reizen, 1993). Thus, black humor arises during critical moments, such as war, economic depression or revolution.

In black comedy, humor relies on irony and cynicism. While in irony words signify the opposite of what a person says, modern cynicism is bitter. Cynicism also protects against despair and disappointment (Small, 2020) by always anticipating the worst (Stanley, 2007). Historically, cynics debased the currency of conventional morality (Branham, 1994). Cynic folly is an outrage against socioeconomic inequality (Revell, 2010).

Black humor conveys the insensitivity and cruelty of our world (McConnell, 2019). Death, trauma and ruthlessness are expressed through grotesque allusions, creating connections between seemingly incompatible ideas and emotions. Gallows humor was originally used to cope with death by execution (Murray, 2007). It expresses gruesome events (Rosenberg, 1991) and horrors of professional tasks (Christopher, 2015; Moran & Massam, 1997). It enables

people to remain sane in psychiatric hospitals (Kuhlman, 1988). An example of gallows humor is Elias' (1985) statement that death is only a problem for the living, dead people have no problems.

3. (Fear of) Death, Black Humor & the Social Unconscious

Black humor is commonly used to express fear of death, which develops between ages 6-8 (Derevensky, 1974) and is universal (Sinoff, 2017). While children ask questions, parents are often reluctant to discuss death (Bridgewater et al., 2021). The tendency to collectively conceal our irrevocable finitude through wishful ideas, is firmly established in Western, modern societies (Elias, 1985). We dread death. Hence, "… in the unconscious every one … is convinced of his own immortality" (Freud, 1955 [1915]: 291). However, when loss or severe illness occur, we are forcibly confronted with our mortality (Garwood, 2001).

Penna (2015) explored the omnipresence of annihilation anxieties in hospital. Death was engraved in the matrices, Penna wrote. Associated with the forgotten known, the uncanny (Freud, 1955 [1919]) and fear of anticipated images of death (Elias, 1985), the ghost of death allowed a glimpse into a hidden dimension, although the unconscious cannot have a record of its own death (Freud, 1955 [1926]). We ourselves have never experienced death, it is always the death of the other (Freud, 1955 [1915]).

However, I suggest that the unconscious records our *fear* of death. Frequently, we deal with this fear by fixating on death in media/films instead of talking about it. If displacement does not alleviate anxiety, our psyche resorts to denial, disavowal or repression. Feifel (1959) stated that the collective repression of individual mortality became part of the collective unconscious. This means that all societies repress fear of death.

I propose that the *articulation* of fear has also been culturally repressed and relegated into the social unconscious. We encounter the return of the repressed in the arts. Narratives, images and music trigger affective and cultural resonances. In this way, the terror of war, which echoes through texts written by war writers, such as Winter (2013), finds its way into our psyches. Frequently, authors resorted to black humor. It is no coincidence that humor became cruel following the World Wars and nuclear atrocities (Murray, 2007). Socio-political constraints created this new style of humor to express issues surrounding death. It indicates that black humor is rooted in the social unconscious of death, which includes attitudes toward death, dying, burial and mourning practices.

At first glance, the combination of black and humor appears logical. Black is linked to death and people had to wear black clothes at funerals (Whitemore, 2018). However, black humor also connects death with cheerfulness. How can we explain this contradiction?

In the 20th century, the unwritten law of civilization imposed forbidden public sorrow and social obligations to contribute to collective happiness (Jacobsen, 2016). Black humor fulfils these two societal demands by only indirectly expressing grief and contributing to happiness through cheerful allusions. But this explanation neglects the negative connotations of black and that the English language is color-coded (Dalal, 2002). Unsurprisingly, *white humor* does not exist. Black humor keeps the dreadfulness away from white, indicating that it is both an expression of the social unconscious and being formed by it.

Furthermore, black and white are signifiers of difference, each signifying the bad and good in relation to people, things and emotions. They penetrate, organize and structure all aspects of our existence, both internally and externally (Dalal, 2002). Hence, black humor functions similarly. It is linked to diverse cultural practices that structure our lives.

Cremation has become the preferred mode of disposal of corpses in Britain (Jacobsen, 2016). Perhaps people try to burn their fear of the dead and destroy remnants of death. Alas, the social unconscious resists to be turned into ashes. Since expressive mourning of casualties was discouraged during wars (Jalland, 2006), our ancestors' unprocessed grief remains engrained in our psyches. Processing grief and fear is difficult, because dying and grief became a medical process in the 20th century. Doctors replaced clergy at the bedsides of the dying, forcing death into sequestered hospital spaces. Nowadays, medicine tends to focus on physical illness, which creates a dilemma. Who attends to people's fear of dying and the distress of the bereaved? I suggest that black humor fulfills this function, as I shall show below in my group analytic analyses.

4. Group Analytic Reading of *A Journey*

Black humor allows people to voice the terror associated with death. Simultaneously, it enables making sense of what happened in a detached manner. Because black humor creates distance and, therefore, makes (engagement with) gruesome atrocities more palatable. So it has crucial social, cultural and political functions.

Moreover, it allows depictions of victims and perpetrators, as I shall demonstrate by critically reading an excerpt from *A Journey*[2] (Adler, 1999). Adler described how the Nazis transported Jews to concentration camps. Aware of the Jews' fate, the guards resort to gallows humor. Knowing what they are doing, they become complicit with murder. Thus, they indeed *pay* for the deportees' guilt by losing their innocence. Simultaneously, their humor is psychotic. Viewing themselves as *guardians* helps manage this insane situation. Through introjection of innocence, they become saviors, who guard the travelers. Attaching a seal of their blessing indicates destructive irony, used at the expense of the deportees. Delusional gallows humor enables detachment from their victims, who are assured that it would be a happy journey. Sarcasm par excellence, since there is nothing joyful in travelling into death.

I suggest that the matrix of the Third Reich had no room for cowards. Adler knew this. Hence, the guards are referred to as *heroes*. And in this hierarchical matrix, the station master positions himself above heroes, which is absurd.

Adler (1999) expressed genocide through delusional gallows humor, the absurd and sarcasm. Of course, black humor also allowed him to write about his own pain and rage, because of its societal acceptability. Thus, dread can be expressed, because black humor bypasses socio-political censoring. Interestingly, Adler gave both perpetrators and victims a voice.

A crucial question for me is why the horror of Nazism could not be directly articulated. Would it have resulted in defensive denial by nations not actively involved in the Holocaust, and political crises, if the word genocide had been used at the time? Foulkes, the founder of Group Analysis, might have been aware of possible ramifications and also remained silent. His silence indicates what could and could not be said, also removing death as a topic from the group analytic community.

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[2] "The engine … gives a pleasant snort … Do you hear the jolly whistle? That's the train … the stationmaster … blows his whistle and is in charge of everything. Here he is much more important than the mighty heroes, to whom he doesn't even pay attention. When one of the heroes comes up to him, he gives a careless salute … The travellers have been made comfortable … Officials, nurses, and orderlies will ensure your fate and attend to your every need … It hurts us that you are so nasty, like naughty children, because we are the ones who carry all the responsibility, for we have to pay for your guilt with our innocence … we are your guardians. Your souls are in our hearts … in our mouths. We lead you by your little hand so that you can survive the struggle … We lock the doors … and place the seal of our blessing upon them, now you can't get away … little sheep …" (cited in White, 2019, 102)

5. Black Humor as a Means to Depict Political Criticism

Filmmakers such as Andersson (1991), resorted to black humor to express socio-political criticism about the Holocaust. His Swedish film *World of Glory* resonates immediately with the audience:

> A group of naked men, women and children is being shoved into an open van to be slowly gassed under the unmoved gaze of bystanders. One of the witnesses, gazes behind him. Spectators are dressed in timeless business suits and multistory buildings are visible in the background.

Living in the shadow of an unescapable end is tragic (Simor, 2019). This film does not dissolve fear, the lingering of experiences nobody can leave behind (Andersson, 2010). At the same time, absurdist humor triggers sorrow and guilt, but also acceptance of death (Ariès, 1976), which makes guilt more profound. It becomes clear that this film demands assuming responsibility for people's contribution to the Holocaust (Brunow, 2010).

However, viewers get distracted, wondering who were worse, those who pulled the switches, or those who idly stood by. Therefore, they may ignore power hierarchies (white above black, perpetrators above victims, Europeans above Jews). Only analysis of the social unconscious can reveal how black humor is embedded in socio-political power structures. In *World of Glory,* Jews are even denied verbal sarcasm. Stripped of all clothes and dignity, their fear is depicted through nakedness. They were born naked and naked they die. The grotesque (naked thin bodies) becomes a social force (Boskin, 1997), because it feels humiliating to watch this scene.

In memories, images of death are closely linked with views of ourselves as independent individuals in Western societies. We live alone and we die alone, which is characteristic of a comparatively late stage in the civilization process (Elias, 1985).

I consider it to be noteworthy that in concentration camps Jews died together. Abraham (1977) suggested that the Jewish people frequently faced death and therefore individuals are not isolated from the life conditions that confront the larger group. Collective bereavement creates cohesion and makes catharsis possible.

6. Black Humor and Death in Contemporary Societies

Steir-Livny (2017) regarded Israel as a unique place of Holocaust awareness, where Holocaust humor plays a special role, working as a defense mechanism against the collective trauma. Hence, not only individualistic cultures resort to black humor to deal with death to experience catharsis. However, it seems that little has changed since Elias wrote in 1985 that society has been socialized into taboos regarding discussions of death.

But we encounter a paradox: While discussions have been silenced, partly due to the accumulative overload of sorrow from wars and terrorism (Murray, 2007), (social) media has turned death into theatrical spectacles (Höijer, 2004). Death is with people 24/7 and reminders of their mortality often emerge when dramas are staged against the backdrop of newsworthy events shaped by natural disasters (Denzin, 1991). Killings are encountered with chilling regularity since death is essential to successful news stories. Frequent exposure to images of dead bodies however does not result in people having a sense of actual demise. Because death is kept at a safe distance provided by the structure of the media (Azquerro, 2016).

Modern cultures have an obsessive fascination with death, which becomes apparent in the popular American series *Six Feet Under* (Ball, 2001-2005). It portrays the life of the Fisher family, who owns a funeral home. Society has transferred care of the dead to funeral directors. They must deal with bodies (Jacobsen, 2016), who become fetishes and products of the funeral industry (Walter, 2005). As the characters attempt to manage the constant presence of death, this scene[3] becomes ever more grotesque due to the moving and restoring of the corpse.

Arthur partly breaks the societal taboo (not talking about death) by his sardonic remark, "dead weight is the hardest kind of weight." Detachment and grotesque movements become an outlet for his sorrow, expressed metaphorically. Trying to deny the finality of physical demise, Arthur restores the nose. This negates (acceptance of) death. Hence, articulation of fear becomes obsolete.

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[3] Arthur, the apprentice mortician, is left in charge while the Fisher brothers are away. He puts the corpse of an obese man on a trestle, waiting for the arrival of a large coffin. During the night, the weight overwhelms the support frame. The body falls to the floor. Following an unsuccessful attempt by the family to lift it onto the trestle again, Arthur comments: "Dead weight is the hardest kind of weight to move." Another attempt to relocate the heavy corpse fails. Later Arthur reconstructs the deceased man's face, since the fall has dislocated his nose.

7. Death Anxiety and Music

While nothing seems exempt from the forces of the social unconscious, nevertheless death anxiety may surface more easily in music due to reverberating acoustic resonances. There is a bitter tone to many pieces in Ritchie's (2020) composition of Aitken's (2018) *Gallipoli to the Somme.* Harsh, relentless, astringent and repetitive battle music.

In his memoir, Aitken (2018) recounts the farewell his battalion received when setting sail for Gallipoli. As the brass band was playing, Aitken was wondering why an ability to play this instrument should excuse a man from marching on with them to Gallipoli. He shrugged it off with "the army is the army."

Inspired by Aitken's sarcastic remark, Lithgow re-composed the *Invercargill March.* We encounter similar cynical elements in *The March of the Anzacs* (Lithgow, 1917). Bravery is implied by musical interludes (United States Navy Band, 2015). As it fades into fragments when the strings take over, signifying Aitken's arrival under the cover of darkness in Gallipoli, the fantasy of bravery dies. Heroism was merely propaganda. The music conveys fear and sarcasm. Fear of death may emerge involuntarily from the social unconscious, I suggest, because acoustic resonances are automatically triggered, bypassing any cognitive and/or societal censors. Hence, as Aitken hears a flute in the muddy trenches, he immediately recognizes the tune as Händel's (1739) *Dead March from Saul.* It was played by the British Army before military executions. Aitken becomes acutely aware of death. Seeing the sign for Ypres (known for battle and death), he is reminded of Schubert's (1927) ominous line in *The Signpos*t, "there's a road that I must wander, where no traveler returns." Dry sarcasm and gallows humor are on Aitken's mind when faced with the prospect of dying.

Embalmed in army songs is the ironic fatalism that carries soldiers through years of hell (Ritchie, 2020). Vernacular (folk) songs, have often been linked to death. *The bells of hell*[4] are sardonically contrasted with the poetic "for you but not for me." Meant to offer courage that soldiers will survive, it verges on delusional absurdity. The lyrics originate in Behan's play *The Big House* (1957). Set in a disreputable Dublin lodging, the play depicts events surrounding the execution of an IRF member in Belfast prison. A British soldier is held hostage in the house. Eventually killed, his corpse rises and sings *The bells of hell* in the finale.

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[4] The bells of hell Go ting-a-ling-a-ling For you but not for me. Oh death, where is thy sting-a-ling-a-ling, Or grave thy victory?

The dual meaning of grave (severe, tomb) and its positioning next to victory, indicate acceptance that victory results in death. But death is *not* silent. Instead, the soldier is resurrected to sing about his grief.

Can fear of death only be safely voiced after one has died? Perhaps Behan (1957) uses this paradox to comfort those, who find silence unbearable owing to its association with demise. However, it is unusual that death is not silent. Honoring fallen soldiers through silence is a ritual. Thus, silence in Behan's play has a function. It does not indicate denial, Behan is aware that victory can be deadly. Paradox enables dissociation and transcendence. Rising from the dead, the soldier sings. By *killing death itself*, signified through singing, fear of death becomes obsolete. Thus, there is no need to talk about it. It shows how deeply repressed any direct articulation of death anxiety is. It can only be communicated via black humor.

8. Black Humor as Defense Mechanism

As defense mechanism, black humor enables detachment (Kobassa & Pucchetti, 1983), denial, avoidance (Haig, 1986) and withdrawal (Mulkay, 1989) for both actors and audiences. This becomes apparent in *Always Look on the Bright Side of Life,* which first appeared in Monty Python's film *Life of Brian* (Idle, 1979):

> It tells the story of Brian, who is both Jewish and Roman. Brian joined an anti-Roman liberation group, but the attack on the Roman occupiers failed. In one scene, Christ is seen delivering a Sermon. Inaudible on the periphery, people hear him say "blessed are the cheesemakers."

We encounter deadly crusades by Roman Emperors juxtaposed with food makers. Erroneously thinking that Brian was Jesus, the crowd feels offended. When Brian's mother screams "he's not the Messiah, he's just a very naughty boy!", the arising hysteria gets ever more surreal. Eventually, the absurd climax is reached when Brian is crucified, whilst another sufferer admonishes the masses to smile, whistle and sing *Always Look on the Bright Side of Life*[5] (Almond, 2019).

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[5] "… For life is quite absurd. And death's the final word. You must always face the curtain with a bow. Forget about your sin. Give the audience a grin. Enjoy it, it's syour last chance anyhow. So always look on the bright side of death. Just before you draw your terminal breath. Life's a piece of shit When you look at it. Life's a laugh and

The song combines cheerfulness with tragedy, and laughter with the grotesque. The audience is thrown into the midst of death through images of Brian's crucifixion. Venturing into gallows humor offers perhaps the only opportunity to psychologically distance oneself from torture. But it does not eradicate fear as religion does.

9. Black Humor as Transitional Object

Piper (1977) suggested that through our relationship with Christ, reunification with God after death is possible. This diminishes our fear of death. Jesus becomes a transitional object. However, the decline of the sacred, increasing individualization and the growing significance of the body (Heaphy, 2007) imply that other conceptualizations are needed.

Gallows humor connects life with death. It even allows people to deal with bodily pain, because it enables detachment. Hence, I propose that gallows humor may function as a transitional object in contemporary society to reduce fear.

10. Repression of Death Anxiety through Humor

Always look on the Bright Side of Life was popular at funerals in Britain in 2014 (Newman, 2014). This song has nothing in common with traditional requiems. Its popularity indicates just how much fear of death is repressed in British society. The absurd, "Life's a laugh and death's a joke, it's true", seems particularly engraved in the Social Matrix in the UK. When death is equated with a joke, people are expected to laugh. Fear and grief are socially forbidden when listeners are asked to *always* look at the bright side, and death must be dealt with by others.

In Western societies, the dead are no longer kept in the home. Moreover, funerals are shorter, prayers condensed, and everything is simpler (Zanasi, 2004), although Muslims and Jews have religious funerals within their communities, creating enclaves within the British society, where funerals are normally municipal and commercial (Walter, 2005).

Foci on individuals no longer acknowledge that death relates to the community (Wood, 1977). Grief is rarely publicly discussed. Instead, heart-warming descriptions of the life of the deceased are presented (Jalland, 2006). Demise is simultaneously present and absent during services. Vague recollections of communal ceremonies have faded into the social unconscious. However, death anxiety passes through the psyches of generations. Referred to as

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death's a joke, it's true. You'll see it's all a show. Keep 'em laughin' as you go. Just remember that the last laugh is on you …"

transgenerational haunting, Rose (2020) suggested that we bring our ancestors trailing behind us.

However, encountering actual death is an unfamiliar experience, because people often die in hospital (Murray, 2007), despite attempts to de-medicalize death (Smith, 2018). Thus, most people have never seen dead bodies, unless they have watched live-streams of executions and/or suicide on social media (Stratton, 2018), or work in medical professions, the military, emergency services (Schwab, 2002; Villeneuve, 2005), or as pathologists and coroners.

Constantly faced with death leaves neither time nor space to articulate fear. Therefore, many medical staff may use black humor to minimize death, and/or resort to gallows humor, which also keeps them focused on their tasks (Christopher, 2015).

Often used defensively, gallows humor can be a saboteur of repression, enabling people to cope through grotesque, absurd and ironic allusions. Despair may be transformed into acceptance (Maier, 1989). However, some individuals may need to voice fear of death. Large groups (Tubert-Oklander & Hernandez-Tubert, 2022) could be convened to discuss death and break the silence surrounding death, including euthanasia.

While discussions about death may no longer be totally taboo in Britain (Curtlin, 2019), for many, death remains as alienating as graveyards. These strange spaces of otherness, heterotopia (Deering, 2015), which become spooky at night (Ezquerro, 2015). We find such nightmarish depictions in the fusion of the Gothic with horror genres.

11. The Gothic Aesthetic as a Form of Black Humor

Gothic literature describes an aesthetic of fear and horror, also including romance and societal problems (poverty, slavery and racial injustice). Characterized by crime and supernatural elements (ghosts, vampires, zombies, voodoo), it explores the occult of the undead and cannibalism, also covering gender, spirituality, cultural practices and resistance to status quo. The Gothic Aesthetic has influenced culture, technology and politics significantly (Fischer, 2019).

For Khapaeva (2017), the Gothic Aesthetic combines conveyance of nightmares with undead protagonists[6]. She uses this term to describe the factors involved in the formation of

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[6] For example, *The Twilight Saga* or *Vampire Diaries* (Williamson and Plec, 2009). These popular films center on young girls falling in love with vampires and then having complicated sexual/intimate relationships with them. Other supernatural creatures (werewolves, ghosts, witches) feature as well.

the modern cult of death, a distinctive way of engaging with death, characterized by fixation on violent death and the undead, and entertainment. Since humans do not differ from non-humans, she questioned human exceptionalism. Vampires not only kill, but consume humans as food. Humans are degraded to the level of animals (eating other people), which is grotesque and expresses a radical disillusionment with humanity. Her Gothic Aesthetic captures our disappointment with rationality, religion, faith, science and civilization.

Of course, vampires are not new, but they have become more pervasive in society and authentic due to digital advances. I suggest that grotesque expressions in the Gothic Aesthetic are a form of black humor. Frequent juxtaposition of black humor with fictional death indicates socio-cultural changes in society. Anti-humanism has become a popular cultural commodity (Khapaeva, 2017). Perhaps it is the commercial aspect (*death clothing*, souvenirs, DVDs) that distinguishes our contemporary *celebration* of the undead/death from previous eras.

12. Modern Cult of Death and Black Humor

The modern cult of death is a global cultural movement, which also manifests itself in the Arabic literature, for instance, *Frankenstein in Baghdad* (Saadawi, 2018).

Amin (2022) viewed the book as a parody of *Frankenstein* (Shelley, 1993)*,* describing violent terrorist and counter-terrorist deaths in Iraq. Contemporary attitudes toward death and humanity are emphasized, which resemble those in Western cultures. But there is a difference. In Saadawi's (2018) book, *Whatsitsname* ("الشِسْمه" or *al-Shismu*) is created by a junk dealer after his friend was killed in an explosion. He collects body parts from Iraq's various sectarian, ethnic and religious groups. He stiches these into a unified body to prevent them from being discarded as rubbish and so preserve people's dignity.

Combining multiple identities from the Iraqi nation in an abominable corpse is characteristic of modern Iraq, which has to come to terms with dismemberment, decapitation and amputation (Amin, 2022). However, *Whatsitsname* continuously needs new body parts to stay alive. He kills those, whose bombs resulted in death, but ironically, also form part of his body. We are confronted with complex questions about morality and justice.

Frankenstein in Baghdad employs elements of black humor and horror. Recourse to the metaphysical in form of nightmares, the uncanny, monstrous and surreal, both represents and produces the experience of terror and brutality (Phillips, 2020). As innocent people are killed to replenish *Whatsitsname's* disintegrating limbs, his quest for justice is corrupted and he becomes ever more abhorrent. The *destruction and rebuild* war justifications seem absurd.

We encounter the same cruel humor as in Adler (1999), however, Adler's characters did not feed on the ones they killed, as they do in Saadawi's (2018) book or other Gothic films.

In this millennium, the celebration of the undead/death constitutes a new cultural phenomenon, where people dwell in death rather than life. This indicates that the social unconscious is no longer able to repress ideas regarding death. Countless films, songs, television programs, video games and fiction are full of thanatological content. Violent death is combined with entertainment (grotesque humor), which makes it enjoyable.

However, black humor on its own cannot explain the modern cult of death, because death is multifaceted. I agree with Khapaeva (2017) that the current celebration of death is not a sublimation of rationality or religion, but linked to anti-humanism. But what exactly distinguishes this phenomenon from how death was portrayed previously?

We find traces of the Oedipus Complex in films (Ronell, 2012) and in Group Analysis. But this is not new. Violent death plays a huge part in the titillating fantasies offered to audiences in thrillers. However, modern depictions of death are extremely violent, often unrelated to war. We can watch coroners dissecting corpses to establish causes of death. Bloody death becomes a fetish of biological death, always located in another person. Emotions (grief) are neglected in violent death, while sensations are enhanced by words and media effects (Gorer, 1955), and eroticization of death occurs.

Catastrophic and/or criminal deaths (accidents, shootings, beheadings, suicide) are constantly presented on social media. In contrast, there are few or no depictions of natural death, such as old people dying at ease (Stratton, 2018). Our era marks the end of traditional aesthetics (Chouliaraki, 2006). Images are formed from sensuous hypes and frenzied visual stimuli. The spectacle has become inseparable from these images, their speed and simultaneity. Everything that used to be directly lived has receded into a representation and even brutal death has acquired a positive meaning. We *consume* violent death in cinemas, the internet or on television. While the spectacle is constituted by social relations, our society of the spectacle has combined these with capitalism (Stratton, 2018).

Stylized death in films has been exceeded by videos of actual death. Social media has enabled the uploading and viewing of actual decapitation (Stratton, 2018). So it is understandable that Khapaeva (2017) questions our humanity, although doubts about humanity had already been expressed after the emergence of the Holocaust. However, films related to the Holocaust (and other wars) were neither produced for profit, nor perceived as joyful

entertainment at the time. Instead, films were educational and shocked, or demanded taking socio-political responsibility, as *World of Glory*.

Terrorism in Behan's (1957) play was problematized. Audiences were not passionately entertained by horrific depictions, but saddened by this sobering experience. Should we blame the internet, filmmakers and audiences, who watch violent films and live-stream videos? This seems too simplistic. After all, they belong to the Social Matrix of black humor and may act out what is projected into them by others.

Historically, death was not celebrated outside the Church, religion or faith. People did not wear resurrection costumes, with images of skulls, skeletons or the Reaper on them, as nowadays happens on Halloween. Artefacts and pictures related to the Holocaust were displayed in museums, often leaving a bitter taste, rather than being printed on garments, or used as interior décor. So how do we explain the modern cult of death, its commodification of death and its entertainment aspects?

13. Can Gallows and Other Forms of Humor Explain Contemporary Phenomena?

The matrix of death can account for transgenerational transmission and may explain why young adults idealize vampires/monsters. Viewing them metaphorically, vampires may signify forbidden fear of death. Since gallows humor can sabotage repression, perhaps it breaks down the structure of the social unconscious or bypasses it. This would explain why prohibitions surrounding death no longer apply. Furthermore, black humor may function as a substitute for absent experiences of observing actual deaths, as well as being used as thanatological, aesthetic entertainment.

At the same time, monsters of death signify insecurities regarding masculinity/femininity, sexuality, existence and identity. Vampires are cultural outsiders, who defy norms. They evoke religious (the crucifix kills them), moral and ethical associations. The vampire as a trope has pervaded cultural consciousness. We can project hopes, fears, dreams and ideas about afterlife into it (Hobson, 2016).

However, this still leaves us with a conundrum. While I can understand people's wishes for immortality and, thus, identification with the undead, these immortals (vampires) must eat other humans in order to survive. Murder no longer takes place due to sadism, revenge, jealousy, envy, psychiatric illness, impulsivity or assassination. Humans behave like animals, the undead kill to feed. Ironically, they are as plagued by fear of survival as humans. Death

anxiety is difficult to eradicate. Thus, we are still presented with the nightmarish reality of death. Its black humor has become more brutal and grotesque than ever before.

I have suggested that black humor is both rooted in the social unconscious of death and being formed by it. As perspectives, attitudes and practices surrounding death have changed, so has black humor. It is becoming ever more absurd, surreal and cruel. It seems that the social unconscious of death itself has started to leak. Death and our fear of death are no longer repressed. This could explain the preponderance of murderous violence on social media, in films and literature. However, why have we not become immune to it? Frequent exposure to violence normally results in desensitization. But people continue to be enchanted by the effects of horror and violent death. Why have these entertainment effects not decreased?

Mass hysteria or mass masochism-sadism/perversion do not explain the celebration of death and fascination with the cult of death either. Audiences are not all perverse or mentally disturbed. They do not come together in a large group, where psychotic features could emerge. Even if we considered the audience as a large group phenomenon, we would expect cycles of projection and projective identification, or an amplification of horror, aggressive anti-group phenomena, acting out, and/or annihilation anxiety. Trauma theory (Hopper, 2003) could explain these, but it cannot account for the entertainment effect.

Has the world become more voyeuristic or dwells in Schadenfreude (joy when others are hurt)? Possibly, but the enjoyment aspect of death is complex. Black humor explains it to a certain extent, because it combines death with cheerfulness. So watching these films may result in enjoyment.

However, considering that digital visual and acoustic effects create an atmosphere, in which it is impossible to distinguish cinematic reality from life, dissociation should occur when people are watching extreme violence. Otherwise, it would be difficult to process graphic images of indescribable brutality. But black humor only results in displacement or detachment, which differs from clinical dissociation. Thus, it does not explain this phenomenon fully and further examination is required.

14. Conclusion and Suggestions

Drawing on the concepts of the sublime and black humor, I propose that the Gothic Aesthetic and our preoccupation with the undead and death may be linked to the sublime. The sublime is associated with delight, pleasure, pain and danger. Its lure is found in astonishment. Sublime things are fascinating, because they are terrible, dark and uncertain. Abjection is one form of

the sublime. Monstrous creatures have become a site for the sublime, accompanied by dread, melancholy and beauty (Armstrong, 1996).

Our aesthetic gaze attributes sadness to dark colors due to their association with death. Black is marked against whiteness. It is interpellated as terror and sublime abjection within the ideology of the white aesthetic. Hence, I suggest that the enjoyment of and fixation on death/undead are rooted in the ideology of white aesthetic.

Black humor keeps the dreadfulness of death away from white. This is a function of the social unconscious. Furthermore, in bypassing repressing, gallows humor breaks down the structure of the social unconscious and with it, prohibitions and constraints. Since the social unconscious forms part of all matrices, analyzing and further researching the matrix of black humor is therefore crucial for the study of humor.

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