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SINGING OUR WAY TO DEATH: SOME REMARKS ON THE CONTEMPORARY DISCOURSE ABOUT DEATH

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Abstract: The paper aims to grasp some of the most relevant aspects of the contemporary discourse about death. The assumption that underlines the investigation states that death, as the inescapable mark of human condition, has a fundamental impact on the cultural artefacts, which can be conceived as strategies that we use in order to better cope with the continuous presence of death. In the first part of the paper, I resort to the analyses proposed by Zygmunt Bauman, Louis-Vincent Thomas and Philippe Ariès so as to outline a picture of the contemporary refusal of death and its mechanisms. Next, I depict a different tone in the discourse about death that manifest itself in music and that explores the fundamental relation between death and love. The reading key that I use in my analysis states that this musical preoccupation with death describes a profoundly romantic refusal of death, by means of its naming through love, and I resort to the music of Hozier, as an exemplification.

Keywords: death, love, music, Romanticism, Hozier

CÂNTÂND PE DRUMUL SPRE MOARTE: CÂTEVA REMARCI ASUPRA DISCURSULUI CONTEMPORAN DESPRE MOARTE

Rezumat: Lucrarea urmăreşte să surprindă câteva aspecte relevante ale discursului contemporan despre moarte. Asumpţia care se află la baza analizei afirmă că moartea, ca marca inevitabilă a condiţiei umane, are un impact fundamental asupra artefactelor culturale, care pot fi concepute, în acest context, ca strategii utilizate în încercarea de a

face mai bine față prezenței permanente a morții. În prima parte a lucrării, fac apel la analizele propuse de Zygmunt Bauman, Louis-Vincent Thomas și Philippe Ariès pentru a descrie imaginea refuzului contemporan al morții și mecanismele sale. Mai apoi, mă opresc asupra unui ton diferit care se distinge în muzică și care explorează relația fundamentală dintre moarte și iubire. Cheia de lectură pe care o utilizez susține că această preocupare muzicală față de moarte descrie un refuz al morții, un refuz care prezintă un puternic caracter romantic și care se realizează, în fapt, ca numire a morții prin dragoste; ca exemplu ilustrativ, mă opresc asupra muzicii lui Hozier.

Cuvinte-cheie: moarte, iubire, muzică, Romanticism, Hozier

1. Introduction

The power of music, an expression used almost as frequently as the power of love, is evoked in ancient texts, in classical philosophical works, and in millions of comments that accompanies the YouTube clips. Music has a unique relation with the sublime and the ineffable, a relation that nourishes its philosophical investigation and makes the attempts to define and describe the nature of music a difficult task. From the multitude of the various aspects that need to be captured by a definition of music, I will pause just on one of its essential traits, namely its social character; more precisely, on the idea that music must be experienced with reference to a social context. The listener's experience is complex and involves various aspects that must be taken into consideration when examining his response to music: both the music and the extra-musical factors. A song's meaning "is a product of three factors: a song's text; its music; and the performance context. Song meaning is co-created by performers and listeners, within specific contexts." (Bicknell 2009, 108) The superpower of music is that it translates a non-referential medium into a referential one without effacing or sacrificing the authenticity of the experience. (Gallop 2017, 33) One of the essential features of human condition that finds its translation in music is the facing of the inevitability of death. Thus, music can embed the representations of death that contribute to the shaping of the discourse about death specific for a certain context.

2. Refusing death

Death is a very difficult investigation subject, it is what our own experiences, but also lots of philosophical works tell us. We cannot perceive, visualize, represent our death; it fundamentally marks our human nature by means of its certain possibility, but never of its actual presence. Under the terror of our limited time, we are caught by its inescapable spell, in a permanent effort to escape its thought. Thus, the culture can be conceived as "an elaborate counter-mnemotechnic

device" (Bauman 1992, 32) that accompanies us in our attempt to forget about death. Focusing on the essential function death plays in culture, Zygmunt Bauman describes it as being the crucial condition of cultural creativity. Why? Because culture acts as a device for the suppression of the knowledge that can't be unknown, namely that we are mortals. "Transcendence (...) is what culture is about. Culture is about expanding temporal and spatial boundaries of being," (Bauman 1992, 5) through its activities which relate to survival (by postponing the moment of death and by giving death a certain significance) and to immortality (by attenuating the horror of death through the immortality of someone's life, qualities, work, that "will never be forgotten.") (Bauman 1992, 7)

Therefore, since death is the inevitable mark of human condition and the whole of human culture serve "the 'purpose of all purposes' -- making possible a meaningful life in a world which 'by itself' is devoid of meaning" (Bauman 1992, 8), thanatology and the discourse about death must be read in the terms of the civilization system and of the social forms that generates them. (Thomas 1991, 1) Bauman goes even further, stating that "most, perhaps all, known cultures can be better understood (...) if conceived of as alternative ways in which that primary trait of human existence -- the fact of mortality and the knowledge of it -- is dealt with and processed, so that it may turn from the condition of impossibility of meaningful life into the major source of life's meaning." (Bauman 1992, 10) Thus, comprehending the representations of mortality and immortality as "approved and practices life strategies" (Bauman 1992, 10) becomes a major part of the process of understanding cultures.

In order to grasp the essence of the contemporary discourse about death, Louis-Vincent Thomas identifies the key factors which determine and, at the same time, unveils the dominant attitudes towards death in contemporary society: the prevalence of objects and signs, against the rites and symbols in consumer society, the individualism specific for contemporary society, the excessive trust in science and technology as the cure against death, the limited contact with the dying and with the dead in the conditions of the urban life and its specific mechanisms of professionalized exclusion of death.

These circumstances determine a specific strategy of refusal, of eschewal of death, a rupture between life and death. (Thomas 1991, 2) Thomas analyses the contemporary discourse about death and stresses the danger of the refusal of death and of the collapse of the symbolic dimension of our relation with death. (Thomas 1991, 30).

A similar perspective is proposed by Philippe Ariès, who describes the contemporary model of death as “the invisible death”. This model is fundamentally marked by the mutation in the nature of the four themes that determine the discourse about death: awareness of the individual, the defense of society against untamed nature, belief in an afterlife, and belief in the existence of evil. (Ariès 2008) Today, Ariès states, “a heavy silence has fallen over the subject of death,” in a world where death is reduced to an insignificant event, a failure or a shame. Yet, the fear is still here and the importance of accepting death is crucial. Given the fundamental shift in our understanding of evil as a weaker and more ambiguous concept, Ariès considers that death has to be humanized, as “the discreet but dignified exit of a peaceful person from a helpful society that is not torn, not even overly upset by the idea of a biological transition without significance, without pain or suffering, and ultimately without fear.” (Ariès 2008, 614)

On the other hand, Bauman identifies in contemporary societies two types of strategies, that act simultaneously, and shape the contemporary discourse about death: a modern strategy, with its drive to deconstruct mortality, in an ever going battle with particular causes of death, which will attack its “position of the ultimate yet remote horizon of life-span” and the postmodern strategy and its attempt to deconstruct immortality, with its focus on the present moment, on life and with its disdain for the durable. (Bauman 1992, 11)

Among the strategies used in order to better cope with the continuous presence of death investigated by Zygmunt Bauman and Louis-Vincent Thomas, we mention the spatial and temporal expetients of death, through funerals and all the associated rituals, the professionalization of death related acts and gestures, euthanasia as an attempt to control death, the existence beyond the limitation of the biological life through specific scientific technologies (i.e cryogeny) or through various forms of “collective immortality” (heroes, people, etc).

(Bauman 1992, 27) An interesting topic would be, in this context, the new form of digital immortality.

The correlated concept that shapes in a fundamental way the discourse about death is love. Freud asserts the permanent co-presence of Eros and Thanatos as the two drives that are essential for man. Freud describes the dynamics of the relation between the drive for life and the drive for death in "Civilization and Its Discontents". If Eros is understood as the drive to preserve the living substance and to form larger units, the drive for death tends to dissolve the groups and to go back to the inorganic state of the primordial beginnings. The two drives cannot be detected isolated one from another, but are always, in various degrees, interconnected. Describing the tension between sexuality and aggressiveness on the one hand and culture, on the other, he defines them as the drives that give the meaning to the cultural development: "It must present the struggle between Eros and Death, between the instinct of life and the instinct of destruction, as it works itself out in the human species. This struggle is what all life essentially consists of, and the evolution of civilization may therefore be simply described as the struggle for life of the human species." (Freud 2000, 183)

Bauman reads this union in the terms of the human refusal of death, stating, more precisely, that in a postmodern world, "transcendence's last shelter" is love: "It is now the partner in love that is expected to offer the space for transcendence, to be the transcendence." (Bauman 1992, 29) Since this is a too difficult task for a mortal partner, "the love relationship turns then to be another form of self-assertion, that obsessive (because never satisfied) urge to make the notoriously incredible -- the personal power to overpower death -- credible; or, at least, to evict from consciousness the knowledge of its futility." (Bauman 1992, 31) In consequence, Bauman identifies a shift in the concept of transcendence, from a transcendence as an achieved and permanent state to a transcendence conceived as a momentary event, as a performance. Erotic love becomes a new type of "mortality-effacing strategy", which focuses, paradoxically, on the compensation of the body's fragility by its ability to outrun its natural limits. "The time dimension of transcendence is turning here into a spatial issue:

stretching the span of life is turned into the effort to stretch the capacity to live.” (Bauman 1992, 30) Nevertheless, the corporeal dimension of love doesn’t cover its entire meaning. Sentimental love is still on its usual pedestal, represented as the ultimate purpose of life, the essence of life, showing the limits of the process of commercialization. (Lipovetsky 2007, 127)

3. A musical discourse about death: Hozier

Offer me that deathless death

There is, however, in the context of the contemporary refusal of death, a different voice that can be heard in the discourse about death and its rapport with love, a lyrical comeback of death as a major theme in music. The way I read it is as if it describes a kind of refusal of death by its naming through love. I will focus on the strong romantic attitude concerning death that can be found in music nowadays, an attitude impregnated by the fundamental relation Romanticism has with death. The analysis will be guided by an important feature of this relation, which, despite its “ethically suspect and macabre elements”, “is placed at the service of life.” (Saul 2009, 172) Craig Schuftan describes the relevance of romantic ideas and themes in rock and roll and remarks that nowadays the romantic poet is the musician that embodies in his work the classical romantic ideas – the desire to escape society, self-expression, the fascination with death, destruction, sin, the ideal love – and he has found new recruits to his cause – the teenagers. (Craig Schuftan 2012)

While the dominant discourse about death is determined, obviously, by the rituals and the symbols regarding the dying, the dead and the death and by the related hopes and scientific promises, it is also shaped by its representation in the cultural artefacts, in movies, shows, in literature and, certainly, in music. The refusal of death through the instruments provided by the contemporary society, science and technology, is accompanied by another kind of preoccupation with death which acknowledges it and even celebrates

it. The end of the world becomes one of the favorite settings for movies, where the presence of death is fought (in the typical blockbusters, such as "Avengers" and its Thanos), or is accepted and welcomed (for instance, "Melancholia" and other recent movies about the end of the world).

In this context, I consider the peculiar presence of death as a theme found in the music of the young singer, Hozier. I am aware of the intimidating dimension and implications of the subject and I also know that there are many other musicians that could be relevant for this type of investigation. Death is and has always been a theme explored by musicians and beautiful and suggestive representations of death can be found in several recent hits. Yet, there is in Hozier's songs a romantic tone that pervades the presence of death and that makes it suitable for the intentions of my paper. Furthermore, death is a constant theme in his songs. Also, he is an artist of today and his success is impressive, especially if we take into consideration his not very commercial music style and his deep and philosophical lyrics. While the dominant love mood in Hozier's songs is pretty dark, dangerous and sometimes even morbid, marked by a romantic tension between lovers and society, there are also songs where he presents a lighter, yet, still complicated love atmosphere.

Hozier becomes well-known in 2013 with the song "Take me to church". His two albums, "Hozier" (2014) and "Wasteland, Baby!" (2019), but also the songs that are not included in those albums, are haunted by a special presence of Thanatos. There are two different levels of the presence of death in Hozier's songs: the death drive experienced rather at a personal level, in a closed bond with love and the presence of death at the collective level, both as the ending point for every human being, and as an apocalyptic shadow that hovers over us.

"Take me to church", the song that brought Hozier into the spotlight, is a critique of the institutionalized religion from the perspective of a forbidden love and soon it becomes the anthem of the gay love. In "Take me to church" there are recurrent themes that are exploited in Hozier's other songs and mark their love mood. Hozier's love songs courageously describe a dark love atmosphere marked by a

destructive presence, in the form of violence, obsession, and even death. "Cherry wine", for instance, is rich in details that describe the violence of an abusive relation, preserving at the same time the intensity and intimacy of love. The same theme appears in "Run": the "rare love" that has a complicated relation with abuse and violence and "must be covered", a love so intense, so organic: "I need you to run to me, run to me, lover / Run until you feel your lungs bleeding" as the love between the bog man and the earth.

The spectrum of destruction floats above the innocent love in "From Eden". The positive vibes of the hope expressed in the refrain "Babe, /There's something tragic about you, / Something so magic about you. /Don't you agree?" are quickly tempered by the presence of sin as inevitable condition of a lover, revealed in the last strophe as a murder plan: "A rope in hand for your other man / To hang from a tree".

The fundamental co-presence of love and death find its most romantic expression in the song "In a week". Here, the decay of the lovers' bodies is described in a mellifluous tone, as the fulfilment of love: "And they'd find us in a week / When the cattle show fear / After the insects have made their claim / After the foxes have known our taste / I'd be home with you, I'd be home with you..."

The lyricism of the depiction of the most dreadful aspect of death, the rotting of the body, and the resignation in face of the insignificancy of the story in the larger frame of the world which will peacefully go on without the two lovers, can be read as an attempt to tame the death, and this attempt can be found also in other places in Hozier's songs. Love makes death bearable and death makes love possible. The inevitable end is the condition of the manifesting of both the fierce love and lover: "Ain't it a gentle sound, the rolling in the graves? / Ain't it like thunder under earth, the sound it makes? / Ain't it exciting you, the rumble where you lay? / Ain't you my baby, ain't you my baby?" ("NFWMY")

In Hozier's songs, love contains the refusal of the meaningless of death, paradoxically, through the fact that it is essentially marked by its presence. Falling in love is often described as dying, as destructive and apocalyptic: "Every version of me dead and buried in the yard

outside/ We'd sit back and watch the world go by" ("Jackie and Wilson") or "All the fear and the fire of the end of the world / Happens each time a boy falls in love with a girl" ("Wasteland, Baby!"). At the same time, love has the power to redeem, to resurrect the dead: "I had a thought, dear, however scary / About that night, the bugs and the dirt / Why were you digging?; what did you bury? / Before those hands pulled me from the earth?" ("Like real people do")

Beside the presence of death experienced at an intensely personal level, in Freudian terms, as the duality Eros-Thanatos whose tension "casts a gigantic shadow of ambivalence on all human existence" (Bauman 1992, 21), there is another dimension of the presence of death in Hozier's songs, in form of the immanent death of the universe. As Hozier says in an interview, and as it is mentioned in the song "No plan", he was inspired by the lecture of the astrophysicist Katie Mack about the heat death of the universe: "There's no plan, there's no kingdom to come ... As Mack explained, there will be darkness again". ("No plan") The apocalyptic setting is present especially in his second album, "Wasteland, Baby!", the song that gives the name of the album being in Hozier's words, "a funny love song to somebody imagining the world as it is now and then imagining the worst case scenario and trying to enjoy, trying to still find joy and still find something worthwhile in the absolute worst case scenarios." (Schlanger 2018)

Whether represented in relation with the most personal and intimate experiences, or as an inevitable apocalypse, death has a romantic core in Hozier's music, a core that perfectly matches the key trait of the romantic age of the beautiful death, as it is described by Philippe Ariès: "this death is no longer death, it is an illusion of art. (...) death is concealing itself under the mask of beauty." (Ariès cap 10)

4. Instead of conclusions

*Give your heart and soul to charity
'Cause the rest of you
The best of you
Honey, belongs to me*

The assumption underlying this paper is that the “mortality connection” (Bauman 1992, 10) of the all aspects of human culture is an element that has to be taken into account when we address any kind of cultural artefact. The refusal of death takes many forms, and one of the dominant discourses today is the one that makes death invisible, as shown in the second section of the paper. It is in this context that we remark the very romantic presence of death as a relevant theme in music, focusing on one particular musician, Hozier. One of the most famous lyrics of his songs contains in fact the core of our argumentation: “My lover’s got humor/ She’s the giggle at the funeral.” (“Take me to church”) In a postmodern world, voided by transcendence, sheltered from death through its rejection, we remark the presence of a poetic voice that reclaims the age of beautiful death, a voice that, as Ariès says, “beautified death, the gateway to an anthropomorphic beyond.” (Ariès 2008, 613) The appetite for the sacred of the postmodern world rejoices, in this context, the presence of love as its vessel. This voice describes the classical romantic picture of the loveliest death and of the deadliest love, and this picture can be interpreted, using the terms proposed by Bauman, as “a counter-mnemotechnic device” (Bauman 1992, 32) that allows us at least to attempt to forget about death.

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Hozier – *Hozier* (album, 2014)

Hozier – *Wasteland, Baby!* (album, 2019)