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## A postmodern thanatic triad : crisis, pornography and renaissance of death

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## *Transgression*

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### **A Postmodern Thanatic Triad: Crisis, Pornography and Renaissance of Death**

#### **Abstract**

In every age we can find a different attitude of man towards the end of life, instanced in varied stances and imaginations regarding death. In postmodernism, which makes a broader context for this work, it is impossible to present one unified image of death, because the attitude of contemporary men towards death and the visual forms of it are greatly varied. The subject of my analysis is a presentation of death shown in three occurrences the crisis, the pornography and the renaissance of death which combine to form the postmodern thanatic triad.

**Keywords:** postmodernism, images of death, crisis, pornography, renaissance of death, cemetery, virtual, media

With the passage of time the perception of death has slowly yet continuously changed. The existence of this disturbing event of unknown nature has provided a stimulus for human imagination and has become an inspiration for countless artists and a challenge for philosophers. The human being is an entity that “must take a stance towards death since self-awareness comes with knowledge of death”(Thielicke 2002, p. 83). This implies that a human, constrained by his “lifetime” consisting of every moment between the birth and death, should try to find an answer to the ultimate question “what is death?”.

In my attempt to precisely explain my interpretation of the theme of this article I have to invoke the thoughts of the thanatologist and literary theorist from Wrocław – J. Kolbuszewski, who said that: “in order to capture the phenomenon of the postmodern attitude of man towards death (in western culture) it is necessary to study three elements of culture commonly referred to as »crisis, pornography and renaissance of death«” (Kolbuszewski

1997, p. 7-16)<sup>1</sup>. Those three elements despite their significant differences coexisted in the 19<sup>th</sup> – 20<sup>th</sup> centuries in the form of thanatic triad – the postmodern perception of death.

### **The crisis of death**

Death is the inevitable conclusion of life. This statement, even though it brings sadness and grief, has been mankind's companion throughout the ages. It is derived from the fact that death is one of the most universal events in human life and at the same time the least known. Therefore in order to avoid pretending to be an expert or to claim to understand "the incomprehensible" I can only present broadly the thoughts and reflections about death in this paper. According to scholars the subject death is unknowable in its nature. As history shows this fact has never been an obstacle but rather a challenge for the human mind and imagination. A challenge which not only provoked reflection, it also had a major impact on the perception of death characteristic over a given period. Reflection about death is a multilayer process because the phenomenon of death has its place in between nature and culture, whose goal is not by a free choice, (to) sustain contingency of human life (Bauman 1998, p. 31). Culture is on one hand obscuring death, rendering its existence hidden and perception clouded, yet on the other hand all the processes that lead to this effect are at the same time enriching the culture and enabling it's evolution (Bauman 1998, p. 31). It is so due to the death having impact on both emotions and imagination that it becomes the ultimate factor for cultural creativity as it is (Bauman 1998, p. 9).

Reflecting upon death is a confrontation of forces of the mind and a phenomenon which, as Z. Bauman stated, is: beyond the human comprehension (Bauman 1998, p. 29). It is a one-sided struggle and defeat is the only possible outcome since death in a rather extreme manner ignores all attempts at understanding her. Therefore the question remains "what is death?"

In Z. Bauman's opinion death is an empty idea, an idea without contents (Bauman 1998, p. 20) because it is impossible for the human mind to "think" it and, what is more, the mind cannot invoke the image of its own inexistence. This gives grounds to a perception of death as an absurd and ultimate failure of reason. It nullifies the trust in the power of the mind and the feeling of safety it provides. In a loud and clear voice it proclaims the lie of reason (Bauman 1998, p. 23) because death is the event which cannot be thought. It is the mystery of human existence and an empirically occurring event. Such a view blocks the thought process

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<sup>1</sup> All translations by the author unless stated otherwise.

and renders all attempts at understanding this most traumatic event impossible. At this moment one might consider the words of Epicurus, who advised that: “one should not worry about death because as long as we live there is no death and when she comes we are no more” (Bortnowska 1984, p. 348).

For generations humanity was simultaneously terrified by death and challenged it. People either tried to understand it so that they would gain control over it or they lived as if death was irrelevant to their existence. Despite this they all knew that the end was inevitable – the awareness of death is an inseparable part of consciousness. Still, it does not mean that every man accepts death silently and peacefully.

A finite lifespan affects the human being which is ontologically differentiated – a psychophysical entity, therefore to discuss the death of such described entity two ontological layers – physical and psychic – must be considered. Physical due to the fact that the human being is limited in the time element of the bio-cosmos. Psychic since death impacts on the personal side of human existence – it is the end of a unique being. This uniqueness is based on the specific qualities of the link which connects man to the surrounding “world in love, sight and feeling” (Bortnowska 1984, p. 348) and makes him more than just a part of nature. The awareness of death separates this event from every other possible experience – it is par excellence extraordinary order (Cichowicz, Godzimirski 1993, p. 46). As V. Jankélévitch said it adds a degree of ontological gravity to life (Cichowicz, Godzimirski 1993, p. 46) making life something unique and unrepeatable, death is responsible for transforming life from simple existence into a form of passion.

Death therefore enriches life and its perspective underlines the uniqueness of existence. The unrepeatable nature of life demands involvement, care about the time given since lifetime can be neither repeated nor postponed. Limited to the period between birth and death the time given to a man gains an immense worth. All of this requires a man to consider the nature and sense of existence in the world grounded and updated in the perspective of its limitation.

### **“Banished death”**

The modern perception of death, which is the basic theme of this work, has its origins in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In that period of time the relation between a dying man and world around him changed. This modification started the phenomenon of “the marginalization of death” also called “the conspiracy of silence”. The symptoms of oncoming change can be observed from the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the transformation of a number of social

interactions and their perception by contemporary people such as the relation between the society and the dying whose status dramatically changed (this also affected the reflections about death). As a result both the process of dying and death itself were considered awkward, shameful and inappropriate as opposed to “obvious” before the modern era.

In ages past death was “available”, its presence was constantly felt and was an important element of culture. This resulted in death being “tame”<sup>2</sup>. Despite the (apparent) continuity of the culture, including rituals and themes, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century death became an issue. There were many reasons for this shift of perspective but what is important is their effect – the return of death<sup>3</sup>, brutal and hideous, invoked not only fear but also disgust. At that time a certain dislike concerning duties and chores performed by closest relatives of the dying became apparent. Therefore the presence of death amongst the living became something that should be hidden – a kind of secret of the dying.

Stripped of its social element death ceases to be a public occurrence which, among others, served an important function of familiarizing the living with the end of life. The passing has become a private event attended by close friends and relatives. Some elements of the mourning process have ceased to exist and others while still adequate, are showing less emotional engagement. As a result the dying were isolated and “hidden” in hospitals under care of “licensed professionals” whose duty was to remove death from public view so that it would not bother the eyes and minds of the living.

### **“The sickness of death”**

In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century society, less tolerant to witnessing agony, has begun searching for a new space reserved for death. Hospitals have become the normal place for this and they have become places which provide peace of mind for those who would like to leave their relatives under professional care and return to “normal life”<sup>4</sup>. Thus began a slow process of claiming death by the medical discourse which resulted in institutionalizing death almost to the point of the absurd in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Removing the dying from their homes, taking away the comfort given by surrounding family and friends and moving them to hospitals changed their status significantly. They are now “patients”, considered in categories of “health” and “disease”, dying in isolation and

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<sup>2</sup> „Tamed death” – instanced in attitudes towards passing which goal is to accept it. In practice this can be observed in actions such as participating in complex funerary rituals which familiarize living with death and dying.

<sup>3</sup> By this term both the real and imaginary pictures and images of death are understood.

<sup>4</sup> Death becomes “an sickening inappropriateness” which puts on hold the affairs of day-to-day life.

loneliness which has a material symbol – the screen which is put in place in order to hide the agony or the isolation room which has recently become a common sight in hospitals (Vovelle 2004, p. 667). In that perspective the hospital has become the realm of death alienated and defenseless, banished from the sight of ordinary people and deprived of its individual character. Death became a malady, an incurable illness – “a plague” spreading destruction and fear while the dying became second class, who in order to prevent distress to the living, endures agony in isolation from public space. The dying person becomes a “medical case”, pushed into cold isolation room, intoxicated with painkillers and other medicine he “loses” his own death. From now on he is property of medical staff” (Ariès 1992, p. 264-265) who concern themselves with different parts of agony and “deconstruct death”. In such circumstances, as L. V. Thomas said, the man’s own death was taken away from him (Cichowicz, Godzimirski 1993, p. 27).

Death was reduced to a shameful occurrence which should be hidden. The process of obscuring it became a sort of moral duty, a social order whose point was to increase the happiness of the general populous. A duty performed admirably by the medical staff who became the most important figures of new ritual of hospital death (Vovelle 2004, p. 669). This institutionalization of death dramatically changed its perception. There is now a new death, “obscured by the screens in hospital” where the dying person’s body is punctured by needles and tubes whilst only the muted hum of medical equipment counts the last moments.

In this situation the medieval *ars moriendi* is rendered obsolete, its place taken by the agony of a forgotten, lonely man. This leads to a new phenomenon – the creation of “death taboo”.

### **“Death taboo”**

The second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was a very important time for the discourse of death. In that time in the area of western culture a new and influential perception of death named “death taboo” reached its most prominent point. The aforementioned taboo can be observed in the ignorance of the topic of death, pushing it outside the consciousness both individual and social. It was directly related to the change of attitude towards the dying and dead. They were cast out of the sphere of reflection and ordinary life alike. The origins of this process can be found in the 19<sup>th</sup> century “marginalization of death” which led to the disappearance of the whole system of symbols and custom connected with passing away and the dead for generations. In its place a new model of death was created – isolated in a lonely

hospital room, calm, silent, discrete, disinfected. This resulted in social distortion of the view of death, from the “tame death” it was transformed into “the wild death” characterized by its disconnection from everyday life, pushing death and everything related to it as far as the safe distance of ignorance dictates. Death has lost its privileged position in western culture – it became “wild”, like a tamed animal cast out from home or a currently abandoned but once cultivated garden (Ariès 1992, p. 41).

The most widely accepted form of passing is a calm and quiet death, which does not involve the surroundings or captures attention as if it is “ashamed of itself” so it hides in obscure corners of hospitals trying to avoid the involvement of the living. It is a lonely death, a “mannequin” described in medical terms, veiled by latin phrases, without a name and dignity. Helpless and alien, sometimes even pathetic – as if “not from this era”.

Forgetting death, placing it beyond the margin of reflection, “locking” it in different institutions, changing its image to be less painful are just a few symptoms of the constantly growing “death taboo” in the modern period. Death, the outcast once again searched for a new image. It was found thanks to “image enhancement specialists” who used many special techniques to lessen the realism of death therefore making it less painful. It was the only possible course of action since 20<sup>th</sup> century *homo aestheticus*, governed by the principle of pleasure, could not cope with the image of real, natural death. The funerary entrepreneurs, also called “the sadness doctors”, have been tasked with a very difficult objective – to remove the natural, uncomfortable image of death and replace it with acceptable and esthetically pleasing one. This resulted in an immense change to the image of death.

The biological, naturalistic image of death represented by the presence of a cadaver was disguised by make up and funerals, which were based on traditional forms and customs, were transformed into expensive, commercial rituals<sup>5</sup>, not unlike mass culture shows. Of course splendid funerals are nothing new<sup>6</sup> to the western culture but the way the body is treated is definitely a *novum*. Examples of this are: embalming, post mortem plastic surgery, post mortem makeup or even a lot more controversial practices like creating diamonds<sup>7</sup> or artificial coral reefs (Domańska 2005, p. 3-4) from the ashes of a cremated human body.

<sup>5</sup> It is also called „death American style”.

<sup>6</sup> The “Sarmatian” (traditional Polish aristocracy, *szlachta*, of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth era) funerals, dignified and luxurious (which in time became a sort of public spectacle) are an example of an elaborate and complex funeral.

<sup>7</sup> In 2001 *LifeGem Memorials* company has been established in Chicago. The service provided by this company is the creation of artificial diamonds out of the ashes of cremated human body; the client can also choose color and form of the gem (Cf. Domańska 2005).

### **“Pornography of death”**

According to the opinion of G. Gorer, who introduced the term “pornography of death” in 1965 in his article *The Pornography of Death*, many correlations exist between figments of imagination created out of interest in the mystery of gender and those which lean towards the mystery of death (Gorer 1997, p. 201). It is so due to the fact that both sexuality and mortality are closely related to “taboo”. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as I mentioned earlier, a dramatic shift occurred in the range of events considered shameful. From that moment on not only the act of physical love was considered inappropriate but also everything directly related to agony and death as a natural process.

The image of death limited only to the disturbing presence of a “decaying cadaver”, allowing only the physiological aspect of passing to surface, imposed a new prohibition on 20<sup>th</sup> century society – a ban on discussing death, even reflecting upon the subject is considered as an “illness” of spirit, a special kind of pathology comparable only to ban on reflecting on birth or physical love in the earlier ages. In G. Gorer’s opinion the factor responsible for this situation was the fact that: certain areas of human experience are treated as scandalous or disgusting in nature therefore it is prohibited to discuss them openly and they are experienced in hiding and usually involve feelings of degradation and guilt. This blocked area becomes then a subject of intense intimate imagination, more or less realistic (Gorer 1997, p. 199).

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century one can witness a kind of “exchange”. The “traditional pornography” enjoying more and more liberal treatment is in a way replaced by a “new pornography” whose domain concerns death. “death taboo” as it seems is more severe and resistant to change than its sexual counterpart. It should come as no surprise then that both death veiled by a ban of shame as was sexuality in the Victorian era, becomes “pornographic”. Pornographic in the sense that, as G. Gorer points out, natural death is continuously and increasingly obscured by prudery while tragic death gains a more prominent role in creations of imagination served to the masses – in novels: crime fiction, western, war stories, spy stories, science fiction and even in macabre comic books (Gorer 1997, p. 201).

This last quotation signifies that marginalization of death has been a factor in inspiring the human mind, despite the ban on the topic of death being still in effect, to create imaginary forms which transform death into the subject of show and fascination. In this manner death while still being perceived as something inappropriate, became one of the most sought after topics in mass media and an inexhaustible deposit of resources for the imagination which in turn led to the creation of new image of death. Supporting this statement is the frequency of

depictions of thanatic topics in the mass media constantly showing instances of death sudden, staged or distant. In other words safe death – since it is witnessed through a glass screen, is too unreal and alien to affect the living. This is in no way a coincidence. The media is a catalyst of the fear of death, which is nothing new yet in modern times has been inflated to almost absurd proportions. The grounds for this are given by displacement of natural death by prudery exemplified by multiplication of images of drastic and sudden death.

Spectacular deaths, arranged according to strictly defined scenarios become media shows imposing upon the spectator the images of suffering and cheap sensation which does not move anyone because death on the screen is just a “nameless corpse” in which the human remains unseen. This “entertainmentization of savagery”<sup>8</sup> renders death as a variety of amusement available at any time thanks to mass media. Creators of these performances never cease in their search for more bizzare and grotesque ways of dying and presenting it to their audiences. It is important to consider words of G. Gorer: if we acknowledge death as something that shouldn't be discussed in well-mannered company – “when children are present” - we almost guarantee the continuous production of macabre comic books. There was never a successful method of censure (Gorer 1997, p. 203).

#### **“Image of death in traditional media”**

“At this time in history when a mass protest against real death is so clearly visible, in times of prudery surrounding real death, the images of death imagined are widespread” (Sułkowski 2006, p. 21). Death created for the sole principle of pleasure, which becomes the subject of show and fascination, is present countless times in movie sequences, video games, informational shows, advertisement and many other forms used by mass media.

Death as a part of pop culture became an element in consumer lifestyle. As a one of the props of a global market of visual and tourist attractions it became a commodity available to purchase (Bauman 1995, p. 19). It can be reasoned that this situation has its roots among others in the media, especially visual media, in the increasingly aggressive manner it borrows death for its own commercial purposes. That way the media visualizations create “entangled series of metaphors and simulations”(Perkowska 2003, p. 153) – a performance stitched together from approximations and semi-real events. Ordinary day-to-day life gains the

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<sup>8</sup> Polish term *karnawalizacja okrucieństwa* taken from B. Sułkowski's , *Przemoc i pornografia śmierci jako przynęty medialne* (Cf. Sułkowski 2006).

qualities of hyperreality<sup>9</sup> based on the new order of reality conquered by ever present images. The condition of the modern world can be summarized as a “chaos of images” “created” and distributed by mass media to as broad an audience as possible.

B. Sułkowski in his work *Przemoc i pornografia śmierci jako przynęty medialne (Violence and Pornography of Death as a Media Lure)* provides an analysis of influence that mass media have on the spectator also stating that depictions of violence, abundant in the media, are directly related to the risk of moral pathology developing in the spectator because of the constant flow of images of savagery and suffering stun him, thus creating the vision of moral indifference and axiological neutrality towards evil. This attitude, as B. Sułkowski claims, is referred to in postmodernism as *adiaphorization* which is directed at “acting and thinking that separates deeds from values, it is an attitude which results in certain types of actions directed at certain objects that do not submit to moral criticism” (Sułkowski 2006, p. 15).

Media death is digitalized – therefore repeatable. Witnessed from safe distance as if from behind glass, made unreal to such a degree that it does not have any impact on a viewer familiar with violent scenes. What is more, death becomes only an entertainment, it lacks moral quality. Therefore B. Sułkowski recognizes that: “traditionally for a man a basic point of reference was moral gradation, nowadays, the media teach us to look at the world without this point, we analyze the technical aspects of the show, we simply stare at a condensed stream of events, sorrows, disasters, victims, torturers” (Sułkowski 2006, p. 16).

In accordance with highly acclaimed diagnosis of contemporary culture presented by Umberto Eco in *Semiologia Quotidiana* it can be argued that in media culture functions as a “show” (Eco 1999, p. 208) because it is directed at that which is spectacular and public shows are interested in it. In show, as he explains, the most important thing is to “experience an event where attendance of others and order in all its complexity of cultural festival counts”(Eco 1999, p. 212). Death as well becomes a show, placed in public view it transforms into a medial spectacle of dying, an amusement for the masses, which (as G. Sartori pointed out) along with continuing multiplication of images morphs from *homo sapiens* into *homo videns* (Sartori 2007, p. 25).

The watching man mentioned by G. Sartori, immersed in an overabundance of information and visual stimuli begins to gradually lose vigilance both intellectual and ethical. Only intense and extreme stimuli are able to reach his indifferent consciousness because his

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<sup>9</sup> Hyperreal can be used as a descriptive term when reality is replaced by signs which blur the dividing line between truth and false – the “real” and the “fictional” world (Baudrillard 2005, p. 11-12).

reaction threshold has been shifted from its earlier place. The image of death must be extremely sharp and detailed so that it might interest and incite the viewer who expects shock that would allow him to recover from the torpor induced by overabundance of information.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century images of medial death encroach on us from all sides. We can see it in different information pieces, also on the internet simply because death sells no matter the form or any other details for that matter, the unifying value here being the brutalized images occupying more and more space in the mass imagination. This presents an interesting situation where death denied in day-to-day life becomes a significant and ever present topic in the media which in turn manipulates its image so that the population will not lose interest. There are of course different presentations of death and dying present in the media like for example a brilliant movie by Dorota Kędzierzawska *Pora umierać* (*Time to die*), however numbers of such enterprises are nowhere near comparable to massive quantities of brutalized shows.

Media death yields to many different interpretations, it can be seen as a psychic involvement in events connected to dying and an incentive to reflect – which might indicate that the postmodern man’s attitude towards death characterized by avoidance is starting to dissolve. Death in the 21<sup>st</sup> century shows us a new face, new presentations and different interpretations are formed. The 20<sup>th</sup> century taboo begins to lose its power as new phenomena make their appearance examples of which are virtual cemeteries, blogs and websites dedicated to dead people – places which help cope with the trauma of death and are a new form of funerary ritual.

### **“Death on the internet”**

Man tried for centuries to present death visually, at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century there are many interpretations of this subject. As one of the theorists of new media, L. Manovich, stated information culture repurposes death towards its own ends. The reason for this state is given by the fact that the dead are exceptionally obedient, they say what they are asked to say, they are begging to be used by someone (Jankélévitch 1993, p. 87). In consequence of this a “manipulation of mortality” is performed, during which as M. Vovelle said death is replaced by the dead who absolutely dominated pop culture (Vovelle 2004, p. 717). In this instance “virtual necropolises”<sup>10</sup> have appeared. They are interpreted as an

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<sup>10</sup> First symptom that hailed the creation of virtual cemeteries was the increased interest in topics related to death, dying and mourning as can be observed in the last several years. More commonly published blogs and

instance of spontaneous evolution of attitude towards death which is directly related to the slow process of “death emerging from hiding”. This emergence is understood as a change in the perception of death in a culture based on weakening the position of dominating culture since the 19<sup>th</sup> century taboo of death and interest in graveyards and funerary customs (Kolbuszewski 1997, p. 7-16).

“CyberCemeteries” (also known as: “e-memorium”) which are virtual sites of memory, despite being a relatively new phenomenon, are just a new form taken by an already present<sup>11</sup> occurrence whose origins can be traced to longing for a way of picturing death in a manner appropriate for the contemporary world. It became obvious that it would be found in the virtual world of the world wide web.

Reasons for digitization of death can be found in modern men’s predisposition to transfer individualized forms and constructs of reality into the non-physical world, which is in a constant state of growth due to its quality of unlimited absorption. Virtual space has no end and no borders, it is reality pieced together from a multitude of varied elements creating a kaleidoscopic pattern with a place for Thanatos’ digital counterpart in it. Therefore the increasing process of borrowing death by the media discourse which can be observed in the period of the last couple of years is one of the more interesting and at the same time least researched elements of contemporary visual culture. Especially the part concerned with virtual cemeteries that serve as a sign of change inside the broader funerary discourse.

The first e-cemetery was created in Canada in 1995 by Michael Kibe and Steve Brauer. They called their enterprise *World Wide Cemetery* and it was the first instance of this kind of site appearing on the internet. Its design and functionality has major differences compared to more recent graphical user interfaces but form and rules of service developed at that time are still applicable to these types of pages created more recently.

E-cemetery is, as its name implies, a virtual phenomenon, its plane of existence is located in cyberspace<sup>12</sup>, seen as a consensual hallucination experienced everyday by billions of legal users in every part of the world (Gibson 1996, p. 53) and in which the technologically borrowed forms of culture create images appropriate to needs and imagination of an individual. This symbiosis of man and electronic circuits of a worldwide communication system leads to the creation of new, equal space, which, thanks to its ability to multiply

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post mortem web sites are perceived as a remainder that traditional forms of commemorating and mourning are not sufficient for modern society which “updated” those traditions with the use of modern means.

<sup>11</sup> Such as blogs, websites, forums dedicated to dead children, animals, celebrities etc.

<sup>12</sup> It is believed that this term was created by W. Gibson and first used in his novel *Neuromancer* (originally published in 1984).

imaginations of death became a place where humanity constantly struggles with passing and death.

E-cemeteries, based on the principle “we live as long as the memory about us” (*Informacja o serwisie*) are virtual “sites of memory” with highly developed esthetical shape and form imposed by advancement. Developers of this kind of site, using cutting-edge technology – present the users with a broad spectrum of multimedia forms to commemorate their lost relatives. Despite those forms being more attractive and varied than the regular ways of attaining that objective they are considered controversial.

While browsing Polish websites of this kind (such as *Wirtualny cmentarz*, [www.wirtualnycmentarz.pl](http://www.wirtualnycmentarz.pl); *Zaduszki*, [www.zaduszki.pl](http://www.zaduszki.pl); *Nekrolog*, [www.nekrolog.pl](http://www.nekrolog.pl); *Virtualheaven*, [www.virtualheaven.pl](http://www.virtualheaven.pl); *Nekropolia*, [www.nekropolia.pl](http://www.nekropolia.pl)) one of the most easily recognizable characteristics is their diversity. Some of them are made to resemble a page from a diary, others a page from a calendar, there are also replicas of real-world cemeteries and “virtual heavens”. The site-monuments even though they vary greatly amongst themselves in the visual department can be generally divided into three categories based on a visual theme. The first group consists of e-cemeteries, which graphical design is based on chosen symbols that are related to death in Western culture. Examples of such sites are *Zaduszki* and *Nekrolog*. The second group is formed by the sites designed to resemble real-life cemeteries as can be seen at the *Wirtualny Cmentarz* and *Nekropolia* websites. Finally there is a group of sites, where design does not have a clear connection to the theme of death or the connection is not obvious. This can be observed at *Virtual Heaven*.

Administrators of Polish funerary websites offer their users a varied array of means to commemorate their relatives and friends. Among them are: creating a gravestone, an epitaph, “lighting candles”, “placing flowers” it is also possible to include a biography of the deceased and upload pictures and movies<sup>13</sup>.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century we can witness a new face of Thanatos, digitized and media based, “an aesthetic death” – which terrifies nobody, but rather placates or amuses. The reason is that modern man does not perceive death as an adolescent with a torch in lowered arm or the grim reaper (Scheler 1994, p. 96). Death is increasingly seen as virtual cemeteries and internet heavens. It is the digital eternal flowers or burning candles for months on virtual tombs, it is

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<sup>13</sup> By paying a special fee the user can gain access to extended functions such as personally created tombstone which form is based on the requests of the user or „the secret mail” which is used to send post mortem mail and notifications of death sometimes in the form of “farewell letters”. E-mails are sent by the authorized person.

also an interactive rendition of the deceased, making him/her more real only “one hyperlink away” from the living.

### Summary

“Confidence (courage) then ought to be employed against death, and caution against the fear of death. But now we do the contrary, and employ against death the attempt to escape; and to our opinion about it we employ carelessness, rashness, and indifference” (Epictetus 2004). Those words, spoken by Epictetus almost two thousand years ago are still very much current today. Analysis of three phenomena present in postmodernism – crisis, pornography and renaissance of death – brings into light a paradox of trying to evade death and at the same time creating countless depictions of it out of which none can pretend to be the correct and widely accepted.

In postmodernism the said phenomena have their instances in: a patient dying in hospital, hidden with a screen from sight of others (the crisis of death), a sudden, often violent death presented by the mass media (the pornography of death) and the search for new ways to commemorate those who have passed away (the renaissance of death). All three of them are factors in creating the plural landscape of postmodernism, in which different and sometimes confronting contexts coexist and create the mosaic of symbols, values, senses and meanings.

All the changes in perception of death that took place in the 19<sup>th</sup> century have given grounds to create not just a new image of death but a whole system for it in the 20<sup>th</sup>/21<sup>st</sup> centuries, which was named “postmodern thanatic triad”. In this work I have tried to present three occurrences which, even though located in different timeframes, found their substantiation in postmodernism.

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