



THOMAS MACHO

DEBATES ABOUT THE DEATH DRIVE

*Nosferatu at the Zoo*¹

ABSTRACT: Between 1920 and 1923 Sigmund Freud revised his drive theory: first in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), later in *The Ego and the Id* (1923). Since then, he spoke of Eros and Thanatos, of life and death drives. The concept of the death drive has been hotly debated – in psychoanalytic societies, journals, and at congresses. Outlines of this debate are presented and commented on; but they are also confronted with the premiere of an important silent movie: on 4 March 1922 – on the eve before Pier Paolo Pasolini’s birth – Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau’s *Nosferatu: A Symphony of Horror* premiered in the marble hall of the Zoological Garden in Berlin.

KEYWORDS: Modernism, Freud, Death Drive, Nosferatu, Vampire Films

Modernity (*Die Moderne*)² can be variously characterized as the era of industrialization, as the age of Enlightenment and its scientific and technical progress, the age of economic globalization, or as the age of secularization and a new thinking on the question of human mortality. Already in 1796, in his novel *Siebenkäs*, Jean Paul (1792, 179-183) portrays a mountain-dream set in the Alps, in which Jesus himself appears, lamenting God’s absence: “I traversed the worlds, I ascended into the suns, and soared with the Milky Ways through the wastes of heaven; but there is no God. I descended to the last reaches of the shadows of Being, and I looked into the chasm and cried: ‘Father, where art thou?’ But I heard only the eternal storm ruled by none, and the shimmering rainbow of essence stood without sun to create it, trickling above the abyss”. And even, when the dead children awake in the church and ask: “Jesus! Have we no father?” he answers, streaming with tears: “We are all orphans, I and ye, we are without a father” (Jean Paul 1792, 182). Towards the end of the 19th century, Friedrich Nietzsche had his “good man” (“*tollen Menschen*”) appear in the marketplace holding a lantern. He looks for God but cannot find him: “Do we not feel the breath of empty space? Has it not become colder? Is not night continually closing in on us? Do we not need to light lanterns in the morning? Do we hear nothing as yet of the noise of the gravediggers who are burying God? Do we smell nothing as yet of the divine decomposition? Gods, too,

¹ Translated by Giuliana Ferreccio.

² As in German there is no generally accepted term for Modernism, I chose to translate “*die Moderne*” as “Modernity” although the latter does not quite correspond to the former; NdT.

decompose. God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him” (Nietzsche 1974, 181).

Modernity is an age of death, of wars that grow more and more brutal, and since the 14th century, it has also been the age of steadily recurring epidemics and natural catastrophes. Therefore, it cannot come as a surprise that, already in the early 1920s, thinking about death, mortality, and suicide have dominated the scene. As soon as the first World War came to an end, it was followed by a devastating pandemic, the so-called “Spanish Flu”, which had exacted a possibly higher death toll than the whole of the war years.³ In the following three sections, I will first shortly dwell on Freud’s conception of the death drive (and its controversial reception), then move on to the original presentation of Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau’s film *Nosferatu* in the *Marmorsaal* of the Berlin Zoo on 4 March 1922, the very eve of the day Pier Paolo Pasolini was born. In the end, I will enquire into the original performance of the play “*Věc Makropulos*” by Karel Čapek which took place in Prague on 21 November 1922.

Death Drive

A few months after the beginning of the first World War, Sigmund Freud published his essay “Thoughts for the Times on War and Death” in the first issue of the journal *Imago* in 1915. He wrote: “It is indeed impossible to imagine our own death; and whenever we attempt to do so we can perceive that we are in fact still present as spectators. Hence the psycho-analytic school could venture on the assertion that at bottom no one believes in his own death, or, to put the same thing in another way, that in the unconscious, every one of us is convinced of his own immortality” (Freud 1957, 289). Five years later – and soon after the end of the first World War and the scare of the “Spanish Flu” – Freud revised his thesis, and in “Beyond the Pleasure Principle”, he developed the concept of a death drive, which, as we know, is biologically founded on a tendency of the cells themselves to achieve preservation through a standstill, and at the same time, to revert to an earlier stage of inorganic life. Stones and metals are more apt to be preserved than plants, animals, or men. Eros and Thanatos: the drives to life and death produce an antagonism that is maintained during the whole of one’s life.

The concept of a death drive, which until today has been considered one of the most controversial of Freud’s ideas, sets at opposition various analysts coming from Freud’s school. Here, I mention only Otto Fenichel (1954) and his essay “Towards a Criticism of the Death Drive” published in *Imago* in 1935, or Wilhelm Reich and his study on the masochistic character, which was published in the *Internationalen Zeitschrift für Psychoanalyse* XVIII and shortly after revised in his *Charakteranalyse* (1933). There, Reich suggested that Freud’s assumption that a “*primary biological tendency toward self-*

³ Cfr. Spinney. 2017.

destruction, a *primary* or erogenic masochism”, could not be verified: “The exponents of the theory of the death instinct made every effort to support their assumptions by calling attention to the physiological processes of decomposition. Yet a convincing substantiation was nowhere to be found” (Reich 1984, 229). In the year 1938, the year before Freud, in his London exile, would ask his friend and doctor Max Schur to help him with his suicide as he had promised – the psychiatric analyst Karl A. Menninger published an exhaustive research on *Man Against Himself*. His research deals with a theme which Freud had neglected in his metapsychological writings: suicide. The first chapter already bears the title “Eros and Thanatos”, and on the second page, Menninger asks:

Men fly above ancient and beautiful cities dropping explosive bombs upon museums and churches, upon great buildings and little children. They are encouraged by the official representatives of two hundred million other people, all of whom contribute daily in taxes to the frantic manufacture of instruments designed for the tearing and ripping and mangling of human beings similar to themselves, possessed of the same instincts, the same sensations, the same little pleasures, and the same realization that death comes to end these things all too soon. This is what one would see who surveyed our planet cursorily, and if he looked closer into the lives of individuals and communities he would see still more to puzzle him; he would see bickerings, hatreds, and fighting, useless waste and petty destructiveness. He would see people sacrificing themselves to injure others, and expending time, trouble, and energy in shortening that pitifully small recess from oblivion which we call life. And most amazing of all, he would see some who, as if lacking aught else to destroy, turn their weapons upon themselves. Whether, as I suppose, this would perplex a visitor from Mars, it surely must amaze anyone who assumes, as perhaps we all do at times, that human beings want what they say – they want life, liberty, and happiness. (Menninger 1938, 4)

Jacques Lacan has not quite rejected the death drive, but he has got rid of Freud’s biological-evolutionary argument and has drawn from the symbolic order. He argues that:

Whatever the significance of the metapsychological imagining of Freud’s which is the death instinct, whether or not he was justified in forging it, the question it raises is articulated in the following form by virtue of the mere fact that it has been raised: How can man, that is to say a living being, have access to knowledge of the death instinct, to his own relationship to death? The answer is, by virtue of the signifier in its most radical form. It is in the signifier and insofar as the subject articulates a signifying chain that he comes up against the fact that he may disappear from the chain of what he is. (Lacan 1992, 295)

Slavoj Žižek recalls in his study on *The Parallax View* (2006):

This is why we should not confuse the death drive with the so-called ‘*nirvana* principle’, the thrust toward destruction or self-obliteration: the Freudian death drive has nothing whatsoever to do with the craving for self-annihilation, for the return to the inorganic absence of any life-tension; it is, on the contrary, the very opposite of dying – a name for the ‘undead’ eternal life itself, for the horrible fate of being caught in the endless repetitive cycle of wandering around in guilt and pain. The paradox of the Freudian ‘death drive’ is therefore that it is Freud’s name for its very opposite, for the way immortality appears within psychoanalysis, for an uncanny *excess* of life, for an ‘undead’ urge which persists beyond the (biological) cycle of life and death, of generation and corruption. The ultimate

lesson of psychoanalysis is that human life is never 'just life': humans are not simply alive, they are possessed by the strange drive to enjoy life in excess, passionately attached to a surplus which sticks out and derails the ordinary run of things. (Žižek 2006, 62)

Thus, should the death drive also be designated as a “drive to immortality”?

Let us go back to the year 1922. In the early 1920s, Benjamin starts translating from Baudelaire. At the same time, he writes “Sonette”,⁴ also as an act of mourning and remembering his friend Fritz Heinle, who had taken his life together with his girlfriend Rika Seligson, on 8 August 1914, shortly after the Germans occupied Belgium:

Although some interpreted this as the last act of a doomed love, Benjamin and their other close friends saw it as the most somber of war protests. The couple had chosen the rooms rented by the student groups for their meetings as the site for their suicide, and Heinle sent off an overnight letter to Benjamin to tell him where he would find their bodies. The immediate effect on Benjamin was several months of depression, and withdrawal from most of his former friends. But the shock of this loss never wholly left him: well into the 1930s, he continued to integrate images of Heinle's death into his work. (Benjamin 1996, 498)

It is no coincidence that Benjamin still engages in Baudelaire's reflections on suicide in his own essay:

Modernity must stand under the sign of suicide, an act which seals a heroic will that makes no concessions to a mentality inimical toward this will. Such a suicide is not resignation but heroic passion. It is the achievement of modernity in the realm of the passions. In this form, as the *passion particuliere de la vie moderne*, suicide appears in the classic passage devoted to the theory of the modern. The voluntary suicide of heroes in the ancient world is an exception. (Benjamin 2003, 45)

Afterwards, he further refers to more suicides committed by workers: “Suicide appears, then, as the quintessence of modernity” (Benjamin 1999, 360)

Nosferatu and the Suicidal Vampires

The year 1922 could be seen as a sort of echo of another year, more than four hundred years earlier. In the year 1516, two noteworthy books were published, already depicting a farewell to immortality: Thomas More brought out his playful, fictional report about life on the island of *Utopia* – with a friendly support by Erasmus of Rotterdam's work – but, at the same time, the *Tractatus de immortalitate animae* by the Italian philosopher and humanist Pietro Pomponazzi came out as well. In this treatise, in contrast with the Neoplatonists of the Renaissance, Pomponazzi rejected the belief in the immortality of the human soul. He thus openly contradicted Pope Leo X who, for the first time, had condemned the doctrine of the mortality of the soul precisely at the 5th Lateran Council of 1513. Pomponazzi's work was publicly burned in Venice in 1562 and, as a

⁴ Cfr. Benjamin 1989.

consequence, the author himself had barely avoided trial by the Church Tribunal. In his *Vorlesungen zur Philosophie der Renaissance*, Ernst Bloch remarked that Pomponazzi's treatise may "have 'worked' as an enormous, anti-ideological blow", as the power of the church consisted in its arrogant presumption of holding the keys to Heaven and Hell. The keys are precisely depicted in the emblem of the earthly representative of Christ. The power of the church essentially consisted in its ruling over the unlikely transcendental fear, which tormented mankind way into the eighteenth century, and cast a black shadow on their life. Man did not fear the first death, but the second one: "hell" (Bloch 1972, 19). Pomponazzi's critique to immortality also applied to the fear of hell, that central tool for the church's dominion. Not by chance, in his *Utopia* did Thomas More himself stress that, on the newly discovered island, it may be allowed to choose a voluntary death as a possible exit:

Everything possible is done to mitigate the pain of those suffering from incurable diseases; and visitors do their best to console them by sitting and talking to them. But if the disease is not only incurable, but excruciatingly and unremittingly painful, then the priests and public officials come and remind the sufferer that he is now unequal to any of life's duties, a burden to himself and others; he has really outlived his own death. They tell him he should not let the pestilence prey on him any longer, but now that life is simply torture, he should not hesitate to die, but he should rely on hope for something better; and since his life is a prison where he is bitterly tormented, he should escape from it on his own or allow others to rescue him from it. (More 2016, 82)

The point is no longer a discussion about heaven or hell, but rather, on the contrary, about epidemics and contagion. As it happens, More actually speaks of the plague, but, at the beginning of the 16th century several epidemics of exceptionally contagious nature and deathly kinds of illness broke out in the English kingdom. These epidemics were called "English sweating sickness" whose possible viral etiology remains unclear up to the present.

On the evening of 4 March 1922, the silent film *Nosferatu: A Symphony of Horror* was originally presented at the *Marmorsaal* of the Berlin Zoo. This Marble Hall had been built from 1910 to 1912: it was one of the largest dance halls in Berlin and was located in the central building of the complex of guesthouses on the southeastern side of the Zoo area; it was also used as a tavern and a film theatre. The ball of the official government press was often held there in the 1930s. However, during the second World War, the hall was destroyed and never rebuilt. Was Murnau's silent film associated with the Zoo? In *Nosferatu* various animals appear: spiders and live flies which the estate-broker Knoch catches and gobbles when in the lunatic asylum, wolves that at first look a little like hyenas, bats and so on. Also fascinating is the film's end, which was supposed to be eliminated due to a lost lawsuit started by Bram Stoker's heirs in 1925, but which nonetheless survived in numberless abridged versions, and is now available in several restored versions. Ellen, Thomas Unters's young wife, played by Greta Schroeder, lies on her bed. She is planning to offer her life in sacrifice to the vampire, who is now eagerly observing her, through the window. Count Orlok, alias Nosferatu, played by Max

Schreck, sneaks into the room, drinks Ellen's blood, but while caught in his act of lust, he fails to notice the first glimpses of light of the day. The first sunbeam falling into the room turns him into smoke. Eros and Thanatos, each at the same time, reach the aim of their drive in a love-death of the undying; with Ellen's sacrifice, the plague leaves the city in the end.

Already in the Gothic literature of the 19th century, vampires appeared as animated monsters, blood-sucking revenants, who could strengthen their life-force with the blood of their mortal contemporaries and lengthen it at will. Their most celebrated representative was Count Dracula in Bram Stoker's novel (1897). His dark figure has also grown to dominate the screen: from *Nosferatu* up to Werner Herzog's remake with Klaus Kinski in the main role (1979), or up to Francis Ford Coppola's *Dracula* (1992). These Dracula films were developed by relying on numberless vampire films that took part in the myth, without citing him explicitly or modifying him. As essential frames of the story, one could regularly count on a haunted castle, the vampire's incapacity to have a reflected image, his aversion to the sun, garlic, silver charms, and crucifixes, his possible death being caused by driving a wooden stake into his chest, or anything that could recall the favourite, grim art of execution, which the Rumanian Wpiwode Vlad III, called Tepes the "Impaler" (1431-1477), a possible historical prototype for Dracula, may have practiced; plus, of course, the bloody kisses planted by long and sharp canine teeth. Besides Vlad, the roots to the vampire myth were connected to reports of burials of seemingly dead men, or with bats, which the vampire would turn into in his nightly outings. A significant break within the genre came about in 1994 at the latest, when Neil Jordan filmed Anne Rice's novel and conquered film theatres with *Interview With the Vampire*. The film's success was not only due to the opulent casting – with Brad Pitt, Tom Cruise, Christian Slater, Antonio Banderas, and Kirsten Dunst – but to the narration itself. The presentation of the sensitive vampire Louis de Pointe du Lac (Brad Pitt), who, off and on, not only gives up kissing out of compassion for his victim, feeding instead on mice, but also, during an epidemic in Louisiana, literally clasps to his heart the orphan Claudia (Kirsten Dunst), who is assisting her dying mother – their hearts spontaneously beating in the same tempo – and so to speak, he adopts her. His master, his companion, and opponent, Lestat de Lioncourt (Tom Cruise), transforms the girl into a vampire, however, with the result of causing Claudia to spend her whole eternal life as a child. Together with Louis, she takes her revenge by slitting de Lioncourt's throat, without actually killing him. Two scenes are particularly interesting: the attempt at suicide which Louis undertakes by setting fire to his house in Louisiana in order to die in the fire, and the melancholy felt by the slimmed-down vampire Lestat in New Orleans, who can ultimately barely stand his undead life in the Postmodern, and flees from the sunrise seeking refuge in a film theatre.

The new vampires are sensitive, prone to compassion and love, polite, urbane, and considerate, respectful, melancholy and inclined to suicide. This trend, which already began with Munrau's *Nosferatu*, has continued into the 21st century. Exactly in the

critical year 2008 – a few weeks after the Lehman’s bankruptcy (17 November 2008) – the first film of the *Twilight Saga* appeared on screen, showing the love story between Bella Swan (Kirsten Stewart) and the vampire Edward Cullen (Robert Pattison). This film ended with a paradoxical return to the classical vampire-love: Bella is bitten by another vampire, but Edward sucks the poisoned blood out of her wound in order to prevent her from becoming a vampire in turn. His kiss works as a substitute for a curative salvation, as a rationalised hand-kissing, or as a kind of reanimation or vaccine: “I must bite you in order to shield you from the destiny of becoming as I am”. A key role is played by Edward’s father, Dr. Cullen, who presents him with the alternative of either saving Bella and thus of restraining his own greed for blood, or transforming her into a vampire. Two months earlier, on 7 September 2008, the first sequel to the tv series *True Blood* was broadcast, in which the vampires mostly settle for synthetic blood. At the beginning, at the heart of *True Blood* there is also a love story: the relationship between Sookie Stackhouse (Anna Paquin) and the vampire Bill Compton (Stephen Moyer). By the time *Twilight* was released, seven episodes of this series had already been filmed. Likewise, in the year 2008, the premiere of the Swedish film by Tomas Alfredson *Låt den rätte komma in* (literally, “Let the Just Enter”, the German version took the title *So Finster die Nacht*, i.e. *So Dark the Night*) was celebrated, much praised and bestowed with sixty film awards. Again, the subject was a love story between a human and a vampire, this time between the pensive Young Oskar (Kåre Hedebrant) and the androgynous girl-vampire Eli (Lina Leandersson). At the end of the film, Oskar and Eli flee on a train. In the midst of the luggage, coming out of a chest in which Eli is transported, we hear signals in Morse alphabet for the word “Kiss”. Kisses have replaced bites forever, and in addition, the vampires have become eternal children, as Claudia had already showed in Neil Jordan’s film. The new vampires grieve over an unhappy love and their immortality, as did Klaus Kinsky in Werner Herzog’s *Nosferatu* remake (1977). Also, Jim Jarmush’s film *Only Lovers Left Alive* (2013) once more tells the love story between two vampires, who are named after the first man and woman: Adam (Tom Hiddleston) and Eve (Tilda Swinton). They do not feed, certainly, on synthetic blood, but on cans of blood coming from a hospital, whose content they drink from elegant sherry glasses. At times their weariness of life seems to overcome even their century-long love, as, for instance, early in the film, when the musician Adam plans his suicide with the help of a wooden ball – instead of the compulsory stake —which he wants to shoot into his heart. To be sure, love triumphs over doubt: in the end, Adam and Eve are still forced to sacrifice another loving couple for their own survival. “Pardon me?” Eve asks nevertheless, before she jabs her teeth into the neck of the girl she is going to kiss, which we never get to see, as the film remains as discreet as its heroes. Besides, Tom calls mortal men “Zombies”; he prepares the plan for his suicide in front of Eve, as a response to the rise of the “Zombies” and their kind, aimed at ruling the world. His comment gives a hint on possible background ideas for the vampire’s melancholic suicidal bent: the new vampires have suffered a ruthless competition in biting by the zombies and werewolves, who already in

Twilight Saga and *True Blood* figured as proletarian opponents to the melancholy aristocrats, steeped in consumer habits. Zombies and werewolves do not settle for blood: like hungry wild animals, they tear their victims apart and even eat their flesh.

What transpires in this short, sketchy, civilizing process the vampire undergoes? Is it an anachronistic view of the class struggle, in which a postmodern consumer class encounters nearly extinct representatives of an aristocratic class, who impose themselves through good manners, melancholy and temporary moderation? Do the capitalists, stock-exchange agents, and financial go-betweens belong now to the class of the biting wolves who, neither by a higher level of self-awareness nor by rapacity, distinguish themselves from the unaware, ignorant Zombies? Thus, has the vampire risen to the transfigured romantic and regretful *topos* of the nostalgia for a decayed culture? In *Only Lovers Left Alive*, the vampires are the last bohemians, intellectuals, such as Christopher Marlowe (played by John Hurt), who not only may declare that he wrote under Shakespeare's pseudonym, but also provides the circle of his friends with fresh blood supplies. While we can easily identify with these vampires who elicit sympathy, the zombies are becoming more and more inimical images *par excellence*: dumb, greedy, brutal, yet – as opposed to the vampire – easy to kill. The civilizing development of the vampire can be assessed in the light of social and economic developments; a perspective bringing back to the fore the change in our attitude with regards to the lengthening of life seems to me more important. A lengthened life is a value whose significance becomes all the more relative, the more men have to come to terms with the possibility of reaching an older age. And this change concerns vampires too: their kisses become all the more tender the more we learn to fear the loss of teeth coming with age, the terror of an all too long life and eternal life.

The Makropoulos Secret

In 1922, the same year in which Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau presented his *Nosferatu*, the first performance of *Věc Makropulos*, a drama conceived as a novel by the Czech author Karel Čapek, was held in one of Prague's theatres. Leoš Janáček also saw it and set the piece to music as an opera (with Max Brod's libretto). The dark comedy and the opera deal with the boredom of eternal life, a gift of life's elixirs, and the melancholy of a being to whom no limits are set. What is *Věc Makropulos* about? Emilia Marty is not only divinely beautiful, but she is also a great singer. She has the whole world at her feet, and she masters her art – and also the art of seduction – so completely that she is left with nothing to long for anymore. In short, life, her life at least, is boring. However, her tedium increases her charisma tenfold. Her audience, mainly men, now and again storm the stage out of enthusiasm, tearing their idol's clothes from her body. Moreover, Emilia Marty is 337 years old – she was born in the year 1585 under the reign of Emperor Rudolf II. Daughter of a magician, at the age of sixteen she was made to drink a life elixir which

would grant her a time span of three hundred years of life. Not everyone who tasted of the elixir survived the experiment, and Emilia too struggled against death for a whole week. However, afterward she lived several lives, changing her names, which always fitted with the initials E. M.. Thus, in the same century, she can enter a fight over an inheritance, or start an affair with a far descendant, who, however, will commit suicide out of unrequited love. E. M. plays with the frequent changes of name, so that she could both caricature and belie what is imposed on women on many levels of married life. E. M. always remains herself. What the drama deals with is exactly what E. M. is *not* interested in: the genealogical order of descendants, an undying by engendering a progeny, who will fight over their inheritance. In contrast to Janáček, Čapek is not concerned with the paradoxes of the philosophical concept of immortality, but with the still topical question of the right to lengthen our life. What he concretely shows is a fight against the exploitation of children by their parents, of the future by the past, or against the process of turning the desire for a longer life into an economic business. It is not coincidental that E. M. is a woman, whose fear of death is immediately removed by the recipe of the elixir; at the end, she laughs: “The end of immortality! Ha, ha, ha! [*She laughs hysterically, breaking off sharply in the middle. Then quietly she raises her arms in a welcoming gesture as though to embrace Death*]” (Čapek 1925, 165). For the Gestapo, Karel Čapek was the public enemy number 2, after the president Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, with whom he was a close friend. Masaryk, who had received his doctorate from the University of Vienna with a study on *Selbstmord als sociale Massenerscheinung der modernen Civilisation* in 1878,⁵ died on 14 September 1937, whereas Čapek died a year later, on 25 December 1938. According to statistics by the Wiesbaden government offices, life expectancy around the end of the French-Prussian war of 1871 – but also during that century of wars and murdering of peoples which Hobsbawm characterized as *The Age of Extremes* —⁶ steadily more than doubled. The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse – on the white horse rides war, on the red horse, power, on the black horse, hunger, and on the pale horse, epidemic and fear – have actually not withdrawn during the twentieth century. Yet, neither have they stopped the demographic change, the oft-cited *Methusalem-Komplott*.⁷ Even the farther reaching life expectancy – the average number of living years – will have more or less doubled by 2050, if we compare it with 1900, although the men and women who are sixty should still wait to be counted up. While sixty-year-old men could count on thirteen more years, by 2050, they will live almost 24 years more. By then, sixty-year-old women will have lived 28 years more, instead of their previous 14 years (therefore in average, up to their 88th birthday). Already today in Japan, as Prag Khanna (2021, 70) remarks, more adult diapers than baby diapers are sold. Life span has increasingly lengthened, and almost no one needs a “prolonging” of their life. Under these

⁵ Cfr. Masaryk 1881.

⁶ Cfr. Hobsbawm 1994.

⁷ Cfr. Schirmacher 2004.

circumstances, cases of surprising deaths have become rarer, and the once acceptable representations of a desirable death have even turned into their contrary. In past centuries, sudden death meant a misfortune, while a slow death was considered a good death, which allowed for putting earthly and heavenly things into order. Today on the contrary, long-drawn out dying is a misfortune which must be forestalled, prevented with the help of testaments and the patient's instructions, while a sudden death is almost considered a lucky death.

The abandonment of religious hopes for an eternal life and personal immortality, even from the longing for a life as long as possible, characterises the process of modernity. Like the remote year 1516, the year 1922 holds a key position in this sense. Starting from this year, we can now take into consideration a number of philosophical or literary works which came out in the following years and decades: Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit* (1927), Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* (1928), the works of Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre, as well as Simone de Beauvoir's novel *Tous les hommes sont mortels* (1946). While Virginia Woolf portrays a kind of voyager through time, who changes his/her gender, like Parsifal in Hans-Jürgen Syberberg's film rendering of Richard Wagner's opera (1982), Beauvoir tells the story of Count Raimon Fosca, in the 13th century, the lord of the North Italian city of Carmona, who drinks an immortality potion. The Count, now immortal, grows more and more powerful, yet not happy: his undying is like a curse. All his friends, women and children die like flies, while he must always go on living. He leaves Italy and from then on, he slips into new roles, one life after another. He becomes a counsellor to Emperor Charles V, when he still hopes to create a paradise on earth; he becomes a foreigner in an indigenous lineage, and an aristocratic sadist in absolutist France, or a revolutionary in the French revolution of 1830. However, as he forfeits all the companions who surrounded him, he decides, in the middle of the 19th century, to fall asleep in a wood and, after he is found there, he must spend a few years in an asylum. After that, in Paris in the 1930s he meets Regine, whom he also again forsakes, after a brief affair. The undying are alone: Čapek's Makropulos, Woolf's Orlando, Simone de Beauvoir's Fosca are tormented by boredom and loss of relationships. They resemble a parody of the "Eigentlichkeit", the individuality of the "Sein zum Tod", which Heidegger depicted in 1927.

Yet, laughing about these parodic effects could essentially lead us astray, seeing as a series of research institutes in Silicon Valley, with funding available in the count of billions, are searching for methods to overcome aging and death. Recently, on 23 November 2019, an issue of the German news magazine *Der Spiegel* came out with the telling title: "Dying? Without me" (Grolle 2019) As Yuval Noah Harari also explains in his bestselling book *Homo Deus* (2016, 25), the quest for immortality is a top project on the agenda of the 21st century. In Harari's words, the maxim of the quest for immortality reads as follows: "The writing is on the wall: equality is out – immortality is in" (Harari

2016, 39).⁸ This program and these promises certainly address a small group which is on the verge of disappearing: Ray Kurzweil, leader of technical development with Google, or Peter Thiel, co-funder of Pay-Pal, with an estimated private net worth of 2.2 billion US dollars, masters behind the electoral campaigns for Donald Trump. However, do the gurus of Silicon Valley know what they wish for? In her debut novel, *The People in the Trees*, Hanya Yanigara (2013) tells the story of a doctor who, with two ethnologists, carries out research on an isolated population on a (fictional) island in the South Seas. In the process, he comes across the traces of a secret way to prolong life. The doctor becomes famous, adopts numberless neglected children whom he brings up in his home in the US, but then he is accused of abusing the children. The novel draws on the life of the American Nobel Prize winner, Daniel Carleton Gadjusek. The point of the novel is that the longevity of the indigenous inhabitants of the island goes along with an increasing loss of consciousness and radical dementia. A longer-than-normal life can apparently lead toward the lasting curse of numberless losses which are either brought to light or provoked. Stephen King (2013) also tells a similar story in the sequel to his world-famous novel *Shining*, of which Stanley Kubrick made a film. In this sequel, Danny Torrance, once the fiendish child of the first novel, comes across a sect of “vampires”, who feed on a “life-elixir” made out of the griefs of tortured children. The action slightly recalls the myths of conspiracy of the QAnon movement. The new vampires are definitely not billionaires from Silicon Valley, but inconspicuous men of leisure, dressed in polyester clothes who drive around in their Land Rovers. On the contrary, Danny Torrance’s work consists in accompanying people in a retirement home towards death by purveying a soft death, and therefore, he goes by the loving name “Doctor Sleep”. It is not the vampires who must be fought against, but older people, who do not want to die, thus goes King’s unsettling message, which seems to dream about a new, peaceful culture of death.

Epilogue

What do we lose in the endless extension of our lives? We lose not only the ideal of equality and solidarity, or the possibility of love and relationships, but also a sort of way of giving meaning to our own lives. The Flemish writer and philosopher Patricia de Martelaere dealt with this aspect in her inspired essay on the *Aesthetik des Selbstmords*. In analogy with a sentence by sci-fiction author Frederik Brown, she wonders about a type of suicide-prone people, who would have “preferred” to have lived instead of living. This impossible attitude is shaped by a “desire for wholeness, for rounding up one’s life” (de Martelaere 1997, 118 *passim*). Heidegger (2003, 237) also wrote of the “question of the wholeness of being-there – the existential question about a possible ability-to-be-whole,

⁸ Cfr. Hülswitt & Brinzanek 2010.

as well as the existential question about the essential constitution of ‘end’ and ‘wholeness’”. However, a “regrettable aspect of living” so argues Patricia de Martelaere, consists exactly in the fact that life does not usually conclude, does not finish up. For we actually imagine that “we, “at the end of our life” we will die, which would be not only logical but right and very nice. Yet we die on the way, while we fetch the children from school, in our bathroom, while we listen to a cultural program on the radio, or in bed with a woman, who is not our woman. We die, so it seems, in the most unseemly moments. And everything which we still have to do, everything which we absolutely still want to say, in reality remains not done and unsaid. Our life is interrupted by death, not finished.⁹ Therefore, in the traditional discourse on the art of life, we actually express the wish of being able to conclude our own life as a whole, as a “work of art”. It is not surprising that so many women artist and artists have taken their lives after they had written or staged an important work.¹⁰ In short, the art of life is conceived as a new experimental “*ars moriendi*”, as the art of dying, and also increasingly practiced as such. This is what Michel Foucault clearly write in his late works. Didn't the “Experimental Turn” of modernity start exactly at this point – perhaps precisely in the year 1922?

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⁹ Cfr. de Martelaere 1997, 120.

¹⁰ Cfr. Macho 2017, 338 passim.

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