Has Death no Future? Cybernetics and the Hecatomb

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Abstract

The paper examines figurations of death in four distinct fields: cybernetics, psychoanalysis, philosophy, and emerging technologies. In this light it becomes possible hypothetically to explore the role of death in the codification of contemporary culture. The aim is to identify alternatives to the dominant biological determination of death, exemplified, for instance, by Xavier Bichat [4]. The paper concludes with some experimental and critical readings that attempt to uncover some aspects of this codification.

Keywords

Digital Death Language

ACM Classification Keywords

Human Factors, Languages, Theory.

General Terms

Death, Psychoanalysis, Cybernetics, Philosophy

Introduction

Cybernetics concerns the possibility of controlling or limiting otherwise fatally stochastic processes [21]. The discourse of psychoanalysis is concerned, in a comparable way, with the codification of processes disguised as accidental factors [14]. In both cases the

accidental or chance factor is systematically linked to a particular concept of death. In the philosophical tradition the concept of death also comes under rigorous scrutiny [1, 2, 3, 15, 16]. At a certain point it tends to be rendered obscure, even meaningless. Two kinds of philosophical project exist (often within the same philosophy). The first proceeds by attempting to exclude the nonsensical elements (chance and death); the other attempts to account for these. This dichotomy is analyzed extensively by Jacques Derrida [9, 10, 11, 12]. My purpose is to consider the interface between these two approaches as it applies in cybernetics, psychoanalysis and digital or cyber culture. The point in the first section is to establish a philosophical account of the experience of death. Death is regarded as a kind of limit [8]. So it often figures as a fundamental limitation to experience. Death lies beyond experience and thus beyond any empirical observation. Classical attempts to transgress or to transcend these limits fail but in doing so they reveal a productive sphere of potential action.

The Digital Hecatomb
A second section examines the role of language in relation to death. It outlines the conditions for a transition between linguistic elements (speech, writing and symbolic signs) and electronic media and images. In both psychoanalysis and in advanced versions of cybernetics a language functions only in situations where it is embodied. An observer or a speaking subject must participate. Otherwise language remains a matter of empty repetitions exemplified well by the 0s and 1s of programming. Yet cybernetics has been instrumental in allowing the historical distinction between animal and machine to become more complicated. It insists on creative approaches, using

analogies, metaphors, homomorphies and isomorphies to construct complex models of organized systems [8]. With both psychoanalysis and cybernetics the dialectic of life and death, with that of organization and chaos, is worked out in models of communication.

The philosophical relation between death and language is well established [1]. The concept of death infects every theory of meaning if only because of its rigorous refusal to yield to it. But more radically than this, the very meaning of speech implies a kind of death. Maurice Blanchot suggests that "before any word is spoken, there must be an immense hecatomb, a preliminary flood plunging all creation into a total sea" [6] (323). Here he is reading G. W. F. Hegel's commentary on Adam's act of naming in *Genesis.* The hecatomb is a concrete image for an abstract idea. It implies a vast number of victims, speakers and their objects, but it is a familiar formulation in the philosophical tradition. The suggestion is reminiscent of what we today commonly refer to as the virtual. It designates a conceptual realm divorced at its origin from concrete existence.

It is now a matter of clarifying this relation of meaning to the nonsense of death. I intend to follow a line of questioning concerning the relation between death and what I call the digital imaginary. The digital imaginary does not depend upon "virtual" or "cyber" space. But the interface between users and electronic technologies would not exist without it. There are numerous examples and during the talk I offer a few of them: organized interactive sites like the Integrated Virtual Learning Environment; games like *vox populi vox dei (a werewolf thriller)* [22]; and cellular automata like those produced in John Conway's *The Game of Life*.

Summary

Death, classically, occupies a sphere that eludes both the regulative orders of logic and language and the accidental elements of an individual's pleasures and desires. The psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan recognized both these orders as constitutive of the subject in language. He designates them, respectively, the *symbolic* and the *imaginary*. By distinguishing these orders Lacan makes possible a way of analyzing the codification of culture. A third category, the *real,* helps to identify whatever it is that eludes the structures of signification. Death can emerge in the irruptive form of the real in various ways. This can be connected with Blanchot's notion of the hecatomb. The aim is to establish the essential passivity of the experience of death. Because a subject can only fail to grasp this we look towards a condition that escapes subjectivity.

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