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Civilized Warriors and Primitive Cinema: Freud's Denial-of-Death in Fin-de-Siècle Spectacles of Mortality

I

In retrospect, it could be claimed that World War I was extremely beneficial to certain national film industries and psychoanalytic movements. The collapse of the European motion picture industries gave American producers a virtual monopoly of the world movie market (cf. Lewis 1968, p. 159), and by 1920 eighty percent of all films shown outside of the United States were being made by American companies (cf. Strinati 2000, p. 12). Meanwhile, in Europe, psychoanalysis was gradually achieving dominance as one of the preferred means to explain war neuroses and treat it (cf. Kaufmann 1999, pp. 130-1, 140).

Sigmund Freud, in true pioneer spirit, realized by 1915 that The Great War was also a great opportunity to emphasize the validity of certain aspects of his theory. Some six months into the war Freud wrote his two-part *Thoughts for the Times on War and Death* (*Zeitgemäßes über Krieg und Tod* [cf. Freud 1915b]). The article is the earliest to appear in Jonathan Dollimore's (1998) survey of the modern discourse claiming that those living in the twentieth century were somehow denying or repressing death. At first blush the idea of alienation from death seems outrageous: humans did not stop dying in the twentieth century, and, in fact, as World War I and many other ventures proved, were diligently bringing death upon themselves and their fellow mortals. Nor does it seem plausible that death, while still an unavoidable physical reality, was simply banished from consciousness, not thought about. There are countless cultural artifacts that attest to the opposite, including films which are rife with deaths of all sorts. But if death was both widely practiced and, at least visually, dealt with in the mass media, what could have led Freud, during a world war, to raise such bizarre claims, and moreover, his followers, even after World War II, the Holocaust and Hiroshima, to bemoan the modern »denial of death«? I would like to suggest that although Freud does employ the term »denial of death« in his 1915 article, and despite the interpretation of some commentators (cf. Dollimore 1998, p. 119), he does not actually state that death is generally denied or repressed by his contemporaries, although later simplifications of his work do make this assertion. In addition, I will attempt to show that the denial-of-death hypothesis has been part of the construction of death since the late nineteenth century, and endows death and its uses with ideological and explanatory power they would not otherwise have. The denial-of-death hypothesis is not, from this point of view, refuted by the

appearance of death in films; rather, both forms of discourse on death participate in its construction. We will begin with Freud's work from 1915.

II

The first part of Freud's article deals with the war and the disillusionment he sensed among his fellow Europeans, who were shocked to see their allegedly civilized compatriots deteriorate to such acts of murderous barbarity. Freud claims that this attitude is unjustified, not because the war is not as horrid as people think, but because even in times of peace civilized Europeans are not as noble as they believe themselves to be. Psychoanalysis has already shown »that the deepest essence of human nature consists of instinctual impulses […] which aim at the satisfaction of certain primal needs« (Freud 1915b, S. E., vol. 14, p. 281).[1] These impulses might be unfamiliar to the psychoanalytically-naïve observer because they have undergone reaction-formation and sublimation and so deceptively appear to have changed in their content. Civilized society continuously tightens its moral demands, and its obedient members are forced into an ever greater »estrangement from their instinctual disposition« (op. cit., p. 284). In light of these findings, there is no reason, claims Freud, to be disappointed by the atrocities being committed in the war: »[i]n reality our fellow-citizens have not sunk so low as we feared, because they had never risen so high as we believed« (op. cit., p. 285).

The second part of the 1915 article continues Freud's inquiry into the feelings of unease aroused by the war, this time in relation to death. This part, like the first, also unveils the ignobility lying at the depths of Freud's civilized contemporaries, and also uses the historical situation as an opportunity to prove some of the discoveries already made by psychoanalysis. Ostensibly, writes Freud, everyone is willing to admit that death is »natural, undeniable and unavoidable« (op. cit., p. 289). Not that this is always tactlessly declared: the civilized adult does display sensitivity when dealing with the death of others and »carefully avoid[s] speaking of such a possibility in the hearing of the person under sentence« (op. cit., p. 289). But to »carefully avoid speaking of« something hardly indicates that it is being denied. In fact, from his description of civilized man's behavior we could very well believe that the latter is rather obsessed with death, or at least with avoiding and managing it: he is deeply affected when death occurs; has developed a habit of stressing the fortuitous causation of specific deaths and thus attempts to reduce death to a contingent chance event; shows the utmost consideration for the dead; and completely collapses when death strikes down someone he loves (op. cit. p. 290) – all activities which require the conscious contemplation of mortality.

But deep down lurks true denial. Despite man's protestations, and as ground for his hopeless attempts to avoid death, Freud sets forth the claim »that at bottom no one believes in his own death, or, to put the same thing another way, that in the unconscious every one of us is convinced of his own immortality« (op. cit., p. 289). The unconscious, he says, is incapable in principle of knowing its own death and it

behaves as if it were immortal. So, although being consciously aware of the fact that we are all mortal, modern man cannot unconsciously believe that he will really die, and often acts as if he is immortal. When describing this conventional treatment of death it could thus be said that death is »denied« (*verleugnen*, not *verneinen*, op. cit., p. 291; cf. G. W., vol. 10, p. 344). A similar contrast between conscious and unconscious thoughts can also be found in relation to the death of others: man's conscious respect toward the deceased does not extend to the unconscious, where modern man does wish for the death of those he dislikes, as well as those he consciously believes only to love. Unlike his modern descendant, primaeval man probably had no qualms about living out these wishes, or about consciously believing he will never die. Only when he encountered the death of someone close to him, whom he loved, did he sense conflicting emotions and the possibility of his own death, which led him to invent the world of spirits as well as ethical commandments preventing murder (Freud refers to his recently published *Totem and Taboo*). This was the origin of modern man's »denial of death« (*die Verleugnung des Todes*, op. cit., p. 295; c. F. G. W., vol. 10, p. 348).

Freud suggests that the condition of war lays bare the primal man in each of us: it »compels us once more to be heroes who cannot believe in their own death; it stamps strangers as enemies, whose death is to be brought about or desired; it tells us to disregard the death of those we love« (op. cit. p. 299). In short, Freud does not simply claim that modern man denies death, but rather that the unconscious denies its own death while wishing for the death of others. Civilized man, however, will not acknowledge this denial, he will not admit that he thinks he is, or acts as if he were, immortal, and keeps his denial of death »carefully suppressed« (*unterdrückt*, not *verdrängt;* op. cit., p. 299; cf. G. W., vol. 10, p. 354).

III

Freud's rather complicated argument did not fare well. In 1920 he published *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (*Jenseits des Lustprinzips*, cf. Freud 1920g) and introduced the concept of a death instinct (*Todestrieb*),[2] which would upstage his 1915 work, despite, or perhaps because of its notoriety among »orthodox« Freudians (see Boothby 1991, pp. 1-20; Baudrillard 1993, pp. 150-154; Dufresne 2000, pp. 13 ff). Even worse off was its fate with those who continued to deal with denials of death, while simplifying and corrupting Freud's ideas. For example, in 1941 Erich Fromm included a rather puzzling passage in his *Escape from Freedom* in which he claimed that his own era »simply denies death« and that »the individual is forced to repress it.« Death, according to Fromm, is »removed from sight,« but as is always the case with repression, it continues to live an illegitimate existence, and is »one source of the flatness of other experiences, and it explains […] the exorbitant amount of money this nation pays for its funerals« (Fromm 1941, pp. 245-246). Whereas for Freud the denial of death in »our own era« can only take place in the unconscious, only relates to one's own death, and is then

suppressed, Fromm contends that it is death en masse which is »simply« denied and that the individual is forced to repress death itself, not suppress its unconscious or primaeval denial. How an individual can belong to a nation which pays an »exorbitant amount of money« for its funerals and still manage not to be cognizant of death is not explained, but perhaps such are the wonders of repression.

Fromm was not the last to make such sweeping generalizations. In 1951, for example, while discussing representation of the afterlife in American cinema, French sociologist Roger Caillois contrasted the United States with Mexico, stating that death »dans aucun pays sans doute, ne tient aussi peu de place dans l'imagination collective qu'aux États-Unis, de même qu'il est peu de pays où elle en tienne plus qu'au Mexique« (Caillois 1951, p. 18). Unlike Fromm he does describe how the elaborate means used by American funeral parlors can help deny death by eliminating any impression of it, including their habit of embalming bodies and displaying them in a cheerful and luxurious décor. All this is done by professionals leaving most Americans free to never think or talk of death, as one advertising slogan of a funeral parlor implies: »Mourez, et nous nous chargeons du reste« (Caillois 1951, p. 20).

Perhaps most extreme was the research on death published by French historian Philippe Ariès. Though he does not mention Freud by name he does cursorily state that while »technically« admitting that we might die, »at heart we feel we are non-mortals« (Ariès 1983, p. 106), but develops this point no further. His novelty is, rather, the claim that death has a history in the West and that it changed radically at the end of the nineteenth century and during the first decades of the twentieth century. Medieval Western culture, he writes, was familiar with death, which, while not being welcomed, was expected, conducted according to well-known rituals, and banal. During the following centuries death was a public spectacle, sometimes even sought after and confounded with erotic themes. But in the twentieth century death was effaced, it became »shameful and forbidden« (Ariès 1985, p. 85), not allowed to interfere with the American pursuit of happiness. Even the location of dying shifted from the home, in the bosom of one's family, to the hospital under professional care (Ariès 1985, p. 87). Death, claims Ariès following English sociologist Geoffrey Gorer, has replaced sex as a taboo: »Formerly children were told that they were brought by the stork, but they were admitted to the great farewell scene about the bed of the dying person. Today they are initiated in their early years to the physiology of love but when they no longer see their grandfather and express astonishment, they are told that he is resting in a beautiful garden among the flowers.« (Ariès 1985, p. 93)

According to Ariès the almost complete suppression of death has in fact taken place in England, and would probably have also occurred in the United States had not the pursuit of happiness been overruled by a certain puritan conservatism and the pursuit of profit by »funeral directors« and »doctors of grief«. But, on the whole, according to Ariès, death was interdicted and hidden in the twentieth century.

IV

Was death truly effaced and, in the words of Erich Fromm, »removed from sight«? It seems a strange claim to make with the plethora of death images flooding visual media in the twentieth century. I would like to concentrate my discussion on early or so-called »primitive« moving pictures produced from the 1890s until the middle of the first decade of the twentieth century. This period not only marks the alleged shift perceived by Ariès from death-as-public-spectacle to death-as-forbidden-taboo, but is also characterized by extremely short and, as far as narrative is concerned, simple films, so that any display of death cannot be claimed to ensue from the story, or be justified by a previous cause or subsequent retribution. As Tom Gunning cogently demonstrated, this was mostly a cinema of attractions, designed to arouse astonishment; an exhibitionist cinema, »inciting visual curiosity, and supplying pleasure through an exciting spectacle – a unique event, whether fictional or documentary,[3] that is of interest in itself« (Gunning 1990, p. 58). If death does appear in a fifteen-second fin-de-siècle film it is not as part of the story, it *is* the story. Furthermore, cinema was a new medium, and although it certainly was not autonomous or disconnected from the culture in which and for which it was formed, it was not a priori bound to any specific tradition which it was expected to sustain or discontinue. If early cinema did latch on to a certain heritage of displaying death in the illustrated press or popular theater it would indicate that audiences of the time were (still) interested in viewing such spectacles, or at the very least that filmmakers believed them to be so inclined. If death did appear in this »pure« form, it could surely appear in later films and anywhere else.

I would like to suggest that at least two forms of early cinematic attractions were directly associated with death. The first, which is still extremely common in today's motion pictures, is a display of death spectacles, the death of others. The second form displays an agent of death, say a speeding train, acting on the camera/audience, i. e. it simulates the death (or possible/probable death) of the audience itself.

Examples of early spectacles of death include beheadings, whether historical, such as in *The Execution of Mary, Queen of Scots* (1895, Edison Manufacturing Company), or contemporary such as the reconstructed actuality film *Beheading a Chinese Prisoner* (1900, Lubin), not to mention, of course, the Grand Guignol classic guillotine executions, as in *Histoire d'un crime* (1901, Pathé Frères). Another popular method of destroying the living was explosion. Georges Méliès seemed to have a real penchant for making characters disappear by blowing them up (for example the moon creatures in *Voyage to the Moon*, 1902). In the multi-shot 1903 *Mary Jane's Mishap* (George Albert Smith) a sloppy housemaid decides to light the kitchen stove using paraffin. We see an explosion, she flies right up, and her body parts are then seen erupting from the chimney. In a later film, *That Fatal Sneeze* (1907, Hepworth Manufacturing Co.), a serial sneezer destroys shop windows, fences, a lamp post and a house door before finally sneezing himself to

death and disappearing in a cloud of smoke. In *Explosion of a Motor Car* (1900, Hepworth Manufacturing Co.) two couples are driving in a motor car which suddenly blows up. A policeman walks towards the scene, but then runs back as parts of their bodies begin to fall from the sky. The policeman calmly takes out a note pad, and notes down the limbs that he spots while organizing the assorted body fragments according to their presumable owners. But the simplest way of killing seems to have been shooting. The title of Edison Manufacturing Company's 1898 *Shooting Captured Insurgents* more or less says it all: four soldiers shoot to death four insurgents. Additional shooting victims can be found in *Attack on a China Mission* (1900, Williamsons Kinematograph Co. Ltd.), a recreation of the Boxer uprising in China and *Desperate Poaching Affray* (1903, Haggar and Sons) in which the poachers' pursuers are occasionally shot down. As none of the other pursuers stop to help those who have been shot it could be safely assumed that they end up dying. In the classic *The Great Train Robbery* (1903, Edison Manufacturing Company) a luggage handler is shot down trying to fight the robbers. One of the passengers held hostage tries to make a run for it, is shot, and is perhaps killed, although the other passengers rush to his aid as soon as the robbers release them. All four robbers are also shot, during or after pursuit on horseback. Not all early cinema victims, by the way, are human. The notorious *Electrocuting an Elephant*, (1903, Edison Manufacturing Company) does indeed show an elephant being electrocuted to death. Audiences at the time might have known, or were perhaps told by their projectionists that this was Topsy, a popular turn-of-the-century attraction at Coney Island's Luna Park, who had been living in captivity in the United States for twenty-eight years. After she had killed three men the Luna Park officials decided to execute her and commissioned the Edison Manufacturing Company to build the apparatus for her electrocution (cf. Cartwright 1995, p. 17).

The second form of death attraction shows a cause of death directed at the audience. For example, *How It Feels to be Run Over* (1900, Hepworth Manufacturing Co.) is a single-shot film which takes place on a road. It first shows a horse-driven carriage drive from the background to the foreground past the audience / camera to the right. As the dust clears we see a horseless carriage heading towards the audience / camera. Its three passengers are frantically waving at the audience / camera, probably trying to signal to them to move out of the way. But, alas, the camera remains still throughout the film and the audience / camera is run over. We then see a blank black screen, followed by white titles on a black background, which were perhaps etched on the negative: »??«, »!!!«, »!«, »Oh!«, »Mother«, »*will*«, »be«, »pleased«. A similar thrill, though with less humor, is offered to the viewers of *The Great Train Robbery*. The film was distributed with an additional shot, which could have been projected either before or after the rest of the film, and in which one of the robbers holds his gun and shoots the audience / camera point blank. *The Big Swallow* (1901?, Williamsons Kinematograph Co. Ltd.) is a three-shot film which offers both forms of death attractions and is a true puzzle for anyone trying to figure out early audience identification. The first shot

shows a gentleman reading who realizes he is being photographed. He approaches the audience / camera, talking frantically, until his head fills the frame. He then opens his mouth and swallows the audience / camera. In the second shot we see a camera fall into a black abyss, and then the camera man follow it and topple over. The third and final shot begins where the first shot ended. The gentleman walks back, closes his mouth and begins chewing as he increases his distance from the audience / camera (but who is filming this third shot?). He finally opens his mouth, smiling happily after having devoured the camera and its operator, an act we have witnessed from the victims' point of view.

Perhaps the most famous case of this second form of death attraction is the so-called »train effect«, i. e. »an anxious or panicky reaction to films of approaching vehicles« (Bottomore 1999, p. 177), such as *Arrivée d'un train en gare à La Ciotat* (1895, Lumière). The alarm of the audience was documented in news items, anecdotes and satirical cartoons and even dramatized in films such as *My First Visit to a Motion Picture Show* (1910, Kineto), *The Countryman and the Cinematograph* (1901, R. W. Paul) and *Uncle Josh at the Moving Picture Show* (1902, Edison). Perhaps the most famous account is Gorky's 1896 review of the Lumière films screened at a house of vice where women sold their kisses: »Suddenly something clicks, everything vanishes and a train appears on the screen. It speeds straight at you – watch out! It seems as though it will plunge into the darkness in which you sit, turning you into a ripped sack full of lacerated flesh and splintered bones, and crushing into dust and into broken fragments this hall and this building, so full of women, wine, music and vice.« (Gorky 1983, p. 408)

Gorky's panic was soon relieved as the locomotive noiselessly disappeared beyond the edge of the screen and he realized that it was only »a train of shadows«. As Stephen Bottomore shows, panic was in reality a rare response to the arrival-of-a-train films. One of the reasons for its being frequently reported was to gain more publicity for the new moving pictures, that is, projectionists at the time believed more people would pay to see the new invention at work if they believed it simulated their own death.

Both forms of death attractions should not surprise us if we rely on Freud's 1915 article. The first form satisfies our suppressed urge to see others die, whereas the second supports our unconscious belief that even if we are shot, swallowed, run over by a car or crushed by a train we will continue living because we cannot possibly die ourselves. All of these early films further support our unconscious belief in our own immortality because they deal with »unnatural« deaths, and so take part in modern man's attempts to reduce death to a contingent chance event instead of accept it as a necessary inevitability.

V

To recapitulate, we have seen that moving pictures, from the late nineteenth century and up to the present, have never been over bashful in displaying

spectacles of death. While it is possible to apply Freud's 1915 insights to explain these films, their existence apparently contradicts other psychoanalytic as well as historical and sociological research which purports that death was repressed during this period and became a secret, shameful, hidden subject not to be seen or even talked about. We could surmount this contradiction by claiming that one of the sides was wrong – perhaps the films were not taken seriously, maybe I have misinterpreted them, or perhaps by chance an unusually high proportion of films dealing with death survived, despite having really comprised only a negligible percentage of all the films made and screened at the period. Is it not possible that films in general were the exception in that period and that their jubilant display of death did not extend to other media? Or maybe films do not »reflect« reality but rather compensate for its lacks?[4] Alternatively, it might be that the historians, psychoanalysts and sociologists need to revise their work. Maybe twentieth-century death was not all that different from previous periods, perhaps the removal of the dying to hospitals and the new professional handling of the dead had no consequences on Western society, or maybe it did but these were misunderstood?[5]

I would like to suggest a different approach: that instead of trying (and mostly failing) to locate filmed death within historical/sociological/psychoanalytic writing, we could try to locate them both – films and scholarly writing – within a single discourse, a general construct of death since the late nineteenth century. The material dying and dead body might have been displaced and removed from sight and touch, in fact all the better for the representations of death if it has – they would then encounter less resistance from physical reality. But removal of the corpse does not entail removal of thoughts about death. Displays of death and the dead were, and still are, common; early cinema is just one example. The idea that death has been completely repressed should not and could not therefore be taken as an accurate description, but rather as an element in the construct of death, of its existence in scientific and lay popular discourse. I would like to claim that this discourse is composed of contradictory elements, without being any less prevalent because of its inherent incongruity. Finally, I will suggest – relying on a return to Freud – that this discourse has survived not despite but rather because of the contradiction and its ability to serve different needs and ideologies.

The first step will be to establish that the death spectacles we discovered in early cinema were not a deviation from late nineteenth-century popular visual culture, but were rather, if I might risk an oxymoron, a common peculiarity. For example, the Paris morgue, which was »[l]isted in practically every guidebook to the city […and] a 'part of every conscientious provincial's first visit to the capital,' […had] large crowds of as many as forty thousand on its 'big days' when the story of a crime circulated through the popular press and curious visitors lined the sidewalk waiting to file through the *salle d'exposition* to see the victim« (Schwartz 1994, p. 153). It was housed in a building erected in 1864 and was one of the city's major attractions not unlike the Eiffel Tower and the catacombs. Moreover, it was free. The morgue was closed to the public in 1907, but death did not disappear. It was

merely shown in a more mediated fashion, for example, through the press.

The illustrated press of the period, when not dealing with the murders whose victims were being displayed in the morgue, or with the enormous number of visitors to the morgue itself, was often stressing the physical and perceptual shocks of modern urban life. The newspapers focused on the new dangers of the technologized urban environment and printed a »plethora of images representing streams of injured pedestrians, piles of 'massacred innocents,' and perennially gleeful skeleton-figures personifying death« (Singer 1995, p. 79). In addition to the terrors of big-city traffic (motor cars, electric trolleys, trains), the press described in detail the deaths of workers mangled by factory machinery and the hazards of tenement life. Thus, even inhabitants of cities that could not boast of owning an attractive morgue were able to enjoy the sights of piquant deaths.

Photography was also a medium for visualizing death. For example, after the Civil War, there was a fad of taking pictures of Spiritualist »manifestations.« This was, according to Gunning (1995), either spirit photography (images of the dead which were not visible to those present when the photographic plate was exposed), or photographs of full manifestations (spirits or ectoplasm which were visible to those present). To be sure, the true significance of the spirits photographed was never clear – what were these forces which so resembled the deceased? – and furthermore the phenomena were often dampened by suspicion of fraud, but death, or the dead, could hardly be said to have been repressed. Photography's role in keeping death well within sight extended to other fields as well, such as photography of corpses, which is as old as photography itself (i. e. since 1839) and still exists today (Ruby 1995). This custom was especially popular in the case of dead children, who were often photographed in the arms of their living mother or another female relative, because no previous photographs of them had been taken and at a time when photographic portraiture was a popular and widespread practice this was considered a legitimate way to preserve the memory of life cut short (cf. Ruby 1995, pp. 159 and 178). We could add further examples, such as X-ray shows which exploited Wilhelm Konrad Röntgen's 1895 discovery and enabled members of the audience to view an image of their own skeleton, a traditional symbol of death (Christie 1994, pp. 114-118), or the cult surrounding *L'Inconnue de la Seine*, the plaster cast of a death mask of a beautiful young woman found in the Seine at the beginning of the twentieth century (or perhaps a fraud committed by a shrewd businessman – see Bronfen 1992, pp. 206 ff) but I believe these examples are enough to demonstrate that death was part of fin-desiècle popular visual culture. With television, films, computer games and the printed press it has surely not disappeared since. Death, or at the very least its visual representation, was not hidden but constructed as something which could and should be viewed. Many of the cases discussed above also demonstrate a tendency to confound death and life – was *L'Inconnue de la Seine* a girl who committed suicide or the living daughter of the manufacturer of the plaster casts? Was it one's living hand in the X-ray show, or a dead one? Was the child in the photograph asleep or dead?

VI

Scientific discourse in the second half of the nineteenth century was no less confusing. As W. R. Albury writes, for example, »in the 1860s and 1870s, the scene abounds in paradoxes.« (Albury 1993, p. 257). For example, the necessity of death was becoming less obvious following the thermodynamic mechanistic interpretation of the living body which was firmly established by the turn of the century. It enabled death to become a contingent occurrence rather than an organic necessity – after all, in principle, »a machine can be kept functioning indefinitely, given adequate maintenance« (Albury 1993, p. 265). Another cause for confusion was the discovery that putrefaction, the classic criterion of the death of the organism, results not from the privation of life, »but from its microscopic profusion« (Albury 1993, pp. 257-258). This discovery and its extension to the germ theory of disease soon led to the objective of killing the pathogenic micro-organisms so as to let the host live (Albury 1993, pp. 262-263). Is it death or is it life?

Another example is Charles Darwin's 1859 *The Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life*, in which he describes the continuous presence and activity of »natural selection« in nature. For Darwin, »natural selection« includes, or at least is concurrent with, death (Darwin 1983 [1859], p. 206), and is described as an agent of creation, improvement and perfection – the source of order and beauty in nature, and thus takes the part traditionally reserved for God (Shaw 1945). Life on earth was not created by an almighty deity; it was the result of natural selection, of death. The situation must have been confusing, as by 1891 August Weismann would reverse the claim that death is an agent of evolution and say that evolution is nothing less than the cause of death, that »there is a specific death mechanism designed by natural selection to eliminate the old and deteriorated members of a population« (quoted in Berry 1981, p. 60). It is not within the scope of this article to explain whether or how Weismann's claim might make sense, nor am I here offering an exhaustive analysis of the construct of death at the period. What we should note is that the Darwinian revolution entailed substantial and confusing ramifications for the construct of death, which was taking over the role of God as creator of life and was not clearly demarcated from it.

Both popular visual culture and scientific discourse were dealing with death. The result might have been a contradictory and confused concept, but it surely does not entail death's disappearance or its being repressed in the late nineteenth or anytime during the twentieth century. Despite the confusion surrounding death scientists did not despair, and if anything death was being constructed as an object to be scrutinized, not ignored: death and its immediate causes were still studied by those who accepted a mechanistic view of the body in the hope of eradicating mortality; models of extinction and »fitness« were formulated and tested by those wishing to discover the secrets of life's evolution; death was encouraged and efficiently brought about in cases where eugenic thought intersected with euthanasia or racist genocides.

Early cinema and, as we have already seen, some of the other media of turn-of-the-century visual culture, was also taking part in the contradictory construction of death. At least some of the early films dealt with death not by unproblematically displaying it but by destabilizing it. *Extraordinary Cab Accident* (1903, R. W. Paul), for example, shows a gentleman part from a lady companion, step down onto the road and get run over by a passing carriage. An enraged policeman follows the carriage, while a passerby runs to comfort the lady. The policeman soon returns with the guilty driver, but surprisingly the »dead« man gets up, grabs his hat and woman, and they both run off. *An Interesting Story* (1905, Williamsons Kinematograph Co. Ltd.) subscribes to a ludicrously extreme mechanistic conceptualization of the human body: it shows a man so caught up with the book he is reading that he accidentally gets run over and flattened by a steamroller. He is then re-inflated by two bicyclists who are luckily equipped with air pumps for their tires. The man shakes their hands, and walks off into the background, reading his book. Some ambiguities of death do not seem to have been intentional or shown to amuse. In *Daring Daylight Burglary* (1903, Sheffield Photo Company) a policeman is thrown off a roof after a struggle with the criminal. The policeman is then shown lying on the road and later being carried on a stretcher into an ambulance. As Jonathan Auerbach has discovered, the Biograph film catalogue assumed that the policeman was dead, whereas the Edison September 1903 catalogue describes him as »almost dead« (Auerbach 2000, p. 812) – the audience was free to wonder what exactly it was being shown.

These contradictory depictions surely helped construct death as an unclear and therefore interesting object of research. I would like to suggest that even the unambiguous displays of death might have served a similar purpose: film viewers were shown death, as they were shown muscular men boxing, beautiful women undressing or trains hurtling at traumatizing speeds. All were shown again and again, quickly and slowly, frozen and then accelerated, sometimes even projected in reverse (see Christie 1994), and in that very act constructed as attractions, as objects to be looked at. If we accept Althusser's ideology-as-practice could we not rephrase his »more or less« quote from Pascal: »Kneel down, move your lips in prayer and you will believe« (Althusser 1971, p. 168), as: »Sit down, set your eyes on the death, and you will be intrigued«? Science and mass entertainment were both guiding Victorians and their twentieth-century heirs to look at death and study it. Understood in this context, the claims that death was being denied only made it a more interesting object of scrutiny – we are seeing something that Freud and Ariès tell us is forbidden. Moreover we are seeing something which cannot be simply fathomed – we must not trust our conscious thoughts when we tell ourselves that we know we will die. We do not really know it, not in our unconscious. Death has joined the Freudian dictionary – it no longer signifies what we think it does, and is no longer signified the way we think it is. Just as psychoanalysis has shown cases where a flame is a phallus and the pharaohs are Freud (see Freud 1932a in S. E., vol. 22, p. 192; cf. also Dufresne 2000, p. 40), so too must death now be re-discovered: what do we really mean when we say »death«;

and when we mean »death«, what do we actually say? The denial-of-death hypotheses, the ambiguous attitude of science, the popular visual culture spectacles are all an imbrication that constructs death as that which needs to be interpreted, looked at again, studied and scrutinized. Were death simply accessible, were we suspected of thinking what we think we think when we think we think of death, there would be nothing to (psycho-)analyze (see Dufresne 2000, p. 187 n. 4). As in other cases, so too with dusty death, it is Freud who blazes the way.

VII

In 1915, as we have already seen, Freud claimed that modern man did not normally acknowledge his denial of death, and that his attitude to death, which could be revealed through psychoanalysis, became manifest in the world war. At the same time he was also dealing with a conundrum that had risen in psychoanalytic theory following his 1914 *On Narcissism: An Introduction* (*Zur Einführung des Narzißmus*; cf. Freud 1914c), which introduced the distinction between ego-libido and object-libido. Freud's own account, as it would later appear in his 1930 *Civilization and its Discontents* (*Das Unbehagen in der Kultur*), merits quoting at length: »The decisive step forward was the introduction of the concept of narcissism – that is to say, the discovery that the ego itself is cathected with libido, that the ego, indeed, is the libido's original home, and remains to some extent its headquarters. This narcissistic libido turns towards objects, and thus becomes object-libido; and it can change back into narcissistic libido once more. […] Since the ego-instincts, too, were libidinal, it seemed for a time inevitable that we should make libido coincide with instinctual energy in general, as C. G. Jung had already advocated earlier. Nevertheless, there still remained in me a kind of conviction, for which I was not as yet able to find reasons, that the instincts could not all be of the same kind. My next step was taken in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* […], when the compulsion to repeat and the conservative character of instinctual life first attracted my attention. Starting from speculations on the beginning of life and from biological parallels, I drew the conclusion that, besides the instinct to preserve living substance and to join it into ever larger units, there must exist another, contrary instinct seeking to dissolve those units and to bring them back to their primaeval, inorganic state. That is to say, as well as Eros there was an instinct of death.« (Freud 1914c, pp. 21: 118-119)

The compulsion to repeat actually appeared in print a year before *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* was published, in *The 'Uncanny'* (*Das Unheimliche*), in which Freud claimed that »it is possible to recognize the dominance in the unconscious mind of a 'compulsion to repeat' proceeding from the instinctual impulses and probably inherent in the very nature of the instincts – a compulsion powerful enough to overrule the pleasure principle […]« (Freud 1919h., p. 238). He felt no need to biologically ground this compulsion or to connect it to death in *The*

'Uncanny', although death and even the war were very much present in this essay, and Freud even mentioned that »[b]iology has not yet been able to decide whether death is the inevitable fate of every living being or whether it is only a regular but yet perhaps avoidable event in life« (op. cit.,p. 242) as an explanation for the fact that our attitude to death had not changed since the very earliest times. I believe that when Freud does finally announce the discovery of a new instinct (*Trieb*) its connection to death is at best expedient. But whatever its genealogy, once this drive towards death has been »discovered«, once a possibility of death as an eternal, indestructible principle, which cannot be dialectically reduced (cf. Baudrillard 1993, p. 145), is brought to mind, we could use it as inspiration for a possible way to avoid the ideological abuses of death.

Beyond the Pleasure Principle was published in 1920. Freud's attitude toward the war seemed to have change since 1915, as he now called it »[t]he terrible war« (Freud 1920g, p. 12) and realized that instead of preventing neurosis it had given rise to a great number of cases of traumatic neurosis. The dreams of these victims, alongside with a child's game, transference during analysis and the feeling that some people were experiencing the same unpleasurable fate over and over again, all seemed to Freud to justify the hypothesis of a compulsion to repeat. Substantially more difficult was Freud's attempt to relate this compulsion to the instincts and especially to the new instinct which he dubbed the death instinct (*Todestrieb*). He did not in 1920, and would not in 1930, have any proof that a death instinct exists, aside from »a kind of conviction« and a passionate love / hate relationship with (or at the very least toward) Jung. It is not therefore surprising that he begins the discussion of the new drive with a disclaimer: »What follows is speculation, often far-fetched speculation, which the reader will consider or dismiss according to his individual predilection. It is further an attempt to follow out an idea consistently, out of curiosity to see where it will lead.« (Freud 1920g, 24) But this seems to be just a rhetorical ruse, not uncommon in Freud's writing, as several pages later he appeared to be markedly more committed to his new instinct: »Let us now hark back for a moment ourselves and consider whether there is any basis at all for these speculations. Is it really the case that, apart from the sexual instincts, there are no instincts that do not seek to restore an earlier state of things [i. e. an inanimate state, death]? that there are none that aim at a state of things which has never yet been attained? I know of no certain example from the organic world that would contradict the characterization I have thus proposed.« (op. cit., p. 41; italics in original) It is therefore to biology that Freud turned to demonstrate his fallacious *ad ignorantiam* argument: it is correct because »I know of no certain example […] that would contradict«.

Let us follow this argument more closely. Freud soon limits his discussion to testing one corollary of the existence of the death instinct, viz. »that all living substance is bound to die from internal causes« (op. cit., p. 44), or in other words, that natural death exists. Weismann's division of living matter into soma, which does die, and germ-plasm, which does not, appears to Freud similar to his own division into Eros and death instincts. However, Weismann's theory that death is

the result of evolution and did not exist in the more primitive single-cell organisms would not do, for »if death is a late acquisition of organisms, then there can be no question of there having been death instincts from the very beginning of life on this earth« (Freud 1920g, p. 47). Freud is pleased to find that experiments testing Weismann's claim were inconclusive and sums up his argument: »Thus our expectation that biology would flatly contradict the recognition of death instincts has not been fulfilled. We are at liberty to continue concerning ourselves with their possibility, if we have other reasons for doing so. The striking similarity between Weismann's distinction of soma and germ-plasm and our separation of the death instincts from the life instincts persists and retains its significance.« (op. cit., p. 49) Or, in the terms we have used so far, Freud capitalized on the construct of death as both important, significant, worthy of study and badly defined and confusing. He therefore found the work initiated by Weismann significant enough to deal with, but also vague enough to completely turn on its head. His later claim »that the uncertainty of our speculation has been greatly increased by the necessity for borrowing from the science of biology« (op. cit., p. 60) could only make sense if Freud did indeed believe that the instinct existed and that biology would in the future confirm his assumptions. Otherwise, all Freud could have really claimed was that it was biology's generous uncertainty that was keeping his hypothesis temporarily alive before it returned to its more natural inanimate state.

Freud thus managed to maintain his beloved (and anti-Jungian) dualistic views and to manipulate biological discourse into giving its stamp of approval for the existence of a death instinct. This ambiguity-cum-importance of death might also explain why Freud chose to dub his new discovery the death instinct and not, say, the aggression instinct, the killing instinct, the suicidal instinct, the sadistic-masochistic instinct, or even the hate or indifference instinct, which would also have been a better contrast to Eros (the love instinct) and probably more appropriate to the account he had given of the death instinct. But perhaps accuracy was of little importance to Freud's works in this case. To repeat, he had absolutely no proof for the existence of the instinct which he invented. Albeit, this does not mean that it had no use for him, or that this fabrication might not be used as a defense against other, more pernicious, uses of death.

Indeed, Freud's exploitation of death to patch up his theory is exemplary of the uses of death in other fields of Western culture during the twentieth century. Returning to moving pictures, the primitive mode was on its way out during the first decade of the twentieth century, and soon narrative fictional films were the dominant product of the film industries. Death was thus no longer an isolated attraction but was enmeshed in a larger framework which bestowed certain meanings upon it. It was no longer just »Look! A beheading!/A car crash!/An electrocution!« Death was now signifying a certain ideology. It was the malicious capitalists who caused the innocent worker to hang himself and justify the revolution; it was the promiscuous lifestyle of the unruly woman that brought about her inevitable murder; it was to revenge the unjust death of his brother and validate the value of the family that he agreed once more to become sheriff. Death

had been given this ideological power by early films, other popular death entertainment and scientific discourse including the hypothesis that death is denied, i.e. that there is more to death than what we think, see, or think we see. Freud and narrative cinema have shown us how this excess of death could be used to fix a theory according to a dualistic bias, or to fix an ideological bias through a film narrative employing death.

But Freud's manipulation of death and fabrication of a death instinct could be used as more than just an example that unveils other uses of death. I would like to suggest that the fruits of Freud's industrious imagination could be mobilized to counter other manipulations of death. By embracing death as an eternal instinct or force, which tells us nothing about the subjects undergoing mortality, we also render death less meaningful. If death is necessary and universal, from the primordial single-cell organism up to Sigmund Freud himself, its appearance indicates no more than just death, it has nothing else to tell us, it has no excess meaning. It thus can no longer strut and fret in the service of an ideology precisely because it truly does signify nothing. Perhaps a promiscuous woman was murdered, but this now makes no statement on her lifestyle; perhaps his brother was killed, but this does not require that he now go on a murderous revenge spree. Were this a total, true, and final interpretation, these deaths would be unimportant, and no accountability would be demanded. But as a fiction, which unveils other fictions and offers an alternative (but not final) construct which interprets the same facts, Freud's death instinct might just lead us to seek other reactions to death which do not necessarily blame the victim or unleash murderous impulses on the victimizers and those somehow thought to be associated with them. Freud's fiction, but only if taken as such, might be used as a tool in rethinking death and violence and our accountability in these events.

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[1] Freud's formulation of the *Todestrieb* (»death instinct« in Strachey's translation), which is an impulse that is authentically self-destructive, would only appear five years later in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (Freud 1920g in S. E., vol. 18, pp. 1-64).

[2] Although many commentators justifiably claim that »drive« would be a more accurate translation of *Trieb*, the *Standard Edition*'s rendering is »instinct« and will be followed throughout this paper.
[3] Accordingly I will not be making the distinction between »real« and »fake« death, which did not seem to be of much interest to the spectators of primitive cinema, although we would probably consider it pertinent today.
[4] Geoffrey Gorer offered an explanation of this sort in his 1955 *The Pornography of Death* (rpt. in Gorer 1965, pp. 169-175). He did not, however, make clear why death did not just disappear from public life, why it *had* to be represented somehow, even in »pornography«.
[5] Clive Seale offers such an analysis (1998, pp. 52 ff), though he does not deal with mass media in this part of his research.

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