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Death as Disaster: Andy Warhol's Aesthetics of Catastrophe

Abstract: Dwelling on an interdisciplinary approach of contemporary visual representations of disaster, which incorporates the theoretical tools of visual culture, semiotics, sociology, psychology and psychoanalysis, this study focuses on the affects and effects of Andy Warhol's series *Death and Disaster* (1962-1963) within the larger framework of Western culture's approach to death, as well as of the deep social and political changes of the 1960s. Unlike the unilateral consensus of Warholian scholars who have often argued that Warhol's pop art was devoid of intention and that its repetitive visuals were merely supposed to replicate the all-encompassing consumerist feature of the '60s and to commodify art, this study argues that there is a lot of subversive intent in Warhol's obsessive representation of death and disaster. In addition, the present analysis also suggests that a so-called aesthetics of catastrophe can be identified, especially when the larger context of Warhol's primary sources and that of the general political and social turmoil of the '60s is considered. The issue of repetitive representation is also addressed in its ambivalent and ambiguous effect of gradually effacing, as well as enhancing the viewers' negative affects towards disaster and death. Departing from the contemporary Western frame of mind, which exiles death outside the boundaries of being and categorizes it simply as the ultimate disaster, the present analysis is interested in seeing how this rhetoric is articulated at the level of visual representation in Warhol's series *Death and Disaster*. Aside from a semiotic interpretation of the images, the study also considers the specific psychological and sociological variables that allow for the semiotic decoding to unfold correctly. Thus, the article argues that within the larger context of the 1960s American society, Warhol's series emerges as a subversive portrayal of political and social changes and their media coverage, of the public consumption of catastrophe and ultimately of the reification and obliteration of death in contemporary Western culture.

Keywords: *death; disaster; representation; repetition; contemporary American visual art; pop art.*

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Introduction

Semantically speaking, death and disaster share the kinship of loss. Whereas death is generally defined as the loss of one's life, either from natural or unnatural causes, disaster qualitatively and quantitatively exceeds the dimensions of mere loss. It engulfs not only the reality of death, but it also incorporates the semantic fields of chance, in its negative hypostasis of bad luck, accident, unpredictability, hazard, destruction. Moreover, it always implies the idea of a community, a large number of people, being affected by extraordinary loss. Despite the obvious semantic difference between death and disaster, there has been a considerable shift in defining death within Western culture over the past centuries. This has coincided with the transition from a theocratic society, one where God was at the center of the world and therefore responsible for human life and death, to humanism, a radically different doctrine that put Man at the center of the world and therefore made him responsible for his own well-being. The transition was slow and, at times, the two coexisted, with God and Man conveniently exchanging roles as Man's responsibilities proved sometimes overwhelming. The complicated issue of death was one of those instances. However, within the past centuries, humanism overlapped secularism, which obliterated the religious aspect completely and presented Man with complicated puzzles to solve. Again, death was one of them. The soul, another.

In 1973 American anthropologist Ernest Becker published *The Denial of Death*, a book that would revolutionize psychology, anthropology and the study of religion, as it argued that all human actions and development are triggered by one single, defining and overarching fear, the fear of death. To Becker, the essential human narcissism stands at the core of Man's existence in the world and also of his refusal to admit to his own mortality (Becker 2). Hence, the denial of death that characterizes Western culture. As a consequence, people become engaged in all sorts of immortality projects that allow them to live under the illusion that they serve greater purposes and take part in heroic destinies. Becker dwells on Freud's psychoanalysis to explain that human narcissism is responsible for making death an unconscious threat (Becker 35). This does not mean inexistent, but rather subversive, elusive, and thus, far more haunting. The human paradox, Becker argues, is being self-conscious of one's own animalic and therefore mortal condition (Becker 26). Becker's considerations on the anthropological and psychological implications of the terror of death represent the starting point for the present analysis, as they convincingly explain the dread

with which Western culture has pushed the reality of death beyond the boundaries of human existence. From a perfectly natural phenomenon to which all living creatures eventually succumbed, death gradually became a transcendental experience that was supposed to somehow ensure the continuity of human consciousness, whether it was called soul, spirit or self. Death was thus transferred from the realm of the natural to that of the cultural and a whole series of practices, rituals and representations started to develop and circulate in order to make this Medusa benign. By culturally appropriating the experience of death, people turned this brutal physical reality into a taboo. And thus, death became something that only happened to the others, something to be securely contemplated from a distance, something to be both dreaded and voluptuously scrutinized from afar. Safeguarded by a plethora of funeral practices and rituals, people could thus tolerate the reality of death, comfortably assuming the role of voracious spectators in the peep-show of other people's demise. And sometimes (many times) enjoying it.

In his 2015 *Homo Deus*, Harari calls these attitudes '*the last days of death*', claiming that 'in the twenty-first century humans are likely to make a serious bid for immortality' (Harari 24). Harari's thesis is that, having solved the essential challenges of mankind, famine, disease and war, Man is now on the brink of making an evolutionary leap that will allow him to address the issue of death. No longer captive to a transcendental logic that places death outside human reach, Homo Sapiens will eventually be replaced by Homo Deus, a God-like creature that will at least attempt to technically solve the issue of biological death. Organisms are already redefined as algorithms (Harari 96), which allows for a reconsideration of biological life and death. However, we are just getting there, so this leap is yet to come.

Death as spectacle

In being completely absorbed and enthralled with ourselves, we cannot concede that death will eventually and arbitrarily delete our presumed greatness. 'At heart, one doesn't feel that *he* will die, he only feels sorry for the man next to him', Becker argues (Becker 2), and, I would add, aside from feeling sorry, there is also a certain degree of voluptuousness doubled by well-camouflaged relief when one experiences another's death. If musing on one's own death is like staring at the sun (Yalom 9), unbearable, contemplating others' generates mixed feelings and emotions that are difficult to voice or accept. Yalom suggests that

watching death from a distance might actually alleviate the intense feelings of dread that one experiences at the prospects of their own (Yalom 6). The spectacle of death becomes one of those ways through which we paradoxically get rid of our own death-related anxieties. This implies distance, re-presentation, deconstruction and re-construction, affect and, of course, imagination. If narratives of death have been around ever since the dawn of history, reflecting a profoundly humane anxiety, images of death are relatively new. While Gilgamesh lamented upon the death of his dearest friend Enkidu some two thousand years before Christ, and death continued to remain a central theme in worldwide narratives, people proved to be far more reluctant to producing and consuming images of death. In part, this was perhaps due to the force of the visual image and the taboos surrounding the representation of death. For many centuries, Western visual culture cautiously approached the topic in somewhat standardized representations featuring still nature scenes, stylized skulls or neatly dying people, the conventional aesthetics of all securing a comfortable emotional distance from the dread of the actual physical reality. Thus, death was elegantly confined within the well-regulated boundaries of high art, where it could safely be contemplated from a distance by refined connoisseurs. Of course, for a more vivid experience, there was always the possibility of attending public executions, which were largely popular across Europe at the time. The spectacle of death was rather a matter of choice. It was the advent of photography and its marriage to the mass media that changed the game and made the spectacle of death widely accessible.

At the turn of the 20th century, an 1888-founded magazine decided that it would use photographs as a marketing strategy in order to increase its visibility, popularity and, implicitly, its subscriptions. In 1905, its newly appointed editor decided to publish 138 photos on 32 pages (Warren 1146), which proved to be an incredibly intuitive and clever move that catapulted membership and inaugurated a new era in the printed press. By 1908, the *National Geographic* had become the first publication to allow more than half of its pages be entirely covered by photographs. The appeal of photography proved irresistible. People were inescapably drawn to the image and, all of a sudden, images became the story. By mid-20th century, major national and international publications would compete for the best photo that would make their front pages. By then, all great editors had already understood the force of a good photograph and the impact it could have on the readers. Text became secondary. The story was the image.

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People all over the world were given instant insight and access to what was going on in places that they have never been to, nor have ever heard of. All of a sudden, the world became visible, accessible, possible. A spectacle to be consumed from the comfort of one's sofa.

As the media started to fiercely compete for people's attention, the images they threw in the game became more and more shocking. The traumas of mankind were laid bare on the front pages of worldwide printed press. War, riots, abuse, civil rights movements, police brutality, domestic violence, crime, all flooded the press in the form of addictively shocking images whose visual impact would gradually wear off people's sensitivity and common sense. Death and disaster became a gruesome form of entertainment. Jill Bennet gives a tentative explanation for this phenomenon in her 2005 book on affect and trauma in contemporary art, as she suggests that 'trauma itself is explained as beyond the scope of language and representation; hence, an imagery of trauma might not readily conform to the logic of representation' (Bennet 3). In other words, representing trauma is rather a matter of affect than intellect, which entails that contemplating images of trauma elicits an emotional response that, following a similar logic, cannot be subjected to rationalization. Regarding other people's pain from a distance becomes a matter of ethics, rather than logic or reason, as Sontag argues:

Photographs of an atrocity may give rise to opposing responses. A call for peace. A cry for revenge. Or simply the bemused awareness, continually restocked by photographic information, that terrible things happen. (Sontag 13)

How much is too much? Is there a moral outcome to watching the spectacle of death? Is there an implicit and immediate rejection of violence whilst watching images of violence? Is the spectacle of death and disaster making people more aware of the atrocities of war, abuse, crime, irresponsibility? And does it push them towards taking immediate action? Or, on the contrary, does it flatten people's revolt and disgust, eventually turning them indifferent to the suffering? This is what the following analysis of Andy Warhol's series *Death and Disaster* is meant to discuss, as this series turns out to be a powerful interrogation into the ethical and aesthetic implications of showcasing death and disaster as first-page bestsellers.

Warhol's Death and Disaster

'Being a spectator of calamities taking place in another country is a quintessential modern experience', Sontag wrote in her 1933 essay *Regarding the Pain of Others*, making specific reference to war having become a modern living-room experience (Sontag 18). In fact, being the casual spectator of catastrophe and disaster has come to define the contemporary visual experience, as all the media thrive on imagery that would constantly maintain if not escalate the shock effect. The natural consequence is that people have become less and less responsive to shock. That is, indifferent. There is a great amount of research that investigates the effects of visual trauma on people's affect. In other words, how images deemed to be violating the representational taboos by either exacerbating the horror of the reality that is represented or simply by representing realities that are not to be looked at influence people's emotional response. According to Kass, Harland and Donnelly (141), there are two opposing arguments that stand out: on the one hand, a large number of studies suggest that the repetitive exposure to shocking visual stimuli entails a flattening of the initial emotional response to the point at which viewers eventually become indifferent to horror. Along the same line of thought, horror movies fans are actually engaged in an individual process of appeasing their own death-related anxiety by regularly exposing themselves to specific visual imagery. Much like an upside-down version of the Ludovico's technique that Burgess so ingeniously devised in his *Clockwork Orange*. On the other hand, there are researchers who claim that the repetitive visual shock will, on the contrary, entail a reaction of revolt against the horror, the violence, the abuse. And that, at times, viewers might even take significant action in the opposite direction. In both cases, one must not overlook the constructed character of the image. Photography, be it documentary or not, visual reports, films, all are human constructs designed to elicit a certain type of response from the part of the viewers. Often times, the expected response is commodified. It is then difficult, especially in the case of documentary imagery, to remember that reality does not equal its representation and that it is important to maintain the necessary affective distance from that representation. It is precisely in this gray area that Warhol's *Death and Disaster* series introduces its culturally subversive commentaries.

By the beginning of the 1960s, Andy Warhol was already a brand. Synonymous with pop culture, consumerism, mass-production and the commodification of art, Warhol's irreverential contribution to the world of the

visual had by then become a point of reference. As the Western world was fundamentally changing, art had to follow. Unnervingly laconic, Warhol's comments on the nature of his art did nothing else but reinforce the allure of his carefully assembled character. However, the cultural context in which his artwork was produced may help elucidate the intent behind. Unlike an important number of Warholian scholars who argue in favor of the unintentionality behind his art (Blakinger 269), I strongly believe that the *Death and Disaster* series represents both a mirror and a subversive critique of the surrounding post-war America. Moreover, I hold that Warhol's series is far from merely passively replicating media imagery (Blakinger 269), but rather uses repetition and calque in order to challenge the substance, purpose and intent of the very source imagery it relies on.

Warhol inaugurated the series in 1962, focusing on media coverages of tragedies and disasters, and relying on repetition as the main mechanism of artistic representation. His obsession with death dated back to a childhood of poverty, poor health and Catholic fervor. Repetition was to be found in the supermarket visuals, where the same product would be neatly arranged on multiple shelves and, as the designer of the Coca Cola bottle and the Campbell's soup can, Warhol was well acquainted with supermarket imagery. With over 70 artworks, the *Death and Disaster* series also include the items that Warhol chose for his first international solo exhibition in 1964, at Galerie Ileana Sonnabend in Paris. Featured by Warhol himself as *Death in America*, the Paris exhibition offered a rather contradictory glimpse of American Pop Art. Far from the glitz and glam that most people associated with pop art, far from the banality, superficiality and uncomplicated mirroring of mass consumption, Warhol's silkscreen paintings revealed a darker side. *Tuna Fish Disaster*, *Race Riot*, *Orange Car Crash*, *Electric Chair*, *129 Die in Jet!* replicated re-presentations of tragedies where violent death featured as central.

In an interview he gave in 1963 to Gene Swenson, Warhol admitted that the *Death and Disaster* series was prompted by a plane crash front page image which read 129 DIE (Warhol in Swenson, 1963) while he was working on the Marilyn Monroe diptych. Suddenly, he had the realization that everything around him was about death and that catastrophe had become commonplace. His series focuses thus on either disastrous events (plane crashes, collective poisoning, car accidents) or symbols of disaster (the electric chair, guns), manipulating their media coverage in order to hijack their meaning. By adding garish colors that are

obviously dissonant with the reality to be represented and by smudging the edges of the objects to be represented, Warhol brings in caricature and parody to introduce intense cultural comments. Moreover, the trademark repetition of the same image within the fixed contours of the same work targets people's emotional response to disturbing images. Although in the same interview, Warhol commented that 'when you see a gruesome picture over and over again, it really doesn't have any effect' (Warhol in Swenson, 1963), it is hard to believe that Warhol's intentions were as benign as effacing the visual shock effect of disaster. His public statements were often laconic and misleading, as he was consciously turning himself into a character. I would argue that the *Death and Disaster* series is more a caricature of the modern media and its voracious appetite for catastrophe than a caricature of death itself.

Looking at Warhol's works, it is impossible not to notice the complete depersonalization of the represented reality. Any form of life is being sucked out of these images which instead focus in on distorted carcasses, be they of cars, planes or tuna cans, magnifying them, multiplying them, highlighting them. The human factor is absent. The object depletes the subject, which, in itself is a triumph of death. But also a cunning reminder of empty consumerism, wild capitalism and contemporary instant gratification. For instance, several of the works included in the series depict car crashes (*Silver Car Crash Disaster*, *Orange Car Crash*, *Black and White Disaster*) in what resembles a cinematic style, featuring the wrecks of American automobiles as if to suggest the crash of the good old American Dream and of a whole era of prosperity right in front of the spectator. Others show scenes of riots and police brutality in the style of comic books, with the same scene being repeated several times in tinted frames ranging from redblood red to turquoise and grey. The faces are merely visible, with personal identities erased by gestures, actions, violence, prefiguring in many ways Kara Walker's racial comments in devising her black and white cardboard silhouettes. Social order is seen as collapsing in a cartoonish sketch of the American melting pot, where color overwrites color, where violence overwrites humanity. In the *Electric Chair*, machine supplements man in a gruesome commentary on ethics, morality, life and death. The work features an empty electric chair in an empty execution room, cables, straps and buckles laying around, a "SILENCE" sign barely visible on the top right corner of the image. The edges are smudged, the contours barely visible, the chair taking central position in a series of differently colored replicas of the same object. Symbol replaces object in what may be

interpreted as an acid commentary on power, human rights, the value of human life and death as spectacle.

Dehumanization accompanies death in Warhol's series, as objects supersede people and images replace persons. The *Death and Disaster* series is but a continuation of his celebrity silkscreens, which interrogate the authenticity of the superstar whose image is rendered through repetitive layers of colors and identical frames. Aesthetically speaking, the repetition is there to raise the question, to introduce the subversion, to scrape the shiny surface of the idol, to challenge. Whereas in the case of Warhol's celebrity silkscreens, what is being challenged is the disjunction between public image and private person, as well as the immense vulnerability that this generates, in the case of the *Death and Disaster* series, the stake is much higher, I would argue. Despite his own equivocal allegations of lack of intent and gratuitous representation, I believe his works point in a very critical manner to the entire post-war American society and climate. A chilling sense of disarray, a visual landscape of decomposition coupled with an eerie cartoonish style, an overall lack of humanity and meaning, all contribute to Warhol's aesthetics of disaster. Death is once again removed from the natural course of life and teamed up with disaster, borrowing its semantics and thus pairing up catastrophe.

Conclusions

Culturally speaking, Warhol's visual works are consistent with the general Western attitudes towards death. Designed to keep fears and anxieties at bay, the taboos surrounding death have ensured, over the centuries, that death falls nothing short of some sort of random disaster, that there is absolutely nothing natural in the demise of almighty humans. Continuing the complex religious and philosophical discourses of Homo Sapiens that, for millennia, placed death in the hands of an almighty God or any other superior entity, the contemporary Western attitudes towards death reflect the birth of what Yuval Noah Harari calls *Homo Deus* (Harari 53). Confronted with the responsibility of dealing with death on his own, the modern man has no choice but to lock away death in the realm of the imaginary, writing about it, mis(re)presenting it, showcasing it, while essentially denying its reality:

As long as people assumed that death is inevitable, they trained themselves from an early age to suppress the desire to live forever, or harnessed it in favour of

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substitute goals. [...] A large part of our artistic creativity, our political commitment and our religious piety is fueled by the fear of death. (Harari 33)

Along the same line of thought, Warhol's *Death and Disaster* series can be looked at as just another instance of what Becker called *the denial of death* (Becker 11), looking away from nature's raw progression by overstating its catastrophic hypostases. As Harari puts it, 'modern science and modern culture [...] don't think of death as a metaphysical mystery, [...] rather, for modern people death is a technical problem that we can and should solve' (Harari 25). Disaster itself is seen as a 'failure that could have been prevented' (Harari 27). Consistently, I view Warhol's repeated stylization of catastrophe as both an ontological visual exercise in depleting death of its dread and a subversive cultural commentary on contemporary attitudes towards death. In other words, a form of containing his personal death-related fears and anxieties while mocking at them. In terms of visual representation, the trauma of death is reduced to a mere aesthetic concern, a visual artifice that replaces death with images of the wrecks of modern technological advances (the automobile, the electric chair, the tuna cans) that are distorted, repeated, garishly colored so that the genuine dread be obliterated.

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