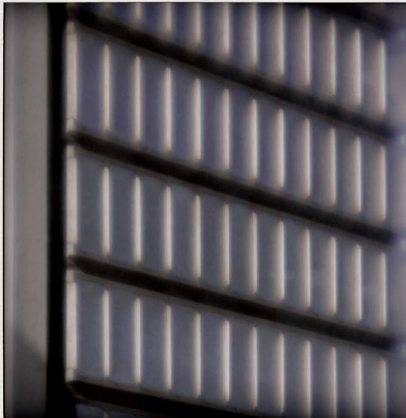# Critical Perspectives on the European Mediasphere

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Using Discourse Theory: A Discourse-Theoretical Exploration of the Articulation of Death

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1. Introduction

Death is one of the most pervasive phenomena of the social, and is sometimes (with a slight sense of drama) described as "the only certainty in life". This pervasiveness seems to privilege more realist and materialist approaches, leaving little room for the constructivist and idealist approaches. Obviously, the bodily condition labelled death has a materialist dimension; it is an event/process that exists and occurs independently from human will, thought and interpretation. We would, however, still like to argue here that death cannot constitute itself as an object of thought outside discourse. Although we should be careful not to reduce death to the way it is discursively interpreted, death still remains loaded with meaning, and we cannot detach it from the processes of social construction, and the contingency that lies behind it.

Death itself is a signifier that tries to capture human decay, and its meaning consists of a series of elements that are often taken for granted, such as end/cessation/termination, negativity, irreversibility, inescapability and undesirability. At the same time, closer scrutiny of these articulations shows the contingency of the discourse of death, with almost every discursive element opening up a range of gaps, complexities and unfixities. In order to unravel the meanings of the articulation of the discourse on death, and to show some of its complexities, we will use discourse theory (and mainly Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) variation) as the theoretical backbone of our analysis, which is firmly rooted in a secular position. This analysis will also allow us to illustrate (part of) the workings of discourse-theoretical analysis (or DTA – see Carpentier & De Cleen, 2007) in the development of a secondary theoretical framework, which

can be used, together with discourse theory itself (as primary theoretical framework), for a variety of analysis, including the study of media texts (Van Brussel, 2011).

2. A DISCOURSE-THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK TO ANALYSE DEATH

In order to analyse the construction of death and dying, a discourse-theoretical framework is used. More specifically, the discourse theory of Laclau and Mouffe is deployed, as their theoretical model is focused on identity construction, societal discursive struggles and the dynamics of fixity and fluidity. It should immediately be emphasised that our use of this theoretical framework does not imply an ambition to explain the entire complexity of the dying process. A discourse-theoretical approach does not, for example, offer a framework to study the psychological and sociological aspects of the – often disruptive – human awareness that every living being is going to die (Bauman, 1992). Nor is such an approach appropriate to analysing the socio-economic aspects and implications of death and dying. But a discourse-theoretical framework does seem to be well suited for analysing the construction of death.

In Laclau and Mouffe's (1985, 1990) work, we find a clear acknowledgement of the materialist dimension of social reality, which is combined with the position that discourses are necessary to generate meaning for the material. In their discourse theory, the focus on meaning and discourse is legitimised by asserting that, although a "*stone exists independently of any system of social relation … it is, for instance, either a projectile or an object of aesthetic contemplation only within a specific discursive configuration*" (Laclau and Mouffe, 1990: 101).

For Laclau and Mouffe, meanings and identities are constructed through the process of articulation, which involves linking up discursive elements around a number of privileged signifiers, which they call nodal points. These nodal points temporally construct and stabilise discourses, or, in the words of Torfing (1999: 88-89), they "*sustain the identity of a certain discourse by constructing a knot of definite meanings.*" But once again, we need to emphasise that the identities of these actions, practices and formations are constructed in a *non-idealist* way (Glynos and Howarth, 2007: 109). Very often, critics accuse Laclau and Mouffe of invoking a "*shamefaced idealism*" (Geras, 1987: 65). Yet the radical constructivism of Laclau and Mouffe is both realist and materialist. First, it is realist in the sense that it acknowledges a world of existence, external to thought and

independently of any system of social relations. Second, the radical constructivism of Laclau and Mouffe is materialist since it puts into question the symmetry between the "realist object" and the "object of thought". In this way, an idealist reduction of the distance between thought and object is prevented. Briefly, a non-idealist constructivism presupposes the "*incompleteness of both the given world and the subject that undertakes the construction of the object*" (Torfing, 1999: 45-48).

It remains important to stress that Laclau and Mouffe's approach to discourse oscillates between fixity and unfixity. They reject a relativist position towards discourse where meaning is completely free-floating, but also emphasise discursive contingency. In their discourse theory, it is the concept of struggle that mediates between both positions, as discourses are seen as not (always) stable and sedimented entities, but often engaged in struggle, attempting to attain a hegemonic position. Hegemonic formations are the outcome of practices attempting to create new forms of social orders from a variety of dispersed elements that are articulated into so-called chains of equivalence (Howarth & Stavrakakis, 2000: 14; Howarth, 1998: 279). According to Laclau and Mouffe (1985: 135-136), hegemony implies that antagonistic practices link elements in so-called chains of equivalence. They claim, "*in other words, that hegemony should emerge in a field crisscrossed by antagonisms and therefore suppose phenomena of equivalence and frontier effects. But, conversely, not every antagonism supposes hegemonic practices.*" In order to point to hegemonic formations that transcend the contingency of discursive formations, the concept of the social imaginary is introduced. This concept refers to the myth in which the fullness of the surface of inscription continues to dominate (Torfing, 1999: 305). Successful hegemonic projects, then, establish new social orders (Howarth, 1998: 279), in which other possible meanings are forgotten. This involves a "non-recognition" of the precarious character of any positivity, of the impossibility of any ultimate saturation. Due to the infinitude of the field of discursivity and the inability of discourse to permanently fix meaning, however, discourses will always be liable to disintegration and re-articulation. As a result, no hegemonic formation can be total, since there is always resistance and the threat of re-articulation. Taking all this into account, then, hegemony can be defined as "t*he expansion of the discourse, or set of discourses, into a dominant horizon of social orientation and action*" (Torfing, 1999: 101).

3. DEFINING DEATH

From a discourse-theoretical perspective, death, like any other discourse, requires its meaning to be fixed. Although the openness of the social prevents this fixation from being total, the discourse of death gains its meaning through (a set of) specific meanings that are discursively constructed through the logics of articulation. Arguably, death is negatively articulated with signifiers like life and existence through inversing them ("life's end" – "ceasing to exist"), as Luper's (2009: 41-48) discussion shows. Another variation can be found in Feldman's (1992; 2000) so-called termination thesis, which obviously articulates death with termination (of life). Although Žižek (2006: 194 – emphasis in original) takes an original approach to death by articulating it as "*the condition of possibility of what is human,*" death still gains its meaning in the juxtaposition of life (and being human). Through this negative articulation, death, in its almost pure negativity, needs life and existence as its constitutive outside.

But the articulation of the discourse of death does not stop here, as the signifiers of life and existence are themselves articulated with the human body, personality and/or consciousness. Focusing on the more organismic component, Bernat, Culver and Gert (1981: 390 – our emphasis), for instance, define death as "*the permanent 'cessation' of functioning of the organism as a whole. We do not mean the whole organism, for example, the sum of its tissue and organ parts, but rather the complex interaction of its organ subsystems.*" A series of other definitions focuses more on personality and/or consciousness, where it is suggested "*that a human person may die before his or her body*" (Steineck, 2003: 239). Pallis' (1982: 1488) influential definition does include a reference to consciousness when he defines death as "*the irreversible loss of the capacity for consciousness and of the capacity to breathe.*" Others, like Veatch (1975) with his definition of death as the irreversible cessation of the capacity for consciousness, move away from the organismic definition towards what DeGrazia (2005: 123) calls a psychological definition of death.

The articulation of the discourse of death with the end/cessation/termination of life signifiers –whether this is seen as the functioning of the "*organism as a whole*" or "*the irreversible loss of that which is considered to be essentially significant to the nature of man*" (Bernat, 2006: 35) – opens up new questions that show the contingency of the discourse of death. Paradoxically, death can only be thought of from within life, by the living. In this sense, the discourse of death is always contaminated by its discur-

sive outside, by life and existence, as thinking death from within death is an ontological impossibility. Death is therefore always conceptualised in "living" terms. By referring to death as a *place*, for instance, or by using metaphors as sleeping and resting, death is always thought of as a deviant form of life. As a discourse, death is thus unavoidably contradictory. Moreover, the articulation of death with end/cessation/termination raises the issue of the meaning of the concept of the end. One debate here is whether death-as-an-end should be articulated as a process or an event. While Morison (1971), for instance, argues in favour of articulating death as a process, Bernat, Culver and Gert (1981: 389) defend the death-as-an-event articulation, when they say that "*death should be viewed not as a process but as the event that separates the process of dying from the process of disintegration.*" Articulating death as an event, but also seeing death as a process, then raises new questions about its exact moment, for ontological, but also medical, political and legal reasons. Clearly, death itself does not communicate about its occurrence, and the difficulties of discursively fixing the exact moment of death have led to a long struggle amongst scientists and legislators. For instance, the steep decrease in body temperature, the absence of a heartbeat and breathing, the lack of activity in the whole brain and the lack of brain stem (or higher brain) activity have all been used to define (or construct) the moment of death (Bernat, 2006: 37-40). Moreover, there are also alternative, counter-hegemonic ways to define the moment of death. Religious discourses, such as Christian discourses, for example, emphasise the importance of the moment that the soul leaves the body. Other approaches have focused more on the lack of clear and absolute criteria, arguing that death's "essence" may be "obscure" and resistant to adequate definition (Chiong, 2005).

The articulation of the discourse of death based on life and existence as its constitutive outside, as pure negativity, is not exclusive, as death also gains its meaning through other signifiers. One cluster of signifiers is related to time. Death is articulated as irreversible and inescapable. A considerable number of the aforementioned definitions articulate death as permanent and irreversible. In his distinction between a formal/universal definition and a material/particular definition, Bartlett (1995: 270) emphasises irreversibility as a key defining component: "*The formal requirement is the same for every definition and, that is, irreversibility. This is true simply as a matter of language. It is how we speakers of English have come to use the word 'death'.*" This irreversibility opens up the discursive repertoires of timelessness and eternity, where death becomes seen as endless, in contrast to the life that has ended. Nevertheless, there are symbolic

ways that remain open to overcome this apparent irreversibility, but they are all situated at the level of the social, and provide routes which are obviously not accessible to the dead themselves, only to the living. First, there is the logic of remembrance, which allows the dead to live on in the memories of the living, sometimes assisted by material components such as statues, street names and graves, but also by a multitude of narrations (Azaryaku, 1996; Jones, 2003; Wojtkowiak & Venbrux, 2010: 19). Statements such as 'he is dead, but his work continues' illustrate how remembrance functions as an immortality strategy (Bauman, 1992). Second, there is the logic of procreation, where the passing on of genetic material (strengthened by the notion of resemblance) is seen as a way to overcome the irreversibility of mortality (Bauman, 1992: 29) and, according to Plato, underlines the desire for immortality (Chadwick, 1987: 13; Sandford, 2010).

Simultaneously, irreversibility itself is sometimes articulated as unstable and changeable. A soft variant of this changeability is the reference to new medical developments. For instance, Lizza (2005: 55) suggests "*that the meaning of 'irreversibility' in the definition of death, just like all other terms, is not timelessly fixed [...] but changes with our understanding of new realistic possibilities.*" In more radical variations of this position, arguments of freezing, suspension, revival and restoration are used to question the articulation of death as irreversible. Similarly radical variations of this survival fantasy can be found in religions that are based on the notion of the after-life, where in some cases the after-life is even privileged over life itself, inversing the hegemonic dominance of life over death (Ma'sumian, 1995).

The second (and related) time-based component that gives death meaning is its necessity and inescapability. Complicated by the notion of a premature, sudden and untimely death, death is seen as something that all human beings must face at some time, rendering unavoidability a core defining element, only softened by survival fantasies. From a medical perspective, this inescapability is grounded in the definition of (many types of) human cells as 'mortal', in the sense that they accumulate damage and cannot proliferate endlessly (Harley, 2001). This logic positions ageing within the discourse of death in a specific way. This specificity is, for instance, expressed by de Beauvoir's (1985: 105 – emphasis in original) writing about the death of her mother: "*You do not die from being born, nor from having lived, nor from old age. You die from* something." Slightly more down to earth, but still similar, is Luper's (2009: 41) explanation:

"Aging sets the stage for death, but is not itself a form of death." But symbolically, ageing, with its increased likelihood of the actual occurrence of death, still acts as a permanent reminder of human mortality and approaching death. Although there is no necessary relation, old age, with its bodily changes that fall outside the beauty myth, is often articulated as the preamble of the bodily disintegration that death encompasses.

Human frailty, especially in old age, but also earlier on in life, brings with it the articulation of death as a permanent, ever-present threat. Freud labelled the fear this threat triggers thanatophobia, but at the same time he saw it as a disguise for a set of deeper concerns, because *"at bottom nobody believes in his own death, or to put the same thing in a different way, in the unconscious every one of us is convinced of his own immortality"* (Freud, 1953: 304–305). A serious challenge to Freud's interpretation of thanatophobia came from Becker (1973), who labelled it people's most profound source of concern. Also from a Lacanian perspective, Žižek (2006: 77) emphasises the fear of death, which has as its *"real basis […] the fear of the loss of the father's love and, by extension, the absolute negativity experienced at the loss of the Other's love that would result from the destruction of the symbolic order."*

One final articulation of death is its undesirability. Within the logic of the binary opposition, life is privileged over death, especially (but not exclusively) in Western cultures. Life is considered ultimately precious, protected by a variety of social, ethical and legal frameworks, and as a concept it enjoys the advantages of normalisation. This makes death a regrettable and tragic interruption of life. The dying process is met with sorrow and mourning, and a wide variety of ritualised practices are initiated to allow the social environment of the deceased to come to terms with their loss. Of course, some ways of dying are considered more undesirable than others, which brings in the distinction between the good death and the bad death. Despite the addition of the label of 'good' and the explicit prioritisation of some form of dying over others, both the good death and the bad death remain undesired for in the hegemonic discourse of death.[1]

This hegemonic articulation generates problems for those who do not desire life, and for those who act upon this desire. Suicide is, for this reason, still seen as a separate category, a blatant violation of the social

1   However, the contemporary focus on dignity in defining a good death (see further) articulates a "dignified" death as more desirable than an "undignified" existence, statements as "He died too late" illustrating this.

norm and thus pushed outside the realm of the ordinary death, with its violent nature being emphasised. In some languages (like Dutch or German, for instance), the signifier 'self-homicide' (*zelfmoord* or *Selbstmord*) is frequently used. Because of its being a violation of the social norm which is often considered an unnatural opposition against the natural desire for survival, suicide is met with incomprehensibility (and sometimes even more intense reactions, such as prosecution), which in turn confirms the social norm. In addition, other forms of dying that result from an explicit human intervention, like euthanasia, have been the object of fierce societal and political struggles, and euthanasia itself is only has only been legalised in a limited number of Western countries. Again, the idea that death is desired for is met with considerable resistance (see, for instance, Gormally, 2000: 284-285). Arguably, the only exception is the field of martyrdom, heroism and self-sacrifice, where the societal context provides an interpretative framework that encourages the desirability of the undesirable.

This discussion shows not only the contingency of the signifier death but also the impossibility of signifying death (see, for instance, Smith, 2006). While discourses are very necessary to provide meaning to the social (including death), the discursive is simultaneously confronted with a structural lack when symbolising that very same social. Arguably, death is one of the areas where the impossibility of a discourse fully symbolising the Real becomes abundantly apparent. In (the Lacanian strand of) discourse theory, the Real is seen always to resist its representation. In Laclau's (2000: 70) words, we have to take the "*autonomisation of the signifier*" into account. Death, as part of the Real, escapes representation, as Chiong (2005) argued (using a different vocabulary). At the same time we desperately try to capture it, and we attempt to provide it with meaning. But in order to comprehend and capture death, we have nothing but discourse at our disposal, a tool whose failure is an inherent part of the practice of representation itself.

Although the discourse of death, based on signifiers like end/cessation/termination, negativity, irreversibility, inescapability, and undesirability with life and existence as its constitutive outside, can be considered hegemonic, we should be careful not to fix these articulations completely, thus ignoring contingency. For instance, the fantasy of survival, still present despite intense processes of secularisation, poses a continuous and disruptive challenge to this hegemonic chain. More genealogical (and Foucauldian) approaches to the articulation of death, involving a

historical account of the discursive changes caused by the impact of the medical field, and more political approaches, showing the struggles over the meaning of (the good) death (Van Brussel & Carpentier, in press), would show even more contingency, but these are beyond the scope of this article.

4. Conclusion

At first sight, death seems to be a straightforward concept with which we are all familiar. Moreover, death has the appearance of being ultimately material, even if it has to be termed a "negative materiality" (Schleifer, 1990: 16). In contrast, the use of a constructivist, discourse-theoretical approach is much less straightforward, and in some cases might even be considered unrealistic or disrespectful. But from a discourse-theoretical perspective, death plays too significant a role within the social to be excluded from discourse theory's analytical gaze. Its proximity to life, its ultimate materiality and the temptation to apply essentialist frameworks make it a very challenging but also very necessary topic for a discourse-theoretical analysis.

Not surprisingly, the outcome of such a discourse-theoretical analysis is paradoxical. In order for humans to make sense of death, like any other area of the social, we need to construct it, whilst at the same time death's constructed nature remains hidden, as it is covered by a veil of being taken for granted and normalisation. Through discourse we bring death within the realm of culture and through this process we somehow domesticate death, despite the terror it still often evokes. But death also shows us the limits of the sense-making process. We desperately need discourse to generate meaning, to produce the cultural and the social, but at the same time the material always escapes us. The symbolic is bound to fail in capturing the Real, however much the symbolic beholds the promise of perfect comprehensibility. Analysing the construction of death, as part of the Real, shows how difficult it is for the symbolic to capture the Real. Thinking death produces insoluble complexities and contradictions, which show that the discourse of death is bound to fail in its representation of the materiality of death. At the same time, we cannot not think death. This compels us to remain very human in our use of discourse, dealing with all its (and our) imperfections.

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