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By Tom McCarthy

Tom McCarthy on Necropia.com

Ever read the Egyptian Book of the Dead? Not many people have. This is a pity: it's full of funky, garish beasts strutting and pouting à la Jagger as they hiss lines such as: "The sky is wrapped around the stars, magic is wrapped around the sky, and my mouth is closed on the magic which is in it. My teeth are a knife, my horns are like a mountain of snakes." It has inspired such modern masterpieces as Norman Mailer's *Ancient Evenings* and William Burroughs's *The Western Lands*. Above all, it is, as far as I can make out, the world's first software system. Developed and updated by whole teams of programmers and coders (there was nothing Baudelairean about Egyptian scribes: they sat in rows in Microsoft-like corporations, learning and applying cipher sequences), it consists of more than a hundred spells, each one of which facilitates a function in the underworld, such as the procurement of food or the opening of a door. The hardware onto which these spells were loaded was, of course, the mummified body of the deceased: scrolls - or rather a selection of them, as few people could afford each spell - were tucked inside the coffin, and thereafter it was hoped that the protocols, passwords and anti-virus shields (the underworld's hazards included disintegration and the theft by wily crocodiles of the dead man's magic powers) these contained would auto-run when necessary and thus maintain the paradoxical state of being alive-in-death, of living out one's own annihilation.

In the early 1990s, cryogenics was the medium of choice for those hoping to melvin the Reaper. In the late 1990s, it's the Internet. Even before Timothy Leary's 'online death', Extropians were fervently saving their memories to disk in the hope that these could be downloaded onto fresher flesh fifty years down the line, thus ensuring the continuation of their own identity beyond its host's demise. It's no coincidence that some of the Net's more imaginative theorists have pictured it as a giant graveyard. Hakim Bey presents it as 'a psychic slum', 'haunted' by UFOs, Heaven's Gate ascended masters and prisoners in Texas doing data-entry as slave labour (those Egyptian scribes again), by 'predatory avatars' (those crocodiles), disinformationists and advertisers.

For us 'sane' Europeans, too, death and the Net are inextricable, were always going to be so, even when we didn't detect the slightest whiff of morbidity in our subject matter. The main points of reference in technothory and net criticism are Deleuze (the rhizomatic structure of the Web, its thrusts and clinamens and BWO-like proliferations) and Marx (the way the medium impacts, reproduces or subverts non-virtual power relations). Behind Deleuze is Nietzsche; behind Marx, Hegel - and death is absolutely central to the thought of both philosophers.

Firstly, Nietzsche: the death he announced was the first death, the über-death: the death of God. As Simon Critchley points out in his excellent *Very Little... Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy and Literature*, philosophical modernity has been little more than a thinking through of this death, "not only the death of the God of the Judaeo-Christian tradition, but also the death of all those ideals, norms, principles, rules, ends and values that are set above humanity in order to provide human beings with a meaning to life." As Heidegger (who cited death as the precondition of temporality) noted, Nietzsche's work marks the collapse of the supersensory world into the sensory world, into its mechanics. True, Platonic presences become POPs.

Secondly, Hegel. Hegel's strange and beautiful schema by which knowledge and comprehension come to institute themselves, to 'occur', turns on a process of negation and surpassing which Hegel likens to death. Things must disappear as things in order to appear symbolically. To name and understand a flower, I must take the living, photosynthesising reality away from it, cause it to be absent - cast it in a state of ideal absence. As Mallarmé puts it: "Je dis un fleur, et le fleur est parti" - I say 'a flower', and the flower is cut/split/gone. Hegel writes that "Adam's first act, which made him master of the animals, was to give them names, that is, he annihilated them as existing creatures." Kojève, Hegel's most celebrated exegete after Marx, unequivocally proclaims this process murder. Maurice Blanchot, Hegel's most poetic exegete, calls death "the advent of truth in the world": "In speech," he writes in "Literature and the Right to Death", "what dies is what gives life to speech; speech is the life of that death, it is 'the life that endures death and maintains itself in it". If death is so fulcral in the realm of common, spoken language, how much more so is it in the virtual world, whose VRML zones enact quite literally the replacement of objects and people by avatars, whose IRC lounges and coffee rooms make users present to each other through a mediation of their very absence, their remoteness at a keyboard at the far end of a networked line?

Ah! To each other! Death isn't just a solipsistic thang. Death makes us present to each other. It is the condition of our mutual experience online, our rapprochement, our communion. For Levinas, common experience of death brings about hypostasis, an event that, as Critchley puts it in his study, "will culminate in the establishment of the ethical relation as the basis of sociality." In Shakespeare's tragedies communities are founded on a shared, and often guilty, knowledge of the murder of another: the eponymous emperor in Julius Caesar, Duncan in MacBeth - but what I'm proposing is more radical: that communities, and online communities par excellence, exist because all participants have entered into death, death is the condition of our participation. To paraphrase Emily Dickinson: we may not have stopped for it, but it's sure as hell stopped for us, flung its doors open, taken us along for the ride. We are all necronauts.

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