The Celebration of Death in Contemporary Culture

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Introduction

The Paradoxes of Death

This book investigates the cult of death, a distinctive way of engaging with death that crystallized in Western culture in the late 1980s and the 1990s. Three decades ago, Halloween did not rival Christmas around the world; dark tourism was not a rapidly growing industry; death studies were not part of the school curriculum; funerals were incomparably more traditional and uniform; and Santa Muerte, “Saint Death,” was a marginal observance, not an international cult. In those days, “corpse chic” and “skull style” did not represent mainstream fashion; Gothic, horror, torture porn, and slasher movies were not conventional entertainment; and vampires, zombies, cannibals, and serial killers did not appeal broadly to audiences of all ages.

I argue that the cult of death reinvents death as entertainment and results from a disillusionment with humanity that renders monsters attractive. The cult of death signifies a rejection of the idea of human exceptionalism and is grounded in a long-standing tradition of the critique of humanism. These philosophical ideas penetrated popular culture, lost their critical potential, and were transformed into commodities. The cult of death says more about attitudes toward human beings than it does about attitudes toward death.

Although an impressive body of research has addressed many aspects of the fixation on death, violence, and the undead, we do not have a convincing explanation of the mounting demand for images of violent death and the dramatic changes in death-related practices. And this is not surprising,
since we can hardly explain concrete manifestations of the cult of death without considering them as aspects of a single cultural movement. The main goal of this book is to document, for the first time, the scale and novelty of this cultural movement and to provide an explanation of the specific cultural and historical conditions that triggered the general acceptance of the cult of death.

The extraordinary appeal of death is not limited to the Western world; this is definitely a global phenomenon. My book, however, confines itself to the Western tradition, with an emphasis on American and Russian cultures. My main sources for this book are Anglo-American and Russian fiction, movies, and TV series featuring violent death and idealized nonhuman monsters (*Twilight Saga, The Vampire Diaries, True Blood, Night Watch*, and the Harry Potter series, to name just a few) that I analyze in the context of sociological and anthropological data to explain recent changes in death-related practices. By comparing the American and Russian ways of celebrating the cult of death, this book reveals its common features and variations.

**Unspeakable Death**

Why indeed, in this time of unparalleled longevity in the West, do we observe the dramatic changes in death-related rituals and practices and an obsessive fascination with death? Why, when our personal encounters with the dead are exceptionally rare compared to previous epochs, are grim reapers and skulls a favorite clothing design for all ages, from newborns to adults? Why do vampires, zombies, and undead monsters enjoy such exceptional popularity? Why has watching movies or reading novels portraying violent death become part of our daily routine?

Since the end of the second millennium, we have been living longer than any previous generation. Medical technology and research are advancing rapidly enough to add a whole year to our lives every half a decade. In the United States, average life expectancy grew from almost seventy-seven years in 2000 to almost seventy-nine years in 2013; in the European Union it had broken the eighty-year mark by the 2000s and has increased by about ten years in the last half a century. But even in less prosperous countries such as Russia, people can expect to live to the age of almost seventy years. The quality of life of the elderly in the West has noticeably improved too, extending active life well into the later years.
To appreciate fully the significance of these numbers, the reader needs to be reminded that a century ago (before the First World War), life expectancy in the United States, Europe, and Russia did not extend beyond the age of forty to forty-nine. Yet compared to the previous demographic regime, even that lifespan was a real achievement. Prior to the eighteenth century, the average age at death in Europe was around thirty to thirty-five. Almost every fourth child died during his or her first year, and only half of all children would survive to marriageable age. It was not until the nineteenth century that a new demographic pattern made possible by the agrarian and industrial revolutions and progress in medicine and science radically reduced child mortality and laid the groundwork for contemporary improvements in longevity.

The successful advancement of life against death, which has made death much less visible in everyday life, ought presumably to have diminished the fear of death. But the mounting anxiety about, and avoidance of, any mention of death-related experience in social interactions remains typical for our contemporaries on both sides of Atlantic.

One of the first attempts to view death denial from a historical and sociological perspective was undertaken by Geoffrey Gorer. In his 1955 essay “The Pornography of Death,” Gorer argued that death had replaced sex in contemporary society as the great “unmentionable.” He contrasted this attitude to death with its perception by the Victorians in nineteenth-century England, for whom death was a domestic affair.

In 1974, Ernest Becker’s book with the telling title The Denial of Death (1973) won the Pulitzer Prize. In that study, Becker argued that death denial is an important survival mechanism in that it helps us withstand the terror of death. He believed that the development of culture and civilization were human strategies to minimize the fear of death. His analysis drew attention to death denial as an important feature of his time.

In The Hour of Our Death, published in 1977, Philippe Ariès also described the radical change in attitudes to death in the twentieth century as a denial of death. Ariès, who studied attitudes to death in Western society from the medieval period to the 1970s, stated that mass society has revolted against death, denying its very existence. Unlike previous epochs, when rituals and rites surrounding death were a habitual part of everyday routine—which, according to Ariès, helped “tame death”—modern society tries to silence it. As a result, death becomes “untamed” and therefore much more frightening than ever before:
“The old attitude, in which death was both familiar and near, evoking no great fear or awe, offers too marked a contrast to ours, where death is so frightful that we dare not utter its name.”

Ariès ends his book by asking if death can be tamed again in the West. He does not, however, seem to hold out much hope that it can. And today, the answer would be resolutely negative.

Demographers and anthropologists agree that since the second half of the twentieth century, Western society, including both the United States and Russia, “shies away” from death. In America, despite some attempts to animate public discussions of death in the 1960s, death is perceived as, and often called, an “unfamiliar,” “unnatural,” and even “foreign” event:

Death as such has been described as a taboo topic for us, and we engage in very little abstract or philosophical discussion of death. Public discussion is generally limited to the social consequences of capital punishment or euthanasia. ( . . . ) Americans are characteristically unwilling to talk openly about the process of dying itself; and they are prone to avoid telling a dying person that he is dying.

International students planning to study at US universities are warned that in this culture, death is an inappropriate subject for conversation. Even a short brochure on cultural orientation takes the time to address the American unwillingness to speak of death: “Americans are notorious for having an especially strained attitude toward the reality of death, often avoiding the whole topic or treating it as if it were something that should not be talked about in polite company.” The taboo on speaking about death has impacted studies of American death rituals to the point that “not only is the general population distanced from the dead, but scholarly knowledge about death rites in the United States and Canada is scant.”

The denial of death and the unwillingness to admit its inevitability is well reflected in recent surveys: American adults, including those aged seventy-five and older, say they have given either no thought or little serious thought to how their lives might end. Doctors and other practitioners who have to deal with attitudes to death in the United States on a daily basis share this view: “For many Americans, modern medical advances have made death seem more like an option than an obligation. ( . . . ) [O]ur culture has come to view death as a medical failure rather than life’s natural conclusion.” Death comes to be seen “not as a natural and inevitable aspect of life, but a preventable evil like polio or measles.” This extreme
“medicalization” of death equates death to a disease that was not treated correctly or in a timely manner. The presumption that humans would live forever were it not for illnesses is well-documented in death certificates, which do not give old age as a possible cause of death. The process of dying “as a shared set of social exchanges between dying individual and those who care for them” is considered unrecognized in contemporary society. The silence surrounding death is translated into the solitude of the dying.

The idealization of youth is clearly one of the tactics of the “death-denial obsession” in America and globally:

“Our cultural obsession with youth can be understood as a huge, collective death-denial obsession. Individuals not only hide the deaths of their relatives in nursing homes and hospitals but they also obscure their own mortality, their own aging process, with hair dyes and face lifts.”

Denial of death is so profound that it is sometimes regarded as a unique feature of American culture. As cross-cultural studies have shown, however, the inclination to disregard death as an inevitable part of human existence is common in the West: “[P]eople in the West, and many of those in other countries who are now becoming industrialized, are attempting to ignore death.”

Contemporary Russia is no exception to this rule: there too, people avoid discussing death, which is considered an uncomfortable topic. Sociologists have observed that it is not customary to talk about death there or even to say the word. Referring to a recent death, Russians use euphemisms similar to those prevalent in the United States: the deceased has “passed away” or simply “left us.” Speaking of the deceased as “dead” or referring to “the body” is unthinkable in the presence of relatives. Death denial is also considered part of the doctor’s professional ethics. “Devoted relatives” are supposed to prevaricate to the very end, the prevailing idea being that lying is better than acknowledging that the dying person has a terminal illness:

Death is consigned to oblivion. Asking about the time of one’s own death is not customary. Doctors inform only the relatives of a terminal diagnosis, and the dying person, while suspecting that the comforting words of the medical personnel are not a true account of his or her condition, still prefers to find solace in those lies since “hope dies last.” ( . . . ) Death is almost completely expelled from the everyday life of Russians.
Even adult children are not supposed to discuss mortality or anything related to the death of their parents: mentioning a will or discussing the parents’ preferred death rituals is considered heartless. Often, this prevailing attitude discourages people from making a will, which ordinary Russians tend not to do anyway.

The tendency to silence death in Russia is even more striking than it is in the United States, since recent Russian history, especially in the first half of the twentieth century, might have been expected to make reflections on, and public discourse about, death a major preoccupation. The First World War, the Red Terror, the Civil War, the Great Purges, collectivization, and the Second World War had devastated the country. According to available estimates, twenty-seven million people died in the Second World War, and around ten million perished during the political repressions only two generations ago. Even today, young adult and child mortality is higher in Russia than it is in any Western country. Life expectancy there is almost ten years less than in the West, and the issue of mortality reduction became a subject of lengthy and heated political debate in the 1990s. Yet in contemporary Russia, death has no more of a voice than it does in the United States.

Death as Entertainment

Expelled from social life on both sides of Atlantic and silenced in mundane conversations, death has instead found its way into fiction and movies. It triumphs in virtual reality; it appears on screen in its most violent forms; its terrifying descriptions haunt readers. This apparent paradox—anxiety about death leading to death denial and a fascination with violent death—has repeatedly drawn the attention of scholars, especially with respect to American culture. “[M]any Americans express a great deal of death anxiety. On the other hand, many Americans also have an obsessive fascination with death, dying and the dead. (…) Nowhere is this paradox more apparent than in our popular culture. Television programs, movies, songs, the print media, games, jokes, and even recreational activities are fraught with thanatological content,” says Keith Durkin in his study of the representations of death in popular culture.

The same could be certainly said about Russians: the allure of movies featuring violent death is not at all exclusive to Americans. “Moreover, there can be no doubt that this phenomenal appeal is not limited to audi-
ences in the Western world, but is universal. The attraction of supervio-
lent entertainment is evident cross-culturally,” Dolf Zillman affirms. An
escalating fascination with death is a hallmark of the past decade: “Though
death has been around since the beginning of humankind, in recent years a
near fascination with death has evolved,” conclude Michael R. Leming and
George E. Dickinson. The desire to view the agonies of fictional death
represents a peculiarity of contemporary popular culture. From the late
1970s, “thanatological entertainment”—representations of death as a wide-
spread source of amusement—has become a “prominent and integral part
of contemporary popular culture.” In the media, violent death established
itself in the 1980s and 1990s as something to be avidly witnessed. At the
beginning of this new trend, the frequent appearance of death in the news
was noticed and explained away as a reflection of the tragic reality of life. By
the 1990s, however, there remained little doubt that the trend had acquired
a dynamic of its own, given that the occurrence of violence in prime-time
programs on American TV was far more frequent than in real life. This
tendency continued, and by the mid-1990s the rapidly growing numbers
of cartoons and movies featuring violent death and attacks on humans was
puzzling observers. Critics commented on the growing incidence of vio-
lent death in the media: “Sadistic maiming and killing are on the rise.”
By the 2000s, death-related content had acquired such prominence on televi-
sion that researchers were speaking of death as a public spectacle. Now
commodified, death entered the entertainment mainstream.

The 1990s saw a Gothic renaissance and the explosion of the horror
genre. But by the 2000s, the horror genre alone was no longer horrific
enough to deliver the desirable dose of agonizing deaths. “Torture porn,”
BDSM, and “slasher” movies featuring extreme violence began to separate
themselves from the horror genre. By the mid-2000s, torture porn and
slashers had invaded genres other than horror, generating a great deal of
tension over the past decade. Critics point out that films of this kind
are fixated on “extreme graphic violence. Scenes that dwell on the victim’s
fear and explicitly portray the attack and its aftermath are the central focus
of slasher films.” The rapid expansion of Gothic motives has also contrib-
uted to this tendency. Although researchers may disagree as to the exact
time when violence took over the entertainment industry, no one disputes
that media and fiction are much more bloodthirsty today than they ever
used to be: “Comparing modern horror films with their classic counter-
parts, or contemporary gangster movies with the originals of the 1930s, it
is clear that screen violence has become much more graphic and spectacu-
lar.” The significant increase in torture and violence in fiction since the 1990s surprises scholars: “[G]ratuitous violence seems to be so much on the rise that one could even speak of escalation.”

This escalation of violence was especially apparent in young adult literature (YAL). Back in the 1990s, the reactions of several intellectuals, journalists, and academics on both the right and left of the political spectrum betrayed astonishment regarding the extent to which YAL has violated what was previously considered appropriate for children. A New York Times Magazine reviewer fretted in 1998:

Somewhere in America tonight, in a delicious rite of childhood, a teen-ager will curl up in a window seat or overstuffed sofa to devour a young-adult novel . . . about murder, incest, rape or drug addiction. These are the subjects of a spate of recently published young-adult novels.

Nowadays, the state of the art in YAL is best reflected in the secrets of success that are being proposed to neophyte authors. Among “The 8 Habits of Highly Successful Young-Adult Fiction Authors,” high priority is given to the slogan “It’s Okay for YA To Get Dark.” The idea that “there’s nothing off-limits when it comes to YA fiction, which frequently dives into unsettling territory like death, drugs, and rape across all of its genres and styles” appears to be one area of common ground shared by those who labor in this field. “Pathologies that went undescribed in print 40 years ago, that were still only sparingly outlined a generation ago, are now spelled out in stomach-clenching detail,” says Meghan Cox Gurdon in an article that invigorated the debates on violence in YA literature in the 2010s.

Images of violent death, both real (in news reports, historical films, etc.) and imaginary, are a much-sought-after mass entertainment for audiences of all ages. And the obsession with violent death goes beyond the virtual world: the celebrity culture of serial killers and cannibals competes for popularity with a vampire subculture and communities known as “vampire churches.” The public debates on media violence, violence in young adult literature, the aestheticization of violence, the correlation between the escalation of violence in entertainment and violent behavior, and the related question of censorship occupy an important place in contemporary politics both in the United States and in Russia.

Three striking paradoxes are apparent. First, the anthropological and sociological data demonstrate that the denial of death is a salient feature
of present-day culture in both America and Russia. Yet the obsession with images of violent death contrasts with the taboo on mentioning death in everyday social interactions. Second, the fascination with death has taken over our society at a time when life expectancy is the highest in human history and continues to rise. Third, the political culture of Western democracy that protects individual rights and the value of human life would seem to stipulate a predominance of humanistic aesthetics. Instead, there is an extraordinary disconnect between the politics in a democratic society and an aesthetic that is fixated on violent death. What do these paradoxes tell us about our present cultural juncture? What are the reasons for our rising fascination with violent death?

**Violent Entertainment Explained**

Attempts to explain violence in entertainment have produced a significant body of research. Here I will limit myself to studies dealing with the reasons for the rise of violent entertainment in contemporary Western society, predominantly discussed in research on media violence and violence in YAL because the majority of novels and movies analyzed in this book target a young adult audience. Researchers are, understandably, concerned primarily with the potential sociopsychological impact of violent entertainment, which leads them to focus predominantly on “why we watch.” Scholars, who are usually mindful of the heated political debates on media violence and violence in YAL as well as of the related debates on censorship, split into two opposing camps on the impact of media violence, some holding that violent entertainment has positive effects and that its role is “therapeutic,” while others consider that exposure to both media violence and literary brutality is damaging to the individual psyche and apt to result in negative social effects.

The mainstream “therapeutic” explanation of the fascination with violent death in contemporary culture stems from the idea that we live in a death-denying society, in which representations of death in the media, movies, and fiction substitute for the absent experience of observing real death in our lives. The death-denying society makes us “crave some degree of information and insight concerning death, and we feed that craving through popular-culture depictions of death and dying.” Since Vicki Goldberg’s 1998 study “Death Takes a Holiday,” the idea that the spectacle of violent death substitutes for the actual experience of dealing with death in everyday life has become prevalent in media studies. According
to her, media representations of death, though “removed to some degree from actual experience,” “offer more and more realistic or exaggerated versions of how we die.” The internal contradiction of this position was less apparent in the late 1990s, when the upsurge of media and fiction violence was not yet as overwhelming as it has become over the past decade. Death is as displaced from the daily experience today as it was back in 1998, while the intensity of media violence continues to grow exponentially and to an unprecedented level. In addition, the escalation of violence in the entertainment cannot be explained as a substitute for “the absence of real experience of death and dying,” simply because a natural death is not usually accompanied by scenes of graphic carnage. In fact, as indicated above, death in the West increasingly takes place in the sterile setting of hospitals and hospices, and with greater palliative care than any previous generation could have imagined. How then can it follow that we are obsessed with images of a violent death accompanied by the most excruciating agonies?

Some argue that exposure to violent entertainment provokes compassion and hones its audience’s moral sensibilities. Hence, media horrors—war atrocities, murder, etc.—while presenting sufferings as entertainment, at the same time restrict voyeurism “in the name of respectability” and even support democracy. These claims are, obviously, highly controversial. In her book *Compassion Fatigue: How the Media Sell Disease, Famine, War, and Death*, Susan D. Moeller argues that on the contrary, the superficial and sensational American media coverage of atrocities tends to desensitize the audience. The quest for “excitement in an unexciting society” is another psychological reason invoked. But if the fascination with gore in movies and fiction were related to that factor, resurgence of the Gothic and the horror genre would have coincided with periods of peace throughout history, and that would be hard to demonstrate.

Targeted arguments have also been advanced to address the rise of violence in young adult literature. When YAL first conceptualized itself as a new genre in the 1970s, it contested the previously prevailing ideas of pedagogical theory, namely, that sadistic impulses should be tamed in children by education and culture. Roald Dahl, a major contributor to the invention of YAL, argued that the torments of suspense are more apt to cast “a narrative spell on readers” than would moralizing tales about “good little children”:

By creating suspense, the writer is simply playing upon the subconscious masochistic instincts of the reader. He is torturing him. And if the torture is expertly applied, the reader will cry out: ‘I can’t stand
it, not for another moment! Oh, isn’t it wonderful!’—and he will read on.\textsuperscript{49}

Dahl justified the use of the “macabre” in the interests of moral retribution, following a prevailing trend in YAL of the 1980s:

Children love to be spooked [. . .]. They like a touch of the macabre as long as it’s funny, too. [. . .] And my nastiness is never gratuitous. It’s retribution. Beastly people must be punished.\textsuperscript{50}

But one can hardly apply Dahl’s ideas of moral retribution to contemporary YAL. Therefore, another chain of arguments in defense of violence in YAL has tapped into the idea that children should face the truth about the world.\textsuperscript{51} YAL writers justify the abundance of naturalistic descriptions of violent death and other types of mayhem as “giving voice to tortured adolescents who would otherwise be voiceless. If a teen has been abused, the logic follows, reading about another teen in the same straits will be comforting.”\textsuperscript{52} But it could be argued that instead of showing victimized children a different world and other realities and values, violent YAL tends to confine them to a universe of the mind in which violence is inescapable.

The argument that violent entertainment can have therapeutic effects may actually carry ambiguous implications. Let us suppose that the spectacle of virtual violence is a remedy against real violence (although no available data show any direct observable correlation between violent entertainment and a drop in violent crime). Then we must ask why contemporary society needs this remedy, and why in ever larger doses? And what if the unprecedented escalation of violent entertainment is actually a symptom of a serious social malaise? The proponents of the “therapeutic” understanding of the role of violent entertainment argue that there is no reliable correlation between violent content and violent behavior.\textsuperscript{53} Several experts point out that while media content has become more ferocious over the past few decades, the incidence of violent crime, especially among young people, has decreased.

While real-life violence was a major cause of death for young adults in the United States in the early 1990s, it has declined in the 2000s. This might seem to argue in favor of the idea that increasing violence in the media may actually have served to reduce violence in the real world and that the consumption of violent content provides psychological relief and may help to prevent crime.\textsuperscript{54} Following this line of reasoning, thanatological content “socially neutralizes death” and is therefore legitimately entertain-
ing and enjoyable. Media death diminishes our “primordial terror.” Since media and fictional death is less frightening than real death, the argument goes, we readily indulge in it: “It appears that the thanatological themes in U.S. popular culture function as a mechanism that helps Americans to deal with death.” According to this view, violent entertainment can bring catharsis by offering liberation from pathogenic emotions or by producing emotions of excitement and pleasure in a viewer who is not exposed to any risks. The catharsis doctrine, formulated by Aristotle, is widely used to justify the lure of violent entertainment on the grounds that through it the audience acquires moral lessons and experience while witnessing the sufferings of protagonists confronted by tragic life circumstances. To apply this theory to torture porn or slasher flicks, however, may require a considerable stretch of the imagination: catharsis, after all, traditionally entails moral retribution that is not accentuated by these genres. The question remains, though: If fake violent death is offered as gratuitous pleasure, are the feelings experienced by those who empathize in any way with murderous monsters also fake? Or is the pleasure gained from viewing a fictional victim’s sufferings a real emotion?

Scholars who hold the view that the emotions produced by violent entertainment are unpleasant and potentially harmful to the psyche argue that media violence is a risk factor for violent behavior. They state that “research evidence has accumulated over the past half-century that exposure to violence on television, movies, and most recently in video games increases the risk of violent behavior on the viewer’s part just as growing up in an environment filled with real violence increases the risk of violent behavior”, that viewing violent death promote “macabre enjoyment in the misfortunes of others”, and that media may add to the spread of self-hatred and suicide.

While violence against others may be down in the US due to all kind of social factors, the statistics on suicide in fifteen- to forty-five-year-olds, who have inevitably had substantial exposure to media violence in the past decades, are less reassuring. The World Health Organization estimates that each year almost one million people die from suicide, which represents one death every 40 seconds. It is predicted that by 2020 the suicide rate will increase to one every twenty seconds. In 2012, suicide became the second leading cause of death in fifteen- to twenty-nine-year-olds globally. That rate is much higher in the developing countries than in the developed world, and no one argues that media violence is solely responsible for the rise in suicides worldwide. Yet it would be equally hard to prove that the boom in depressing media content has played no role whatsoever in this trend.
To conclude, as human beings have presumably been haunted in various ways by fear of death since the beginning of time, psychological explanations, despite their importance, have shown a limited capacity to address the escalating fascination with violent death, which is a concrete historical and cultural phenomenon. There is no reason to believe that modern man should feel any greater insecurity in the face of death than people did when, say, the bubonic plague was running rampant. And by definition, a constant psychological factor cannot explain historical change.

Some observers consider violence an immanent feature of pure art and just another form of self-expression. For them, the upsurge of violent entertainment is a natural manifestation of this particular aesthetic experience. Supporters of this idea trace their intellectual genealogy to *On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts*, by Thomas de Quincey, and to the antiheroes of classical literature and to the Gothic novel. According to this view, representations of violence craft a specific aesthetic understanding. Hence, an act of murder can be regarded as art and the murderer as an artist. What remains unanswered, then, is the question of why the unprecedented demand for this “aesthetic experience” has hit popular culture so hard in the past two or three decades.

Alongside psychological and aesthetic explanations, political explanations are often put forward as a reason for the growth of violent entertainment. Terrorism in general and September 11 in particular, as well as other political events that may provoke anxiety among the general public, are considered responsible for the interest in violent content. But this whole trend in entertainment dates back to the late 1970s and early 1980s, when terrorism was perceived as much less politically important in the United States than it is today. In addition, the fascination with death is truly international and cannot be explained by American political conjecture alone. Besides, it remains unclear why watching carnage and brutality should help in overcoming political anxiety and insecurity.

Other supposed causes of the rise of simulated violence over the past two decades include technological and economic factors. But however important the role that technology and the economy may play in the development of deadly entertainment, their advancement and commercialization alone cannot explain the choice of content. Even if the upward trajectory of Halloween spending were to correlate with economic growth (which it does not, as we will see in chapter 2), why would those who have contrived to recover some of their lost funds in the wake of a financial crisis opt to spend it on ghastly costumes and fake corpses?

Attempts to relate these recent tendencies in entertainment to the rise
of skepticism and secularization in Western culture are also less than satisfactory: skepticism and secularization date back at least to the eighteenth century and can hardly be regarded as a proximate cause of the recent cultural change. And finally, although the fascination with violent entertainment may bear some relationships to the rise of Wicca, this factor alone is also insufficient: violent entertainment is much more popular and influential than paganism.

However much one may agree that any or all of the factors discussed here could play a role in the rise of violent entertainment, none of them in particular, nor all of them taken together, satisfactorily explains why this obsession with violent death is taking place right here, right now. By failing to address the specificity of today’s cultural and historical conditions, they raise more questions than they answer.

Over the past three decades, violent entertainment was not the only topic discussed in relation to death. An immense body of scholarship focused on death as a real-life event explores attitudes toward death, dying, and bereavement, death-related rituals and practices in different cultures, the question of euthanasia, and the impact of contemporary advancements of medical research on the physical, cultural, and philosophical meaning of death. This proliferation of research can itself be interpreted as an indication of the powerful appeal of death in contemporary culture. Changes in funerals and other death-related rituals, in Halloween celebrations, in worship of “Saint Death,” the role of death in education, dark tourism, and the serial killer celebrity culture, as well as popularity of the dead—vampires, zombies, ghosts—have been intensively researched, and we will discuss some of the relevant findings in later chapters.

The Cult of Death

My approach differs from the studies discussed above in several respects. In this book, I consider the cult of death from a historical perspective, as a distinct cultural phenomenon emerging at a particular moment in time and under specific cultural, intellectual, and aesthetic conditions. A historical comparison with other epochs enables me to identify the specificity of the current situation. In my analysis, I seek to establish the concrete historical and cultural junctures of the past decades that laid the groundwork for the commodification of fictional violent death in popular culture and conditioned the current widespread acceptance of the cult of death.66

To locate the cult of death in history, it is crucial to clearly distinguish
it from traditional cults of the dead. Scholars who study death cults—from the veneration of ancestors in ancient Rome to the Mexican Day of the Dead—define them as a system of beliefs that unites the deceased and the living in a single community. A cult of the dead affirms the bond between the world of living descendants and the world of dead ancestors. Funeral and mourning rituals are intended to re-establish the harmony of a social entity that has been destroyed by the death of a member, as Robert Hertz was one of the first to demonstrate:

Thus, when a man dies, society loses in him much more than a unit; it is stricken in the very principle of its life, in the faith it has in itself. ( . . . ) It seems that the entire community feels itself lost, or at least directly threatened by the presence of antagonistic forces: the very basis of its existence is shaken.67

Reinforcing the sense of belonging to a larger social whole and reinstating the harmony of the social organism is a primary function of the cult of the dead. The contemporary cult of death is not relatable to remembrance of the dead or ancestor worship. It does not reinforce the cohesion of either real or imaginary society. Its true heroes are fictionalized monsters—vampires, zombies, and other representatives of the living dead—and not the dead relatives.

Although, as I argue, the contemporary cult of death has to do with the experience of horror and atrocities of the twentieth century, it is not related to the phenomenon of state-organized rituals of remembrance that prompted Pierre Nora to call our times “the era of commemoration.”68 Equally, it has no association with a “heroic death for the Fatherland” or various cults of national heroes, a central element of the political or civic “religions” that have proven so important to the nation-state and the ideology of nationalism.

As a popular culture movement, the cult of death has no articulated sacral or religious meaning, although worship of violent death or vampires as sacred beings can be regarded as one of its manifestations. While irrational mysticism plays an important role in contemporary culture, the cult of death also cannot be reduced to belief in magic69 and cannot be explained away by antireligious secularization of society. At present, it relies upon no rationalized dogma.

Attitudes toward real death as a personal, social, or existential event, whether rendered through the prism of media or not (clearly the province of death studies, anthropology, philosophy, and media studies), are of
lesser concern to me than the cultural and historical phenomenon that has emerged from the commodification of fictional death as entertainment.\textsuperscript{70} To interpret the cult of death as a distinct feature of current cultural conditions, I apply the concept of the culture industry and the theory of the commodification of cultural products developed by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, to the contemporary cultural situation.\textsuperscript{71} The commodification of ideas—the appropriation of philosophical ideas or works of art by the culture industry—denies their autonomy and entails mutation of their meaning.\textsuperscript{72} I am interested in investigating how the double rejection of humanism and the human exceptionalism, which originally emerged as a complex philosophical idea has been appropriated by popular culture and has triggered the cult of death.\textsuperscript{73} Through the concept of commodification, my approach reveals the linkages between fictional world and life and the way their intersection has given rise to a new cultural movement. I consider the cult of death that redefines our understanding of humanism and humanity in the secular value system\textsuperscript{74} in the context of the changing attitudes about the place of humans in the spectrum of species. The commodification of violent death as entertainment symbolizes popular culture’s rejection of human exceptionalism. A focus on attitudes toward human exceptionalism is critical to my analysis of contemporary cultural production, in both movies and fiction.\textsuperscript{75}

The cult of death manifests itself in a constellation of changes in popular culture alongside the changes in social practices: burial rituals, holidays, cults, language, education, and commercial ventures. I interpret those social and cultural facts through an analysis of the profound shift in the representations of the human being. Changes in the attitudes toward humans reflected in popular fiction and movies help us understand the meaning and the nature of changes in these social practices.

Yet violence per se and the complex relations between death and sex that have been much scrutinized since Freud and Gorer will not be part of my research: I believe that the shift we are observing today has much more to do with a redefinition of the attitudes toward human beings vis-à-vis other species, which cannot be reduced to just another vicissitude of the sexual revolution.

Like several other contemporary cultural trends, the cult of death does not fit in terms of existing political antagonisms, and it corresponds to no political divide. Despite persistent attempts to appropriate some meanings related to the cult of death—the left’s claims that the images of violent death, monsters, or apocalypse expresses “revolutionary protest” against capitalist exploitation, gender, racial inequality, and American imperial-
ism, or the conservatives’ declarations that the “death culture” is a result of a centuries-long “leftist conspiracy against Christianity and traditional American values”—its manifestations transcend political divides and its meaning sidesteps the rifts of the culture wars. Primarily a cultural and a historical phenomenon, the cult of death must be analyzed in its own terms if it is to receive the serious attention it undoubtedly deserves.

Gothic Aesthetic

To explain the cult of death I rely on several concepts I have developed in my previous research. In this section, I will briefly introduce the concept of Gothic Aesthetic and explain why I prefer to use it instead of the more familiar notions of the Gothic and horror genre.

Until now, the horror genre has been something of a metaphorical concept. Studies of the horror genre stress that it has Gothic elements, “escapes categorization,” and evades any conclusive attempt to explain the reasons behind the growing interest in its multiple manifestations. Due to this broad definition, the horror genre has been held to cover diverse texts from blood-and-gore thrillers to vampire sagas, from mystical spine-chillers to dystopian fantasy. In addition, over the past decade, the horror genre has exploded and diversified wildly.

As for the Gothic genre, scholars trace it back to the Gothic novel, which evokes images of gloomy ruins, death, and destruction and focuses on darkness and the horrors of the underworld. Researchers accentuate the role played in its formation by an interest in monstrous and supernatural forces, the desire to look at the dark side of the human psyche, and a protest against rationality. Among countless attempts to define the Gothic genre, and especially to establish the difference between it and horror, David Punter emphasizes that unlike the classical Gothic novel, the contemporary Gothic has acquired new meanings. These narratives feature worlds “infested with psychic and social decay,” where “violence, rapes and breakdown are the key motifs” and “the crucial tone is one of desensitized acquiescence in the horror of obsession and prevalent insanity.” Punter accentuates the blurring of horror and the Gothic in contemporary culture and emphasizes the problems of distinguishing between the two. In his later works, Punter goes on to consider indeterminacy of meaning as a characteristic feature of the Gothic. Fred Botting, another scholar of the Gothic, adds to the roster of the genre’s features “tortuous, fragmented narratives,” mysterious villains, and the castle or old house as the setting. He holds that the Gothic spreads like a dis-
ease, implying that it is able to “infect” other genres.\textsuperscript{85} The fusion of the Gothic and horror over the past decade has been a constant complaint of the critics. In fact, it has become almost impossible to distinguish horror from Gothic, prompting Luis Gross, for example, to speak of fear—which one would consider a feature of horror by default—as the essential feature of the contemporary Gothic.\textsuperscript{86} In this broad interpretation, both Gothic and horror are all-embracing concepts that are of little help in understanding the works that are important for my analysis.

The genre concept itself has a significant restriction relative to my purposes: it has a strong formal and technical aspect that limits its application in the context of a study whose primary interest lies in the interconnection between intellectual ideas, aesthetic principles, and social practices.\textsuperscript{87} I think that the notion of an aesthetic trend offers a better opportunity to relate particular features of fiction or cinematographic works to the historical and ideological context from which they have grown, on the one hand, and the social practices and popular culture phenomena they have informed, on the other.

I therefore propose the concept of Gothic Aesthetic, which allows us to single out those cultural products that are relevant for an understanding of the cult of death but are usually categorized as part of the Gothic and horror genres. Gothic Aesthetic manifests itself in fiction and movies through a combination of two features. First, the prime selling point and principal goal of those literary texts and visual arts products is to convey the experience of nightmare to its audience. Since the turn of the millennium, nightmare has become a highly desirable state for millions of readers, viewers, and gamers. The imitation of nightmare determines the framework of the respective narratives, their artistic devices, and their plots.\textsuperscript{88} Second, the undead—a vampire, zombie, or their ilk—performs as the novel’s or movie’s first-person narrator and/or main protagonist, with whom the audience is expected to identify and who represents an unassailable aesthetic ideal. Undead monsters were ideally positioned to take over from human characters because they are the perfect protagonists for a manmade nightmare.\textsuperscript{89}

Unlike Gothic or horror, Gothic Aesthetic does not form an all-inclusive category. However horrifying a bloody thriller or mystical spine-tingler might be and however savage cyberpunk might become, if the protagonists and narrators of those texts are not murderous monsters and if their actions in the plot are not conditioned by the aim of immersing the audience into a nightmare trance, they are no part of Gothic Aesthetic.

The monster-centered narratives of Gothic Aesthetic can be seen as part of a larger questioning—if not outright rejection—of the idea of
human exceptionalism. The vampire is a perfect symbol of those new attitudes toward human characters. When these imaginary monsters not only kill human beings but also consume them as food, that act becomes a radical expression of disenchantment with humanity as an ultimate value. The act of murder alone is apparently deemed insufficient to articulate the denial of the unique value of human life: humans are to be degraded to the level of animals in the act of consumption, and this is the most important message of Gothic Aesthetic. Gothic Aesthetic conveys those nightmarish emotions to its audience, rejects the relevance of human life, and promotes the cult of death.

Dark mysticism is the only ontology that Gothic Aesthetic allows, which makes irrationality its other important feature. The present-day vampires or zombies are not servants of the devil, nor are they sinners condemned by God for making deals with the devil, nor are they mortals whose corpses were buried contrary to Christian custom, as was the case with their literary and cinematic predecessors. Gothic Aesthetic is equally hostile to rationalism and religion, since it postulates that the origins of evil cannot be known or explained, least of all in terms of Christianity. The literary devils of Christian mythology that are so plentiful in all of Western literature and whose nature is fully explained by Christian dogma are of no concern to Gothic Aesthetic. They embody the temptations that torment the human protagonists, as in the case of Goethe’s Mephistopheles and Dr. Faustus, and contribute nothing whatsoever to the idealization of nonhuman monsters.

While monsters have no religious explanation, they are also not the result of scientific experiment: the science fiction agenda is not even applicable to works impacted by Gothic Aesthetic. Since the beginning of the new millennium, the fascination with vampires has produced several attempts to inject vampires into science fiction and explain their origins by “natural causes.” But science fiction’s explanation of the vampire’s existence is so “rational” that those works have been unable to enter the mainstream of Gothic Aesthetic and therefore remain marginal. Once again, this demonstrates the empirical power of the concept: the ontology of the narratives influenced by Gothic Aesthetic holds that the nature of monsters and the origin of evil are, in general, irrational, mysterious, and unknowable.

Gothic Aesthetic is an expression of disillusionment with rationalism and religion, with faith and scientific reason, and with civilization. The addiction to nightmare and the undead that has grown out of Gothic Aesthetic has greatly facilitated the rise and spread of the cult of death. Man-
eating monsters and fatal nightmares have been instrumental in promoting the commodification of violent death.

**Manmade Nightmare as a Literary Device**

Today, one can hardly imagine a horror movie or novel not attempting to bring its audience as close as possible to a living nightmare. Offerings such as the Harry Potter series, *Twilight*, *Night Watch*, *The Vampire Diaries*, *True Blood*, *Snow White and the Huntsman*, *Charmed*, *Van Helsing*, *Avatar*, the *X-Men* franchise, and *The Walking Dead*, among hundreds of others, have several features in common insofar as their framework and plot structure are concerned. We see flying monsters chasing after the hero or heroine, monsters exercising dreamlike magical powers, and a pursuit accompanied by horrifying atrocities and violence. We witness trancelike experiences that the protagonist—and the audience—confuse with reality. Prophetic nightmares come true, flashbacks disturb causal relations, eerie sounds and spinning sensations unsettle the normal perception. Most often the protagonist acts in an altered state of mind (either drugged or delirious) that underscores his or her weakness and unsteadiness. The overall intention is to disrupt our sense of time and space in order to create the impression of being fully disconnected from reality.

The tradition of depicting nightmares is not a recent phenomenon in Western literature: many eighteenth- and nineteenth-century writers used nightmares in their works. Literary scholars, however, have paid almost no attention to the study of nightmare as a literary device and as an important creative project that defined the works of several classical writers. In my book *Nightmare: From Literary Experiment to Cultural Project*, I show that experiments with nightmare played a crucial role in the development of the intellectual and artistic agendas of Charles Robert Maturin, Nikolai Gogol, Fyodor Dostoevsky, and Thomas Mann, among others.

In order to convey and recreate the nightmare in literature—a mental state that is resistant to the standard linguistic ploys—authors needed to invent special expressive devices. I propose to use the term *hypnotics* to describe the set of artistic tools required to plunge the audience into a sense of nightmare. The concept of hypnotics is necessary, since the term “poetics,” developed by the Russian formalists and especially by Mikhail Bakhtin in his famous work on Dostoevsky, is insufficient here, implying as it does that the author is not entirely aware of his own reasons for writing in a particular way and employs various literary devices unconsciously.
Unlike poetics, hypnotics points to the author’s conscious efforts to reproduce the nightmare state in the reader’s mind.\textsuperscript{93}

Hypnotics encompasses several devices, such as depictions of the dizziness of a protagonist with whom a reader tends to identify, by means of a rotating motion or a glimpse into an abyss. Sudden breaks in logic and chronology, doppelgangers acting as protagonists, repetitions of words and events, instances of déjà-vu, lighting that distracts the readers’ attention—all these tools of hypnotics serve to make the reader feel that “time is out of joint,” diminishing the reader’s critical ability and dislocating his sense of identity. Flight, chase, and falling—frequent plots of our nightmares and of fictional offerings—are the simplest ways for our consciousness to represent what happens in a nightmare as a distinct image. Over the course of thirty years, a mistrust of “the real” and contempt for “the human” created an atmosphere highly conducive to the rise of nightmare as a prime plot premise that prepared and facilitated the formation and spread of the cult of death.\textsuperscript{94}