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**Cuvinte cheie:** gândirea postmodernă, moarte, nemurire, strategie, corp, instinct sexual, frumusețe, erotism

### Raportarea postmodernă la problema finitudinii

#### Rezumat

Plecând de la cele trei caracteristici ale gândirii postmodernității, încercăm, în această lucrare, să schițăm o imagine a transformărilor profunde din lumea contemporană, inclusiv (sau mai ales) în ceea ce privește atitudinea față de moarte.

Spaima de moarte, care este până la urmă spaima vieții, a determinat ființa umană să-și construiască o strategie prin care să "evadeze" din lumea reală într-o lume a ficțiunii unde beneficiază de o libertate totală a alegerii, de gândul fără graniță. Și de aici mai avem un singur pas, pe care postmodernul îl face, pentru a gândi nemurirea. Esența acestei strategii are în centrul său corpul uman și, în mod special, instinctul sexual. Se ajunge, în final, să i se aloc corpului uman un rol extrem de important în disputa cu moartea: corpul se opune morții sacralizându-se, adică metamorfozându-se într-un adevărat "obiect de cult narcisic". Frumusețea și erotismul devin, astfel, imperative și leitmotiv ale societății postmoderne.

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## **The Postmodern Approach to the Problem of Finitude**

### **Summary**

Starting from the three characteristics of postmodernity, the intention of this paper is to sketch an image of the profound transformations in the contemporary world, including (especially) the attitude towards death.

The fear of death, that is actually the fear of life, determined the human being to construct a strategy through which to “evade” from the real world into a world of fiction where it is possible to enjoy a total liberty of choice, the thought without boundary. Hence there is only one step that the postmodern man takes in order to think of immortality. The essence of this strategy has in its center the human body, especially the sexual instinct. Finally, a stage is reached when the human body is given an extremely important role in its dispute with death: the body opposes death becoming sacred, i.e. transforming itself into a real “narcissistic object of cult”. Beauty and eroticism become thus imperative and a leitmotif in postmodern society.

## The Postmodern Approach to the Problem of Finitude

The results of the approaches of the philosophers preoccupied with the end of postmodernity and with the way in which it can become operational in the contemporary society (subjected to the pressure of the “commercialization” of knowledge) offer an overall image concerning the understanding of the radical changes in the contemporary world (including the attitude towards death). A series of critical texts, written in different epochs, in which the analysis gravitates around this topic, remain extremely up-to-date and pertinent through their methods of introspection and critical acceptance of the present. Among the authors of such writings one could mention: Nietzsche, Jaspers, Heidegger, Sartre, and, more recently, Vattimo, Baudrillard, Lipovetsky or Lyotard.

In a reference work<sup>2</sup>, Gianni Vattimo tries to detect the relationship that links the results of Nietzsche’s and Heidegger’s thinking to more recent perspectives, referring to the end of the modern epoch and postmodernity. The inherent difficulty as concerns the end of modernity issues, according to Vattimo, from the fact that modernity itself is thought as a continuous renewal, therefore to surpass it implies a process that goes beyond the logic of modernity. The concept that names this surpassing is Heidegger’s *Verwindung*, which does not mean a passage with abandonment but rather a passage over, containing in itself the coordinates of acceptance and of profound study. In other words, the exit from the logic of modernity is a suspension of its ground or the affirmation of a lack of ground. With Nietzsche the explicit vacuity of any ground is connected to God’s death and the new situation of relative security that individual and social existence have acquired due to social organization and technical development.

With Heidegger the term *Verwindung* implies a relationship with metaphysics and with *Ge-Stell*. The relationship with metaphysics implies a loss of the fundamental character of Being, while the relationship with *Ge-Stell* implies the occurrence of an improper order of man. The new relationship that man establishes with metaphysics and the world of technology does not presuppose an act of thought concerning their ground but rather an imagining-remembering, *Andenken*, of the conditions of their appearance. “There is no *Grund*, no ultimate truth, there are only historical apertures, destined to or sent by the *Selbst* a One-and-the-Same that is given only in them, through them (going through them, not using their means)”<sup>3</sup>. Assuming Nietzsche’s and Heidegger’s criticism, Vattimo highlights three characteristics of postmodern thought. First, there would be a “thought of benefiting” induced by the fact that the new thought “does not surprise any *Grund* and could even less, at its turn, serve as ground for a practical transformation of ‘reality’. This makes Vattimo sustain that hermeneutical ontology implies an ethics that could be defined as an ethics of commodities in opposition with an ethics of imperatives. In a way, one could say that the thought of benefiting is only an existential strategy of man living in the world of different globalizations, not opposing global transformations from the perspective of a metaphysical ground, but rather constructing individual or collective strategies.

The second characteristic is a “thought of contamination”. According to this, without a universally accepted ground, postmodern thinking can operate only hermeneutically upon the world, imposing the necessity of certain techniques of interpreting the data reality offers. The ground of these techniques consists in personal interpretive experience or those of the community to which they belong, experience that implies at its turn the process of contamination and the necessity of assuming the fact that one operates in the field of “weak” truths.

The third characteristic of postmodern thought is “a thought of the *Ge-Stell*”. There is no doubt that to Heidegger the essence of technique is not something of a technical order: “*Ge-Stell* is the way in which the real comes out of hiding with an available-situation (...) insistently exposed to the requirement

<sup>2</sup> Gianni Vattimo, *Sfârșitul modernității. Nihilism și hermeneutică în cultura postmodernă*, Ed. Pontica, Constanța, 1993

<sup>3</sup> G. Vattimo, op. cit., p. 173

of delivering itself, man being situated in the domain of essence that is specific to *Ge-Stell*. Since man is in the sphere of *Ge-Stell*, he is not free to chose his relationship with it"<sup>4</sup>. With Heidegger the notion of *Ge-Stell* is correlated with a loss of essence: "but in reality, nowadays man is nowhere meeting himself, namely his essence"<sup>5</sup>. The philosopher remarks the fact that whatever exists is not anymore something for man, rather something subjected to a transhuman requirement that answers a subjection to a command behind which man is not anymore. If it is true that man is the only creature that knows he will die, then it is also true that he is the only one who fears death. This is why he invented worlds that proclaim anguish as an extremely necessary reaction, in order to adapt to the condition of his existence. The impossible to remove limitation is easier to bear through an extremely intelligent artifice: the recourse to imagination.

To ignore death becomes useless and counterproductive because it is a kind of flight from the very destiny of the self. Such a gesture is impossible; moreover there is no act or action that would allow one to glide beyond death. That is why one is chased permanently by the fear of death that is actually a fear of life. Consequently, man has imagined and put into practice a stratagem (finite and inevitably leading to death) through which to oppose the real world by another kind of world: the world of fiction where he enjoys the total liberty of choice, the limitless thought.

The immortal thought (or rather capable of thinking immortality) finds this way the space in which it can ignore the mortal body. Thus man interprets itself (or even the species itself) by means of these structures of the fictional world. To these structures, which produce and sustain the plunge into the world of fiction, belong the new "articulations" (or "prolongations") of the human body: the nanotechnologies and the IT systems. With their help man has been prepared to take his seclusion to its end, coming to live "less in the vicinity of other people, in their presence an discourse, rather more under the mute regard of some objects (...) offering permanently the same discourse, of our petrified power, of our virtual abundance, and of our mutual absence"<sup>6</sup>. In Jean Baudrillard's above statement there are two keywords that are extremely important to our analysis: "abundance" and "absence". If one of the possible variants for defining death would be "absence"<sup>7</sup>, then, at least at a fugitive glance, there would be a contradiction between the two terms. Abundance in modern society, as Baudrillard mentioned, aims to cover exactly this absence. Abundance becomes a kind of magic wand through which there is an attempt to impose a "compulsory" happiness as an extreme method to banish the fear of emptiness, of absence, namely of death. On the other hand, the sexual instinct becomes the "pleasure principle" that pushes "the individual to be able to rediscover his body and to be able to invest narcissistically – the formal principle of pleasure – so that the force of desire could be transformed into a request of objects – manipulable signs"<sup>8</sup>. Finally, according to Baudrillard, the individual has to reach to consider himself "the most beautiful among objects" and thus "the most valuable exchange material".

The human body thus introduced in the equation represents the mortal part of the self and – through its reproductive function – the instrument through which immortality has been confiscated from the species<sup>9</sup> but, in the same time, it is invested with a vey important role in the dispute with death: the body opposes death, becoming sacred, which means that it changes into a real narcissistic cult object or an element of the social ritual<sup>10</sup>. Thus beauty and even more eroticism become imperative to and leitmotifs of a consumerist society. It is worth stressing that in order to reach this point, the game of Eros/Thanatos ambivalence, of the love/death duality, the body subjects itself to a partial death: it starves itself, according to the obsession with leanness, because it becomes a distinctive sign<sup>11</sup>. In order to obtain this leanness, the body has to be subjected, according to the same principle of ambivalence, to

<sup>4</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Întrebare privitoare la tehnică*, în vol. *Originea operei de artă*, Ed. Humanitas, București, 1995, p. 150

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*, p.154

<sup>6</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Societatea de consum. Mituri și structuri*, Ed. Comunicare. Ro. Buc., 2005, p.30

<sup>7</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Mortality, Immortality and other life strategies*, Stanford University Press, 1992, p.13: „The horror of death is the horror of void, of the ultimate absence of 'non-being'.”

<sup>8</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *op.cit.*, p. 174

<sup>9</sup> N. O. Brown, *apud* Bauman, *op. cit.*, p. 35

<sup>10</sup> Z. Bauman, *op. cit.*, p. 169

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 182



Detaliu pronaos biserică de lemn din Rozavlea; foto: Felician Săteanu

a double pressure: one “gratifying” and the other “repressive”. The latter, the repressive one, includes the whole range of collective obsessions regarding the body, and first of all its hygiene. Baudrillard finds an evident similarity between these genuine rituals and the sacrificial techniques of preparing the body. In connection with this, could be mentioned the various diets, resembling the traditional practices of fasting. Notwithstanding the action of this mechanism through which society thinks to have reached a harmony between man and his body, Baudrillard sustains that, in reality, “a self-destructive irrepressible tendency manifests itself, so that “the body becomes via an absolute reversal of significance, a dangerous object that has to be watched, reduced, tortured for delicate-aesthetic ends”. Moreover, as Baudrillard underlines, one can say that “all the contradictions of this society are summed up at the level of the body” in a mixture in which one can find “beauty and repression” as well as “the principle of fashion and the principle of death”<sup>12</sup>.

Another chimera of modern society is “the obsession with health” inscribed in the same model of direct action on the body. In this case, too, an excessive preoccupation with health is ultimately directed also against death: to the narcissistic intentions, stressed by Baudrillard, are corresponding in this case some “more technical”, Prometheic ones. Like bound Prometheus, “his initiatives are extremely limited, given the authority enjoyed by the norms and medical apparatus”<sup>13</sup>. Following the aesthetic “torture”, the consumer in the position of patient subjects his body to a healing one, too. The aim of accessing these medical procedures (actually genuine rituals) is exactly the citizen’s wish to direct his own faith, to decide upon his own destiny, because through these medical sequences (rituals, procedures) the body is emptied of power in order to become stronger afterwards. In order to

<sup>12</sup> J. Baudrillard, op. cit., p. 184

<sup>13</sup> Gilles Lipovetsky, *Fericea paradoxală. Eseu asupra societății de hiperconsum*, Ed. Polirom, București, 2007, p. 46



regenerate or at least hoping to regenerate, the body, as an essential part of the consuming individual, is subjected to a temporary death, is sacrificed like in initiation rites.

The medical nuisances are causes of death. Even if death in itself cannot be defeated, there are chances to fight its causes which can be diminished as the fight with death can remain insignificant, but the fight with the causes of death becomes the reason of life<sup>14</sup>. In Z. Bauman's work one can find an extremely interesting analysis regarding modern man's wish to deconstruct mortality. The great construction of mortality has been divided into sufferings that are more insignificant and potentially curable, rather than frightening. Death does not come at the end of life because it is there from the very beginning. Since death is watching us, we need to watch it, too.<sup>15</sup> Modernity assumes death watching it during a lifetime and decomposing it into its constitutive elements, easier to control. Death is not seen anymore as a totality but rather as a sequence of particular cases, in which particular persons are menaced. Having in front of us some concrete embodiments of death it is easier to fight it. This solution to reduce death to particular instances and individual cases offers the chance to forget the most annoying fact, namely the idea of death, the idea of mortality. To fight the causes of death becomes thus the sense of the entire life, even if the dispute with mortality in itself remains without any sense. The transcendence of mortality is substituted with taking to its best end the technical capacity of living. Eschatology is dissolved into technology, instrumentality triumphs over metaphysics, the event over eternity, man being forced to live in a "continuous present"<sup>16</sup>

If modernism is identified with the initial period of the consumer society, postmodernism is associated with its actual phase. Postmodernism continues the way of modernism in relationship with the attitudes towards time and death. Instead of bringing the future into the present, it dissolves the future into the present. It does it by splitting time into short episodes. Thus mortality becomes familiar and the habitual, while everyday life becomes a general rehearsal of death<sup>17</sup>. If modernism de-constructs mortality, postmodernism, stresses Bauman, de-constructs immortality into a multitude of lesser or bigger satisfactions. Therefore immortality becomes as transient and ephemeral as the rest of things<sup>18</sup>.

If we were to identify the essential difference between modern man and postmodern man, then we could say that modern man has an ardent wish for something else. This wish has its origin in the unbridled lust to try again, to exhaust all possibilities at hand. Nothing of what he possess and what he knows is satisfying him. While postmodern man has reached the level of complete saturation. His sole liberty is to look backwards, mixing and remixing continuously data and facts of the past, in a lack of order that offers itself as a "new" defining recipe. Who is closer to death? To the thought of it? It is the postmodern man, no doubt. Notwithstanding the artifices that colour his destiny, his death is, paradoxically, more natural. He dies ultimately as the simple man of other times, when he is and because he is „sick of life". "Weak thought" as defined by Vattimo is not weak in the sense that it is powerless, it is a *thought that is weak* meaning that it can remain powerful, but it is accompanied by a certain will, a tense detachment and marked by shallowness. This shallowness of postmodern thought has to be understood as a wish of boundless inclusion, but also as an evident liberation of morganatic depths. The true tradition does not represent any landmark. Supersaturated with "sciences" and bombarded with the informational flux, postmodern man has not anymore the power to reason about the mysteries of the world. Alone in front of life and death, with no certitudes and predeterminations, isolated from any kind of conditioning, his failure is predictable. His wandering in the dense fog of appearances is total. Therefore the postmodern game is the most "pathetic and tragic game of immortality". The absence of future could be the surprising way that leads to the avoidance of death. For postmodern man time is not anymore heading towards the inevitable future of death but can be "embezzled" through the reiteration of the "important" sequences from the whole past. Looking backward with utmost irony and saturated with knowledge, postmodern man positions himself under the sign of the ephemeral. In the ideologically, politically induced age of *to have* the consumer searches his supreme salvation in endless consumption,

<sup>14</sup> Z. Bauman, op. cit., p. 140

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 141

<sup>17</sup> Z. Bauman, op. cit., p. 187

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 164

ultimately metamorphosized in the aim and principle of existence.

The game of no-death is the serious, grave, pathetic sense of postmodernity. Modern man aspires to become *different* in his way to death while postmodern man attempts to be simultaneously in all ways exactly in order to avoid the way. Disillusionment is the deepest illusion, disappointment is delusion taken to its extreme. The linearity of destiny once abolished, postmodern man thinks his freedom is total, even if, in his inner self, he understands that any way is forbidden to him. Man is surprised and amazed in the moment of death because the knowledge of death is not innate, moreover, society does not propose to educate him for death. Postmodernity, success, progress are all defined by hiding their finitude. Thus man becomes completely unprepared for life. From the very beginning of his life he has to learn also what is characteristic to man (language, behavior pattern etc.) but also what with other mammals is inborn (walking, swimming etc.). Unprepared and in the same time without determination, he is open to any experience, disposed to any form of "forgetting death". The reestablishment of equilibrium and the reconciliation with his inner nature can be foreseen only when society will understand that the learning of death is a *sine qua non* imperative of his implication as human being. Pre-ontologically we know what it means *to be* and we accept the meaning of this verb with all its interrogations and mysterious connotations. Severing the relationship, death can be seen as indecent. It does not anymore disguise absence but rather calls for it with the frozen silence of the mask that replaces the face.

The liberation from the fictions about death and the removal of any delusion can offer the chance to know death. Death, the great judge, brings each man to trial, without summons. There is no court day, no warning. This is a trial with no witnesses, only in the presence of one's conscience. Everything happens inside each man and there is where darkness has to be dissipated. The "defendant" is alone and with no support. And the sentence is certain: condemnation to death, with no possibility to appeal. When man will understand this, with serenity and lack of haughtiness, even if with alarm, then the way towards the true freedom will be open to him.

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