

Death Aesthetization in Contemporary Artistic Practices

Estetización de la muerte en las prácticas artísticas contemporáneas

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Abstract

Starting from the famous and enigmatic quotation of the Aristotle's *Poetics*, who argues that the human has a natural desire and pleasure to see corpses if mediated by art, is intended to show the relationship between the attraction for the horror and some contemporary art practices surrounding the depiction of death, particularly with regard to the ultimate use of the human corpse as an artistic resource. Avoiding any kind of ethical approach or questioning of the limits of the artistic production, is meant to highlight the phenomenon through the examples brought out by the work of some contemporary artists such as Andy Warhol, Eric Fischl, Damien Hirst, Von Hagens, Andres Serrano, Joel-Peter Witkin and Teresa Margolles: From those who use the corpse in and turn it in something aesthetically pleasant, to others who turn human corpses in sculptures of scientific value, and further other kind of artists who assume the morbid and dramatic life of the corpse in their art production as something structural.

Keywords: Abjection, Death, Aesthetization, Contemporary Art, Corpse.

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Resumen

Partiendo de la famosa y enigmática cita de la *Poética* de Aristóteles que sostiene que el ser humano tiene un deseo natural y placer de ver cadáveres cuando mediada por el arte, se pretende mostrar la relación entre la atracción por el horror y algunas prácticas artísticas contemporáneas en torno a la representación de la muerte, en particular con respecto a la radical utilización del cadáver humano como un recurso artístico. Evitando cualquier tipo de enfoque ético o cuestionamiento de los límites de la producción artística, tenemos la intención de resaltar el fenómeno a través de los ejemplos presentados a cabo de la obra de algunos artistas contemporáneos, como Andy Warhol, Eric Fischl, Damien Hirst, Von Hagens, Andres Serrano, Joel-Peter Witkin y Teresa Margolles: partiendo de los que utilizan el cadáver y lo convierten en algo estéticamente agradable, a otros que transforman cadáveres humanos en esculturas de valor científico y, además, otro tipo de artistas que asumen la vida mórbida y dramática del cadáver en su producción artística como algo estructural.

Palabras clave: Abyección, Muerte, Estetización, Arte Contemporáneo, Cadáver.

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1. Introduction

The attraction by the Horror and the voyeuristic desire to see corpses seems to be natural to the human nature, thus shows Aristotle in his *Poetics*, which argues that artistic *mimesis* allows a pleasant contemplation of that, which if was seen in flesh would be unbearable, like, for instance, wild animals or human corpses. Thereby art representations can create an aesthetic distance but at the same time a genuine and committed reflection about death.

Death is omnipresence in the art world for centuries, as the numerous *Vanitas* and *Memento Mori* can testify. The death representation happens somewhere between fascination and repulsion and can resemble the abjection and its paradoxical effect: the link of the human with his own body and materiality, a sense from which the human civilization has somehow already unlinked.

In the contemporary artistic practices, the relationship between artists and the use of corpses, an artistic resource (a bondery that have started to faint since the early days of what was called as abject art), can nowadays appear in different ways: while some artists seek or naturally find beauty in the corpse in a romantic atmosphere, there are others that transform the body into a representation of scientific or aesthetic interest, and even others that use the corpse or parts of it as an artistic resource, without any attempt of embellishment.

Towards the difficulty in dealing with this matter, that at the same time fascinates and causes repulsion, art, science and entertainment industry have found very interesting ways to deal with that boundary between the repulsion and the attraction. Despite the trivialization of death propagated by the media, such artists continue to make a terrible transgression to the social and religion customs of human communities, making their provocative and challenging artistic work, to be accompanied by a paradoxical, but guaranteed success, from which no one can remain indifferent.

2. Attraction for the horror and aesthetization of death

Since classical antiquity, the relation with the horror has always produced two opposing types of attitudes: a) the *referens horresco* (failure to mention the horror: disgust) and b) the *morbid delectatio* (an attraction and an aesthetic pleasure at the Horror). This second type - the *morbid delectatio* - was already mentioned in the *Poetics* by Aristotle, the one that exposed the ability that art has to transmit a pleasure by representing certain things that if seen “in the flesh” would be repugnant. In his words, a “sign of this is what happens in the experience: through *mimesis* we contemplate with pleasure the most accurate images of those same things that we look with disgust, for example, representations of wild animals and corpses.” (Aristotle, 1996, p. 107). The examples of Aristotle are enlightening and they reveal, precisely, our greatest fear. While the fierce animals jeopardize our survival, the contemplation of the corpse announces our death. Even if Aristotle’s argument is based on the possibility of knowledge that art enables and allows a pleasant contact with those things that would otherwise not bear to see,

his unexpected reference (regarding the poetry causes and the natural human desire of mimesis) shows how old and the visceral the attraction for the horror is. Art represented since immemorial times the privileged gateway into contemplation of the phenomenon of death, creating an aesthetic distance but at the same time a genuine and committed reflection.

Interestingly, it seems that Kant did not agree with Aristotle, as shown by the following passage of the *Critique of the Aesthetic Judgment*: “(...) only one kind of ugliness, cannot be represented according to nature, without throwing away all the aesthetic pleasure. Therefore: the beauty of art: namely, the ugliness that arouses disgust.” (Kant, 1998, p. 217). For Kant, disgust destroys all aesthetic satisfaction. If one sees the purpose of art as the mere production of pleasure in the viewer, one can say ironically with Danto that “only the most perverse of artists would undertake to represent the disgusting, which cannot “in accordance with nature,” produce pleasure in normal viewers.” (Danto, 2010, p. 1).

The omnipresence of *Vanitas* and the *Memento Mori* constituted true ways of reflection about the meaning of life through art. We can also identify a specific tendency in the European Christian religious that was frequently captivated by blood, martyrs and tortures and Catholic art was used as an instrument of threaten and used to depict terrible scenes of cruelty as a way of express piety and the vanity of our material life. Art at the service of the Catholic Church, for instance, had introduced the issue of aesthetic suffering, in which it has wisely and successfully associated the agonizing suffering to the tragic human dignity. It is important to remember that the recommendations of the Council of Trent to the artists were very clear: to display the agonies of the martyred, in order, through this display of affect, to elicit the sympathy of viewers and through that to strengthen their faith. But would those images pretend to be only a warning with a moral and philosophical concern? Don't such images refer themselves to that secret pleasure and power about which Aristotle had already spoken? In a time when art was trapped in dogmas and stylistic and ideological barriers, one can argue that the depiction of death and horror, under the pretext of moralizing message, constitutes an aesthetic flight to this trespasser and lawbreaker pleasure. Since ever, the depressive and morbid iconography has instituted an essential legacy of painting, expressing in one hand the melancholic personalities of the artists and on the other hand the contact with the horror, with the night and the darkness, with the mysterious and with the cursed side. In effect, as an universal sense of boundary between life and death, a binding to primary, preceding the categorizations of *logos*, organizations and social and religious castrations, and by its intensity and transgressive freedom, the depressive and morbid iconography exercises its power of seduction.

I have seen some sculptures from Nuremberg from the late Gothic era, where a figure, which looks comely and strong from the front, is displayed in a state of wormy decay when seen from behind: the body is shown the way it would look decomposing in the grave. Such sights explain why we actually bury the dead. It is intended thus to be seen as revolting by normal viewers, and there can be no question of what is the intended function of showing bodily decay with the skill of a Nuremberg stone carver. It is not to give the viewer pleasure. It is, rather, to disgust the viewer, and in so doing, to act as a vanitas, reminding us through presentation that the flesh is corrupt, and its pleasures a distraction from our higher aspirations, namely to achieve everlasting blessedness and avoid eternal punishment (Danto, 2010, p. 3).

Danto argues that this association between taste, beauty and pleasure, although constitutes a tendency of the philosophy of art, it is not demonstrative of artistic practices, not even the oldest. To evidence that, Danto invokes the example of Vanitas: “Heavily charged with excitation, they threaten to overwhelm the fragile barriers of the mind that contained them, and to swamp the immature, precarious self” (Wollheim, 1987, p. 348-349 *apud* Danto, 2010, p. 6).

Friedrich Schiller, in his essay *About Pathetic* included in *the Sublime*, 1801, also warned about the power contained in the experience of the horror and noticed how art can be associated to this phenomenon. He makes an alliance between the sublime’s theory to the theory of tragedy. He argues that the tragic is the most authentic form of sublime. About the tragic Schiller says that it is a general phenomenon of the human nature that the sadness and the terribleness exert an attraction on us with an irresistible spell. (1997, p. 19) Schiller noticed that even for what is chilling, we feel repelled and attracted again with equal force by horror scenes. To Schiller the sublime object appears to be hostile and against the existence of the human being, challenging him to a ‘combat’ what one cannot overcome. Schiller emphasized the importance of being the individual that observes the danger at a distance, not really as part of the danger. This idea resembles the previous Aristotle’s words, that art can constitute that distance of safety from the danger.

In this paper we could not help to emphasize the masterful work Kristeva’s *Powers of Horror* (1982) and its conception of Abjection essentially developed in this book. Such conception shed light to the relationship between the theory of abjection and the art by proposing abjection and disgust as pre-symbolic structures inherent to the act of artistic creation. The concept of abjection means literally ‘the state of being cast off’. The abject extends to all aspects of the body that are considered impure by an increasingly sanitized society. Kristeva explains that abjection turns into a substitute of the sacred. She noticed that in the modern times, for instance, in the literature, one can feel how religion is becoming more divorced from art in general. But the truth question is not related with the presence of God, but with the way one deals with death.

Kristeva reinterprets the Sublime in the light of the notion of Deleuze’s abjection. In effect, she highlights that abjection is an universal and primitive feeling that everyone has already experienced at least once in their lives, as an intense feeling of repulsion for the horror represented in intolerable things such as vomiting, feces, blood, and finally, what Kristeva associates with the peak of abjection, the corpse. The corpse is the ultimate site of the abject because it is here that all meaning to the unity falls. The unity of body and mind and the control of the boundary between inside and outside falls. “The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life.” (Kristeva, 1982, p. 4)

3. Contemporary Art Practices and Death

3.1. *The Aesthetization of the Corpse*

Although the proliferation of scatological art practices can already be detected from 1960, some authors such as Hal Foster, argue that the beginning of abject art, particularly the “movement of shit” must be placed at the beginning of the decade of the nineties of

the twenty century. (Foster, 2001, p. 165) For the Abject Art, the human body assumed a new political significance caused, in part, by controversial issues such as abortion and AIDS. Although the body-art trend began to lose its temporary enthusiasm (as the AIDS crisis vanished), started to rise a fascination with the degraded and defenseless human body.

Therefore, the abject art can arise also as a reaction to a certain excessive emptying or institutionalization in art. Certain artists are looking to return through a psychic regression into a primitive state:

Artists have investigated the temporality, contingency and instability of the body, and have explored the notion that identity is 'acted out' within and beyond cultural boundaries, rather than being an inherent quality. They have explored the notion of consciousness, reaching to express the self that is invisible, formless and luminal. They have addressed issues of risk, fear, death, danger and sexuality, at times when the body has been most threatened by these things (Jones, 2003, p. 11).

Thus the abject art can make use of parts of bodies, decaying matter, feces, blood, and other materials which somehow evoke a return to a primary bonding that the "well educated" public of art had forgotten. Artists such as Piero Manzoni, who presented *Merda d'artista* in cans, or Joseph Beuys, for instance, who used animal fat as a symbolic material in his art, would well synthesize this idea:

Urine, excrement, blood and semen have all been central elements in art works which have raised the hackles of the religious right. A discomfort with these over evidences of bodily processes is, in part, a lingering legacy of American Puritanism. It also conforms to the Cartesian tendency to see the body as mere machine which is animated by the injection of the mind or spirit (Heartney, 2004, p. 64).

The abject is also situated in an ambiguous space which put into question the boundaries between the Self and the Other, as Julia Kristeva argues, but enhances its visceral side by representing excrementitiously fluids or materials (such as blood, milk or hair), represents the fragmentation of the body. It spreads a feeling that seeps in the entrails, namely the feeling of disgust or disturbing moored in the early days of the formation of subjectivity. The abject and disgusting has a paradoxical effect on art: by being based on the underground side of civilization, will seek in the unknown, in the unconscious, in the instinctual, in the unclean, its true sense, a sense from which the human being had already unlinked. The abject happens somewhere between fascination and repulsion.

Going further than the mere representation of death, some contemporary artists use in fact the corpse as an artistic resource. The artist that currently works with the bodies/corpses lifts a ban on contact, moreover founded in the unconscious desire to commit such a breach. Artists such as Von Hagens, Witkin, Serrano, Teresa Margolles and others are located in a territory, that always seduced and exercised a fascination and despite the trivialization of death propagated by the media, continue to be cursed and avoided.

The link between corpse, taboo and dirt as ways of abjection is well synthesized in Mary Douglas's work *Purity and Danger* (1960), where she argues that "there is no such thing as dirt; no single item is dirty apart from a particular system of classification

in which it does not fit.” (p. 208) This means that dirt is a displaced matter, i.e., dirt is a concept that disturbs the cleanliness (e.g., if the blood is out of the body becomes dirt). This point of view is similar to the one of Kristeva’s that stands that the abjection is not the lack of cleanliness, but is what in fact disturbs the order, what not respect the borders. That’s why for Kristeva the corpse is the highest representation of the abject, which traumatically reminds us our own materiality. As Kristeva demonstrates in *Powers*, the corpse, without fiction, without masks reveals what we try in vain to conceal in order to live: humans are at the border of their condition as living beings, potential corpse in decomposition. The human corpse means for us all death infecting life. We run away from anything that remembers our mortality, our materiality, including our own waste and trash as forbidden and shameful materials. Corpse is, what Kristeva calls, the ultimate debt to nature, the evidence of human’s materiality without any romanticism.

But art The famous photograph of Evelyn McHale’s suicide, that was at the origin of the Andy Warhol’s *Suicide: Fallen Body* (1962) art work (Fig. 1).



Figure 1. Andy Warhol, *Suicide (Fallen Body)* 1962. Disponible en: <http://janeander.tumblr.com/post/62750474578/andy-warhol-suicide-fallen-body-1962-warhol>.

This is a great example of the ultimate aesthetization of Death and its full depiction. In 12th May 1947, LIFE magazine devoted a full page to a picture taken by the photographer Robert Wiles. It had the caption: “At the bottom of the Empire State Building the body of Evelyn McHale reposes calmly in grotesque bier, her falling body punched into the top of a car.” This photo would go down in history known as “The Most Beautiful Suicide.”

But beyond the mystery of Evelyn McHale's life and death, there is the equally profound mystery of how a single photograph of a dead woman can feel so technically rich, visually compelling and—it must be said—so downright beautiful so many years after it was made. There's a reason, after all, why she is often referred to as “the most beautiful suicide”; why Andy Warhol appropriated Wiles' picture for his *Suicide: Fallen Body* (1962); why once we look, it's so hard to look away (Cosgrove, 2014, p. 3).

Suicide was part of Warhol's *Death and Disaster series*. In 1962, Andy Warhol was advised by Henry Geldzahler, a young curator from New York city to give away those consumer symbols such as Coke bottles and soup cans, and encouraged him to persecute more profound and serious themes and matters, like death for instance. The engagement with more serious subject matter led the artist to create some of his most disturbing works such as *129 Die in Jet!* One can say that Warhol took the senseless tragedies of his time, those that expressed the fractures and failures of the American dream and presented them as history painting, and lead the spectator to a reflection instead of the banalization. Warhol's fascination by the Death's subject found its expression in these series of art works where he explored with great irony the paradoxical binomious of Death and Celebrity:

For when looking at Warhol's silkscreens, it becomes obvious that only in the culture “America” is it sometimes necessary to die in order to achieve a certain “superstar” status of Celebrity; only in the culture “America” can someone find Death masquerading as separation, public domain, and immortality in Celebrity (Cowser, 1998, p. 7).

The depiction of a beautiful death is pleasant even when it refers to a photograph of a real corpse and not to a mere representation of it, especially if it evokes a sort of romanticism or eroticism, but if the artistic representation convenes to recent and traumatic memories as was the 9/11 in New York city, a sculpture like the Eric Fischl's *Tumbling Woman* may be publicly censored and considered offensive. (Fig. 2)



Figure 2. Eric Fischl, *Tumbling Woman*, 2002.

Disponible en: http://www.ericfischl.com/html/en/sculpture/2001_042.html

Tumbling Woman, who represented a “jumper” from the Twin Towers was displayed in September of 2002 in the lower concourse of the Rockefeller Center, but was met with harsh criticism and ended with its removal. In an interview to the artist, Fischl was asked if he thought that the problem was the sculpture had been displayed “too soon” after 9/11, and he answered:

*No, it's more complicated than that. America has a hard time with the human body and the issues surrounding the body and certainly, mortality is one of those problems. The thing around 9/11 is that it was this horrific event killed 3,000 people but there were no bodies. If you remember all the passion was centered on architecture to replace the Towers. To secure the footprints of the Towers. It had nothing to do with human tragedy because it was too painful. So I think that the *Tumbling Woman* reminded people that it was a human tragedy (Brown, 2012, p. 9).*

3.2. *When the Human Corpse became a sculpture*

Bataille had already warned, in the fascinating book “The Birth of Art” (Bataille, 2015), for the structuring aspect that Death represents in the birth of art. The prehistoric understanding of the human about death and his attitude towards the human corpses and remains, reveals how death has always fascinated the living humans, urging them to behaviors that vary from the interdiction (and taboos) to the experience of the sacred. This is how Bataille, with a brilliant astuteness, will identify, in part, these feelings inspired by the experience of death, as the origin of art, dissociating it from just the magical rituals that anthropology had come to associate the prehistoric cave painting:

Nevertheless, the attention regarding to the corpses, or more generally with regard to human remains, and we see this long before the upper Paleolithic times (...) is enough to show that human behaviors about death are primitive, therefore essential. It is clear that these behaviors implied from the beginning a sense of fear or respect; in any case a strong feeling that made the human remains different from all other objects (Bataille, 2015, p. 45).

This short introduction from Bataille aims not only to show how ancestral is the human relationship with his awareness of death, embodied in his conduct towards the corpses, but also seeks to stimulate a reflection about the long and complex journey of humanity. How did the corpse have passed from interdict object to a mere artistic resource?

In some of Damien Hirst’s most famous works, for instance, we can find excellent examples of the use of corpses and how a distance is created that easily leads the spectator to forget that it is actually a corpse that constitutes the work of art. The artist uses corpses, or parts of corpses as artistic materials. Yet despite this obvious quality of abjection, the reactions that his finished pieces actually bring forth in a viewer are indeed far from repulsion. *In the work For the Love of God*, Hirst makes use of the most emblematic part of the human corpse: the skull. In that sculpture Hirst has completely covered this authentic skull with diamonds. (Fig. 3) The art historian Rudi Fuchs, observed: “The skull is out of this world, celestial almost. It proclaims victory over decay. At the same time it represents death as something infinitely more relentless. Compared to the tearful sadness of a *vanitas* scene, the diamond skull is glory itself” (Fuchs cited in Sterling, 2011, p. 4).



Figure 3. Damien Hirst, *For the Love of God*, 2007.
 Disponible en: <http://www.damienhirst.com/for-the-love-of-god>.

Hirst combined the imagery of classic *vanitas* and *memento mori* with inspiration drawn from Aztec skulls. The process of idealization and aesthetification is quite evident. Even though the skull is authentic what is extraordinarily curious is that the brilliance of the diamonds can turn this vain and dark matter into a true object of desire. As the artist argues, “You don’t like it, so you disguise it or you decorate it to make it look like something bearable – to such an extent that it becomes something else” (Hirst cited in Burn: 2008, p. 21).

Another successful case about using human corpse as sculpture is the notable work of Gunther von Hagens, which was the first to improve the technique of plastination capable of preserving corpses. His travelling exhibition of plastinated corpses *Bodyworlds* has been shown in major international cities and is attracting thousands of visitors wherever they are staged. Ostensibly set up for morally instructive purposes, to “teach children about human physiology and help adults lead healthier lives.” (Muller, 2006, p. 4) The success and unbridled public demand for von Hagens’s exhibitions cannot be ignored. In a certain way Hagens recovers the spirit of science-spectacle, so fashionable in the European courts from the sixteenth until the eighteenth centuries.

It is plausible to imagine that Vesalius’s and his *De Humani Corporis Fabrica* might have been a source of inspiration for Gunther von Hagens. The form of presentation resembles that of Vesalius’s and anatomists of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, a time of great revival of anatomical research, when the anatomical boards showed the nerve or muscle structure of human figures in elegant positions, having posed as background beautiful countryside of Padua and Florence. Vesalius’s says that while

drawing the veins of the body, these drawings provoke him pleasure. The reason for this pleasure, clarifies José Gil (1980), may be: “Vesalius’s illustrations make it possible to set this object, to an extent that it turns off, thereby the real body.” (p. 125) The illustrations of Vesalius show living bodies, alive of Science, “by taking the dead its sacred powers, it is no longer regarded as a sign of corruption and end.” (p. 126). The body represented by Vesalius is stripped of all funeral and emotional charge. It is a neutral body like science imposes. In a certain way, the anatomist instead of just representing bodies like Vesalius, effectively uses corpses. His bodies are alive of Science, though indeed being dead. Such bodies possess an independent life, disconnected from the previous life. Such use of the bodies inaugurates an impersonal and scientific life of the corpse. The bodies plastinated turned into sculptures are no longer corpses, they are a sort of cyborgs, biomechanical entities, modified chemically and surgically. Pesuant von Hagens: “I want to bring the life back to anatomy. I am making the dead lifeful again. This exhibition is a place where the dead and the living mix.” (Hagens cited in Jeffries, 2002, p. 12)

The intention is to show what has been practiced at medical schools since the sixteenth century, i.e., to teach the function of the parts in the specific system, display its usual diseases and expose the individual anatomical structures. “The exhibited corpses are not cushioned in coffins, looking life-like; rather they often resemble the enameled body models that have been manufactured for medical and anatomical purposes or the mummified remains, periodically unearthed, of people from an earlier age.” (Muller, 2006, p. 4)

One can consider that the German anatomist is trying to conceal the overwhelmed reality of the decaying body. Those bodies have been preserved by the technique of plastination, they don’t have any odor and they look like artistically sculpted bodies, without the abjection element that the contact with corps usually provides. Although visitors almost forget that they are looking at real corps, because of the vivid positions the corps adopt and their similitude to sculptures, the *Bodyworlds* website states that the spectators are “gripped with a deeply moving fascination for what has been fixed in this novel way on the border between death and decomposition” (www.bodyworlds.com).

3.3. Morbid Presentation of the Corpse in Contemporary art practices

There are still other artists whose real intention is precisely the opposite of Hagens, namely, to draw attention to the existential, funeral, morbid and macabre load of the corpse representation, which they hardly believe that could be overshadowed. With the purpose of revealing an aesthetic of the horror or with a purpose of social denunciation, those artists will find in horror, physical decomposition and material decay an undeniable and very attractive aesthetics. Unlike Hagens and even preserving the anonymity of corpses, artists such as Andres Serrano (American photographer) and Teresa Margolles, (Mexican artist) tend to achieve an aesthetic of redemption in which an artistic representation or *reliquial aura*, seems to be able to return the dignity to anonymous and forgotten corpse at the morgue.

Andres Serrano’s work includes images of morgue photographs and photographs of burned and fatally wounded people. The most relevant example is found in *The*

Morgue (1992), as nothing was known about the bodies because the artist decided to hide their identities and partially covered all photographed faces. In most cases Serrano photographed victims of violent deaths. With such photographs, the artist, among other aspects, intended to note that the idea of death we have is somehow ideal. Many of us imagine that we will die more or less peacefully, but, as noted by the artist, in many cases death happens precisely as violence against the body. However, another aspect that Serrano intends to approach relates to the constructed and false idea that death is not a necessary character, as if it was a kind of external agent that might happen, an interesting question that Freud had also made note: “We always insist on the occasional character of death: accidents, diseases, infections, deep old age, revealing our tendency to strip the death of all character of necessity, to make it seem like an event purely accidental” (Freud cited in Morin, 1970, p. 72).

For Arasse more than a picture with forensic or scientific objectives, Serrano’s purpose is aesthetic because he constantly pursues the beauty of bodies, even where we thought there was not. (Arasse, 1992, p. 64). Serrano photographed the bodies with a near classical beauty rarely associated with the corpses of the morgue. The *chiaroscuro*, the careful use of light, and the attention to detail and composition in each photograph resembles the marked contrast of Baroque painting and seems to link us to a particular and individuated history which dignifies each individual as a person. Each person is driven to think in a personal history and the images encourage the spectator to the inner contemplation and reflection about life and death. Serrano’s intention is still somehow ambiguous: if one can feel an emotional link to the photo, it is also possible to see an emotional restraint caused primarily by merely descriptive titles of each photograph, pointing out the cause of death (for instance, an impressive photo of a half covered face has the laconic and cold title “Blood Transfusion resulting in AIDS”. (Fig.4)



Figure 4. Andres Serrano, *Blood Transfusion resulting in AIDS*, 1992.

Disponibile en: <http://beautifuldecay.com/2013/09/13/andres-serranos-powerful-images-death/>

Joel Peter Witkin, an American photographer, born in 1939 in New York city, has become one of the most influential and outstanding photographers of the second half twentieth century. For pushing photographic representation to its limits through his depictions of all kinds of freaks, such as giants, persons with deformities, hermaphrodites and dead corpses (he often claims to see himself as loving the unloved, the damaged, the outcasts). Often harshly criticized in his home country, Joel Peter Witkin was well received in Europe where his work was understood as an invitation for reflection on the human weakness, on the boundaries of human life and upon the ultimate meaning of life and death.

Witkin considers issues of morality as central to his work. Starting from a large frame of sources - literature, myth, and Renaissance and Baroque painting - Witkin creates in an ingenious way photographic tableaux that recall us to the macabre, to the mystic, to the erotic, and to the religious. We can foresee moral issues represented from the most bizarre images of human frailty with abundant art historical references, manipulated negatives and prints, Baroque staging and lighting. The artist also frequently uses dead bodies or body parts, that he deliberately handles in the creation of his work. (Fig. 5) Witkin's most emblematic photos portraying corpses and body parts were performed in Mexico (where else could this artist get away with such a task legally?) using corpses from a hospital in Mexico City that let him sort through unclaimed, anonymous corpses and body parts picked up on the streets to use in his artworks.



Figure 5. Joel- Peter Witkin, *Harvest*, 1984

Disponible en: <http://www.orderofthegooddeath.com/after-joel-peter-witkin#.VsM7LLSLTMw>

With a strong influence of Witkin, we can only emphasize the Mexican artist Teresa Margolles who reveals an artistic route of great consistency, evolving from an abject and aggressive aesthetics to a more conceptual artistic expression, a conducting wire

arises: the identity of the corpse and reflection about death. The extent of her work is remarkable: from the underground exhibition unauthorized, reaches the most prestigious art institutions in the world, such as Tate (2006) and the Venice Biennale (2009). Her work is committed to violence in Mexico, her native country, and social issue that comes from the drug trafficking crimes. She reveals a dimension of art-denunciation that seemed to have ceased to dominate the agenda of contemporary art. The artist claimed the unidentified bodies in Mexican morgues and through the art restores their lost identity and dignity.

The bodies and body parts the artist places at the centre of her works, witness the unsettlingly direct relation between violence enacted upon the body, and its result, death. The removal of these physical entetirs from social space leaves behind traces and residues that now, by means of the artist's intervention, metonymically evidence their former lives and erase the distance between dead and living bodies (Banwell, 2010, p.45).

Just like relics, her art works become sacred and the victims, once anonymous and forgotten by society, reach a kind of holiness and sacred *aura*. The use of the corpse, with forensic inspiration, is far from the hygienically and scientific intention of an artist like Gunther von Hagens. There is a nobility in death, but death is cursed, one can not show it without the justification of religion, a place that Margolles seems to claim for the artistic territory. Her works, with clear metonymic and symbolic intention, makes use of fragments of corpses or objects that were in contact with the bodies, summoning the spirit of the holy relic to a yore violent and bloody scene. (Fig. 6)



Figure 6. Teresa Margolles, *Lengua*, 2000

Disponible en: <http://narcopolitics.blogspot.pt/2011/02/teresa-margolles.html>

Her work exposes the silence of the victims in a blatant way and becomes a vehicle that addresses without taboos the dramatic and violent reality of murder, impunity and violence. The concentration of pain, that her art exposes, paves the way to a kind of an uncomfortable, but genuine, reflection (which we usually move away from our common sense) about “the-being-towards -death” (as called Heidegger), that constitutes everyone.

4. Conclusion

The fact that humans are animals with awareness of their finitude, led them to create a range of behaviors regarding the death, between the sacred, the interdiction and the taboo. Art can provide a monitored and controlled way to be in touch with our greatest fears and mysteries, and yet, as Aristotle said, take some pleasure from this Horror’s contemplation. Thus, art occupies a central role in our ancestral connection with the horror through its mediation and through its aesthetization.

Although Kant argued that there is only one kind of ugliness that cannot be represented according to nature, without throwing away all the aesthetic pleasure: the ugliness that arouses disgust, a large part of the art depictions had always consisted in exposing some ugliness, suffering and death. This issue has always dominated the History of Art for centuries but some contemporary art practises are showing what Kant’s romantic conception couldn’t even imagine.

The primordial and primal materiality of the human existence that death and the corpse, the ultimate level of abjection (as Kristeva reminds), announce, began to be explored by art, at least, since the beginning of the sixties as the abject art demonstrates, when it started to rise a fascination with the degraded and defenseless human body.

What this paper concludes is that some artists from the last decades are defying the boundary that always circumscribed the human corpse, as for instance, Andres Serrano, the morgue’s photographer, that seeks to register beauty where no one would expect to find it, in order to show what is generally avoided, and generally refused to see or think. It is through art, that what remained in the unconscious is brought to awareness: eschatology and vanity of the body, the horror of death, its social taboo, but also its fatal seduction.

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