

*Kitap Tanıtımı / Book Review*

# Corpse Encounters: An Aesthetics of Death

**Mustafa Nurkan BİTLİSLİ<sup>1</sup>**

**Elam, J., & Pielak, C. (2018). *Corpse Encounters: An Aesthetics of Death*. Lexington Books: London.**

Through emphasising corpses and their aesthetically reimagined versions, Jacqueline Elam and Chase Pielak, in their book *Corpse Encounters: An Aesthetics of Death*, strive to expound upon the encounters with death so as to discern not only the ways corpses are conceptualised within the limits of systems of meaning but also to untangle the relation between self and the other underlined in one's own disposition towards death. One can argue, therefore, that establishing a framework whose undertone calls for a reconsideration of the supposed demarcation between life and death, requires a meticulous effort to identify and distinguish aesthetic figurations with which the possibility for an afflux, which can distort as well as reaffirm the images and symbols inscribed into dead bodies, is inquired. Such an effort is evident as the book revolves around selected fictions, ranging from *Evelyn Waugh's The Loved One* to *Beckett's trilogy (Molloy, Malone Dies and The Unnamable)* and various others, without shrinking from real-life institutions, techniques and events in order to associate the process of aestheticization with the rituals and practices set upon dead bodies. That which is particularly eminent in the book is Elam and Pielak's presupposition that envisages corpses as "accidents, disturbing instances of what is beyond control intervening in the otherwise apparently ordered reality of those still alive enough to consider their presence" (2018, p. 4). They, essentially, underscore that this accidental quality of corpses is obscured through purposeful encounters circumscribed by ritualisation processes in order to veil the "accident of death" itself, and thus, in the world of living, meanings become ascribed through rituals towards the corpses in the hope that a constant alterity, otherness, does not indicate the subversion of an order that both fixate and rearranges that which is discordant with itself (pp. 4-5). It is when the alterity is done away with, Elam and Pielak assert, that one can discern that corpses "speak" back, and their modes of speaking carve out the focus of this book (p. 5). At this point, however, it is necessary to briefly touch upon their methodology before moving forward since the reason why aesthetic matters and that which corpses render it possible to encounter are drawn from specific conceptualisations and considered as the subject matter of the book.

Throughout various chapters, Elam and Pielak presuppose the Lacanian concept of imaginary/symbolic order and examine the corpse's position in the eyes of viewers/attendants as a way to indicate the Real ("the limit of the subject") resided, in a repressed manner, within the symbolic (p. 17). As Elam and Pielak indicate, corpses, by themselves, are "symbolic failures" that do not signify any of the meanings formed within the symbolic; however, this accidental

---

<sup>1</sup> Arş.Gör., İstanbul Gelişim Üniversitesi, İktisadi İdari ve Sosyal Bilimler Fakültesi, Siyaset Bilimi ve Kamu Yönetimi, mustafa.nurkan@outlook.com, ORCID: 0009-0009-8757-3701.

complacency renders them as objects that provide a partial perception towards, or an encounter with, that which cannot be assimilated and represented within the symbolic, namely, the Real (p. 17). As one cannot imagine one's own death, in Freudian terms, it is the corpse of the other that, at least, grants a substitute by being a "*representative for representation*" and provokes the chance for one to encounter one's own death, or the Real, emanated from the gaze upon the other's being dead (p. 18). Herein, aesthetics, due to its capacity to alter the image and signification of corpses, is associated with the very moment of encountering the Real and is attributed to the function of disarming and taming that which is overwhelming (p. 18). Within Elam and Pielak's methodology, as is seen, various concepts developed with reference to death, such as "*looking awry*", "*punctum*", or "*studium*" are framed and, to an extent, resituated within the liminal borders of the corpse. However, this methodology draws an initial line between the modalities of ritualisation in which corpses are subjected to aesthetic reimagination that places them, once again, in the sphere of the symbolic. As a result, Elam and Pielak discern two repeated methods of thematization whereby dead bodies are appropriated with particular motives. On the one hand, there exists an "*archive*" through which a perpetual fixity is ascribed and a "*memory picture*" (p. 57) is formed, while on the other hand, '*erasure*' comes into the picture not as a practice of memorialisation, rather as an aesthetic way to overcome the possibility to confront with one's own death through the hasty removal of the corpse (pp. 8–10).

In this sense, one can assert that the methods of archive and the demarcation between life and death are best reflected in the second chapter, *Only Half in Love* and respectively in the third chapter, *The Green Corpse* and Beckett's *Trilogy*, even though they are exactly opposed to each other within the context of transition between imaginary and symbolic order. The former revolves around the novel, *The Loved One*, whose setting is the Forest Lawn, a real-life memorial park in which the point of reference, death, is displaced through "*substituting conceptually manageable signs for traumatic truths*" (p. 34). Herein, the emphasis is put on the potency of symbolisation that intertwines the memorialisation of one's past life with the absence of one's dead body. This is why Elam and Pielak, in Baudrillardian terms, depict Forest Lawn both as a dissimulation in which liquification of signifiers provides the absence of death, and as a simulation where one's aesthetically constructed body clouds the difference between the living and the death (p. 44). An encounter with the real, naturally, while still being possible, is repressed through empty signifiers -e.g. fountains, paintings and other architectures that encompass the dead - in order to detach the Real by offering an eternity in which death mimics a different version of life (p. 45). Therefore, it would not be unplausible to argue that Forest Lawn corresponds to the utmost form of aestheticization upon the corpse to render the dead as a meaningful referent that blurs the value of its own signifier.

The reverse of this aestheticization, however, is signified by the concept of a green corpse and Beckett's *trilogy* in such a way that it implies a sort of return to the imaginary order in the context of the theme of erasure. Here, Elam and Pielak argue that how one decays becomes meaningful due to alteration within the signification of one's body (p. 87). In this perspective, dead bodies can gain a *passive agency* derived from the chosen mode of decomposition, namely, green burials, through which corpses directly disintegrate into nature and forego all kinds of traditional representations that erase the markers of decay so as to stage the dead body as something less traumatic (pp. 88–90). Through green burials, one is able to, at least partially, designate that which ought to be assumed when one turns into an object (p. 98). For Elam and Pielak, it can be

opted that the desire to decay directly in nature, achieved through a passive agency, is related to the effort to disengage from the system of meanings, as well as from the aesthetic congealment of the relation between the signifier and the signified. Therefore, it is not surprising when Beckett's trilogy is analysed as somehow the reverse circle of death in which one gradually recesses from the symbolic into the inert state or into the pre-conscious prevalent in the "mother's womb" (p. 91) so as to free oneself from the restraints of the symbolic through transposing the abject -corpse- as the subject that perverts the meaning itself (p. 102). As is seen, turning back to the pre-conscious posits that it is possible to bypass the symbolic, even the language within, and by that quality, it implies a potency that opposes that which circles around Forest Lawn, that is, the displacement of death through aesthetic symbolisation. Nevertheless, where this recession converges with Forest Lawn lies in the effort put into rearrangement of the demarcation between life and death; while the former distorts the system of meaning so as to recess the fixity of life per se, the latter expels the Real to purge the death from its accidentality.

Assuming that the corpse by itself is the sole focus of reconfigurations made upon death would be a crude understanding for the book since Elam and Pielak shift the emphasis towards the specific techniques of disposition in order to shed light on the relation between aesthetic rearrangement of corpses and ideology. Initially, in the chapter *The Phoenix and the Corpse*, different rites of cremation, deemed as a practice that melts both figuratively and literally the markers of the dead within the context of erasure (p. 117), takes centre stage. For Elam and Pielak, this melting, when perceived particularly within the framework of Catholicism, becomes a connotation of the flames in hell, and therefore, its earlier implementations upon dead bodies were used as a mode of punishment or of determent (p. 119). This is why they are able to convey, through the medium of Martin Scorsese's *Silence*, the idea that ideological residues of cremation can still be found when being burnt, as an image, is confronted with the staged corpses in traditional burials (p. 127). Be that as it may, cremation, for Elam and Pielak, essentially indicates a pattern in which dead bodies, by being "the materialized structure of perception" are subjected not only to destruction but also to reconstruction so as to regulate the viewer's experience through aestheticization of one's signless remains -such as ashes (p. 129). Moreover, to broaden the scope of ideological rendering upon dead bodies, Elam and Pielak, put an emphasis on the relation between one's fixated gaze and an object dried out and aestheticized through institutions, i.e., mummies. Within this context, it is not just "the commodification of one's remains" that fixates one's perception (p. 156), but the locus of the practice of exhibition, too, indicates an impulse to regulate and produce meanings and distance the audience towards the other through displaying the difference between the viewer and the object (pp. 177-178). As is seen, Elam and Pielak do not shy away from intertwining a Foucauldian perspective, whereby institutions that produce meaning through display -such as museums or exhibitions- are investigated, with their ongoing focus on encountering the Real.

Concordantly, it can be asserted that the general schema of the book follows that which disseminates from the encounter of one's death within the different modes of meanings ascribed to the corpse upon aestheticization. While such an investigation can be regarded as sufficient for possessing philosophical importance, since it challenges the presuppositions -dead ones are the ultimate others, for instance- one ought to embrace in order to occlude an influx between life and death, Elam and Pielak also incorporate various fictions as a way to supplement the somehow slippery ground they choose in a manner that associates residues of fantasy with the real-life

practices. On the one hand, therefore, it provides its reader with a consistent and accurate reflection upon the altering dispositions of one's attitude towards death by using the very referents of it, dead bodies, as a medium; while on the other hand, it traces the practices of aestheticization in such a way that it becomes plausible to associate the undertones of different modes of disposition with an imagined possibility of fiction and thus, furthering the scope where one can distort the fixity of one's gaze upon the other. Moreover, as a second route, Elam and Pielak dwell into the ideological connotations of dead bodies and, to a limited extent, deconstruct their rendering by expounding upon the images inscribed to disposition procedures. However, the parts where they engage in environmental politics, by addressing a vast array of techniques ranging from natural burials (p. 83) to Tibetan "*sky-burials*" (p. 210), lack a critical glance towards their own presuppositions, albeit positing that which ought to be regarded as more feasible. For instance, throughout the book, Elam and Pielak promote the method of green cremation, wherein bodies are dissolved through chemicals. They do not underscore green cremation, i.e., alkaline hydrolysis, simply because it is "*the most environmentally friendly of all disposition techniques*" (p. 136), instead, its significance stems from the idea that when one is dead, the corpse would not constitute that which one can be identified with, and this is why Elam and Pielak claims that notions ascribed to the corpses with negative connotations, such as solid waste and so on, do not mean literally anything (p. 139). Therefore, in their framework, green burials become justified regardless of possible associations inscribed into its treatment of the corpse. Yet, this conclusion is not the only thing that can be regarded as a deficiency of the book, since while they acknowledge the concept of dignity and assert its implications, at least tacitly in matters such as mass graves (p. 226), they do not consider it necessary when a disposition technique is valued due to its effectiveness with reference to "repurposing" the dead body as less of an environmental threat. Nevertheless, *Corpse Encounters: An Aesthetics of Death* achieves what it strives for: to indicate the liminal boundaries between life and death so as to wander around the influx within the ways one assumes oneself as a subject when confronted with the other. This indication, it can be argued, turns into a suggestion for discovering the possibility in which one can become an object to oneself to realize oneself as a subject without foregoing the Real nor overlooking the inescapability of the meaning.