the eyes of death
THE EYES OF DEATH:
THE VISUAL MOVEMENT FROM WITNESS TO SPECTATOR

Submitted for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
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2008
Acknowledgments:

This Ph.D. journey has been intense, emotional and passionate. Without the wonderful people who have helped me on the way with their support, understanding and patience the completion would be impossible. Into the destination of grief, mourning and remembrance I dedicate this study to the loving memory of S.H. whose body was confined to bed three and a half years in a coma and who left us on 15 March 2007. I am indebted to S.H.’s family for giving me permission to dedicate this study to her memory and document her dying process.

For strength, eternal support, love, care, motivation and for always keeping me sane, giving me courage throughout the research process my deepest thanks to my excellent parents Figen and Ismet Dagli, and my brother Murat Dagli for his profound feedback, perceptive comments and insights on the text and his wise advice and support.

I am deeply grateful to Professor Tara Brabazon who accepted this project, for her exceptional supervision, penetrating inspiring critique, insightful, motivating and encouraging approach. The submission of this Ph.D. became only possible with her mentorship and guidance. I cannot imagine having a better supervisory support if not Professor Tara Brabazon’s incomparable energy and enthusiasm.

I thank my loving friend Nina Dimitriadi 11 who has not only shared the Ph.D. journey with me but also helped me to find first Chris Mullen who has made this project acceptable for a doctoral study, and then Professor Tara Brabazon who has nurtured this project patiently and passionately for completion. I also thank you long lasting friends film-maker Caglar Kimyoncu for his mentoring and Canadian independent researcher Rob Mathers for conversations and debating with me on the subject matter, and special thanks to all the dedicated friends Phillip Pergolas, Ozben Saygun, Richard Schofield, Anthony Star, Dan Weber, Berke Demirkan, Atilla Abana, Ada Helin and Matthew Swieczynski for their collaborative effort on filming process, archival and technical help. In particular I must acknowledge the influence and support of the Greek poet and musician Diamanda Galás for letting me use her music and trusting me to commence with O’Death.

Undoubtedly without memory, without love, support and trust of people, without the companionship of family and friends, and great supervisor Professor Tara Brabazon, there
would be endless struggle where everything sinks into despair. I thank you, from the bottom of my heart, everybody who has made this project possible and has been a powerful advocate and ally throughout the research.
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1992 - 1997  Marmara University of Fine Arts, Istanbul, Turkey: BA Industrial Design
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Title of Master Degree thesis: Why is it important for a designer to ask the question “What is an object?”

Exhibitions and Creative Works:


2007 - November, collaboration with Diamanda Galas, worked as a film-maker and editor on the film O’Death.

2005 - 17 August – 23 October, Collaborated with two films (Staring Back and Paranoia) in The Exhausted Body Exhibition, curated by Nina Dimitriadi 11, Kaoshiung Modern Art Museum, Taiwan, .


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Abstract:

This doctoral study, composed of four films and an exegesis, configures a new conceptualisation of death in and through film, assembling an intricate theorisation of ‘the mediated I’ and ‘the unmediated I’ of the witness. This thesis focuses on the consciousness of the witness, through locating a position and expression in reflective, reflexive, experiential, critical and artistic practice. My research questions the witness’s attempt to ‘manage’ the experience and tracks the self reflective process of thought s/he undertakes in the face of death, dying, coma and suffering. In probing the subjective experiences of the witness, the knowledge of disaster and the absent Other gives way to a moment of distinction between the spectator and the witness. The actual movement being proposed between the two is through the ways in which they both are activated through the reality of death. Critical and creative practice encourages a recognition of - and identification with - the possible meditations and negotiations of the witness. It aims to infuse a configuration of the witness by way of reflection in consciousness and artistic formulation.

This thesis proposes a conceptual diagnosis as the original contribution to knowledge. I identify apathy as an anti-choice and unrecognised necessity of consciousness in the face of death, dying, coma and suffering. The research offers a new insight into the existential encounter of the witness. The aim of the practice component is to re-present and re-vision everyday encounters on television and in media alongside metaphors, possible meditations and negotiations to the subjective experience in and through filmic gaze. The visual propositions complement the written text by means of displaying the fear and anguish of the witness, and the attitude towards the Other, disaster and the irrecoverable death. The aim in turning this subject matter into an academic study has been to align two different perceptions: visual and theoretical practice. These two conceptual terms have offered distinct ways of handling the unsettling encounter from not only a witness’s point of view but also from the perspective of a researcher and the film-maker.

Together, the visual and theoretical strategy reveal the workings of consciousness and creative meditation of the witness to identify the struggles against internal and external terror in being a witness. The research is interdisciplinary, deploying philosophy, literary and artistic theory. Yet it is not a contribution to the specialised discipline of philosophy, sociology or psychoanalysis of death, dying and suffering, but offers a critical and creative matrix combining inventive and reflexive approaches. This practice-based doctoral study
challenges the artist and practitioner to create and then raise awareness through a dynamic, reflexive and interpretative discourse. It fuses genres, including autobiography, literary studies and visual arts.

The relationship between the exegesis and films provide an innovative pathway through creative meditation and negotiation of the witness by integrating filmic presentations as an integral loop in the research. Every chapter frames a dialogue between already existing theories of death, dying and grief and filmic texts to transform experience into visuality through constructing a descriptive insight and artistic expression.
Perceiving Subject: This term is borrowed from Zygmunt Bauman. It refers to the ‘acting subject’ whose perception struggles to identify with the subjective experience. The research shifts attention from what is visible to the perceiving subject in order to lay bare the structure of the experience in the witness’s framework within which consciousness is positioned. Bauman states that ‘faced with such impossibility, the perceiving subject may only delude itself with a play of metaphors, which conceals rather than reveals what is to be perceived, and in the end belies the state of non-perception which death would be. Failing that, the knowing subject must admit its impotence and throw in the towel.’ My research, while bringing a Sartrean existential approach, adopts this term to capture the witness in the process of self-conscious reflection. In Sartrean philosophy, the term also has connotations of the Berkleian formula ‘esse est percipi - to be is to be perceived’ which has connections to Husserl when subjective yields the irreducibility of being to appearance or to consciousness of the appearance.

Perceived Object: The term refers to the encounter of the witness in the face of death, coma, dying and suffering. My research, after establishing an analysis of the witness turning into herself as the perceiving subject to reflect in consciousness, modifies the challenges and difficulties of the encounter and attempts to identify with the Other and disaster as the perceived object. Perceived object requires attention in order to construct a relation to itself and to its reality for the witness.

‘The Reflective I’: The attempt on the part of a conscious self to contemplate, reconcile and comment on the encounter by way of reflection. The research follows the reasoning of the witness in consciousness and captures ‘the reflective I’ in the process of determining a decision and a response to the experience. ‘The reflective I’ is mediated by the research of a language that formulates an intellectual order to understand possible meditations and negotiations in the consciousness of the witness.

1 These terms are deployed and defined within the text of exegesis. However for the convenience of examiners and readers, the list of terms provides a quick guide to the crucial terms, their theoretical and historical origin, and their trajectory through the thesis.
3 ibid.
4 see C. Macann 1993, Four Phenomenological Philosophers, London: Routledge, pages 112-4
**Sovereign Moment:** A term borrowed from Georges Bataille, it refers to ‘an instance unknowing’ which reveals itself in the face of terror and fear. The project applies Bataille’s term to the impact of fears in order to be able to explain the inability to act and the lack of self-referential knowledge to what is encountered. Bataille’s configuration of sovereign moment reveals what cannot be reflected in consciousness and what haunts the witness. The arrival of the unexpected determines the practice of fear: the feeling of impotence which arouses and targets all the anxieties of the incomprehensible. His notion emphasises the relationship between death and thought as undergoing a sovereign moment at the moment of the encounter, locating the transgressive through loss of self and announcing the limits of experience. The research re-defines the notion of fear as the mystery of the unknown which appeals to Bataillian unknowing. The research suggests that the sovereign moment – the fear gives rise to anguish in order to be able to reflect in consciousness.

**Anguish:** The doctoral study draws attention to the anguish when probing the witness’s predicament in the face of death and dying. Anguish has been the subject matter of existential philosophy from Soren Kierkegaard, Martin Heidegger to Jean Paul Sartre. The study employs Sartre’s configuration of anguish. Sartrean anguish is ‘the mode of being of freedom,’ where a constant obligation to remake the Self creates an apprehension of one’s choices in the face of itself. Sartre sees anguish as the mode of being of freedom because in the face of not-being, he claims that one feels the burden of the immense responsibility and as a result experiences anguish, and this anguish is the realisation of the kind of freedom that makes one aware of the possibility of making choices. Within the doctoral study, it is re-described as the misery of the unknown in consciousness, compelling the witness to reflect upon and act on its misery. The research offers an attempt to explain the witness’s mind-set through anguish. It is the absence of justification but it is also what demands recognition and a response in order to determine a choice and responsibility towards what torments the witness. Sartre argues that, ‘being is brought on to reflective plane and envisaging one’s distant or immediate possibilities suffice to apprehend oneself in pure anguish. In each instance, anguish is born as a structure of the reflective consciousness in so far as the latter considers consciousness as an object of reflection; but it still remains possible for me to maintain various types of conduct with respect to my own anguish – in particular, patterns of

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flight. The research aims to establish (the witness’s) types of conduct in anguish and seeks to articulate the modes of choices and responses of the witness in reflection.

**Counter-anguish:** According to Sartre ‘it is the counter-anguish which generally puts an end to anguish by transmuting it into indecision. Indecision in its turn, calls for decision.’ My research follows the process of thought of the witness in anguish; from indecision to decision attempting to create the counter-anguish in order to accomplish an (awareness of a possibility of) escape from it.

**Apathy:** Commencing with Sartre’s existential approach, my research suggests that a witness generates the counter-anguish as a mode of apathy which becomes an anti-choice within consciousness, seeking to formulate a response and responsibility to anguish. Apathy is not a failure of effort or lack of apprehension as in its conventional usage. Rather, it is the unrecognised and unspoken necessity of consciousness that the witness strives for in order to turn the unbearable into bearable. It implies a Freudian detachment from the lost object. The state described as apathy is understood by way of self-reflection, by way of analysing the witness’s anguish in consciousness. The research probes its definable and rational causes, and demonstrates it as the transcended anguish. Apathy, within the doctoral study, is performed from a position of wished-for-freedom that will attempt to overshadow the anguish where consciousness intervenes to transcend.

**The Gap:** The term is inspired by Maurice Blanchot’s notion of ‘interval’ that reveals itself ‘between no longer and not yet.’ The impossibility of attachment to the Other and to disaster breeds a particular approach towards its knowledge and constructs a space between engagement and escape for the witness. The study suggests that the witness captures and creates this space between herself/himself and the Other; between herself/himself and the world in order to be able to construct a relation to the reality and the actuality of the events. The gap is shaped and formed upon the impossible experience in which the witness is not participating, but perceiving. The gap is an affirmation of the distance and interruption in time that preserves the questions by keeping them open and by allowing the interminable and incessant exposure of thought that Blanchot assigns to the language of the impossible experience.

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7 ibid. 64
8 ibid. 56
**One’s Own Other:** The demand of a relation to the Other and disaster, and the constraints of the impossible experience both confirm the separation (from the world) within the gap while attempting to define and put the Other in its place not only in social life but in individual life. My research suggests that the witness, in order to conceptually handle the experience and give meaning to disaster and the Other (whose absence requires meaning), creates one’s own Other. It is invented out of necessity and out of experience as a mode of approach to the possibility of concern and connection constructed by the witness in relation to the Other and to the world. The thought invites a suspension in time that opens up to its discontinuity and tries to complete itself in order to designate the unknown and the impossible experience. One’s own Other gives rise to the necessary structure and connection to the Other by way of providing the distance to address our relationship with death, dying and suffering as well as the traumatic experience.

**Meditation with exposure:** The witness is exposed to what s/he encounters. The appearance of the Other (who is struck by disaster) leaves the witness vulnerable in relation to the event and the world. The witness, in order to be able to reflect and give meaning to what is encountered, engages in meditation with exposure as s/he conceptualises and contextualises the experience. The term refers to the profound process of disclosing and unmasking the unknown and unfamiliar occurrence of the witness.

**Persecutor:** Maurice Blanchot perceives the Other as the Persecutor\(^\text{10}\) whose appearance and crimes overwhelm and who is actively and passively marking the witness by death and disaster. In the process of constructing a relation to the Other, this doctoral research utilises a Blanchotian approach to the Other, describing the unbearable and violent appearance of the Other in relation to the witness as becoming the Persecutor.

**Patience of passivity:** Blanchot talks of a state of abeyance\(^\text{11}\) on the part of the witness/the victim in the encounter of death, disaster and the Other that is not voluntary but rather it is a task\(^\text{12}\) that presupposes the distance, implicating the passivity of suffering. The patience of passivity bears ‘loss of self; loss of all sovereignty but also of all subordination; utter uprootedness, exile, the impossibility of presence, [and] dispersion (separation).’\(^\text{13}\) My research refers to and deploys this state to evaluate and elaborate the witness’s effort and affliction in the face of the Other and disaster.

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\(^{10}\) ibid. p. 19


\(^{13}\) ibid. p. 18
The logic of disappearance: The term refers to the limitations of the visual representation of death, and the disturbance (and the fascination) evoked by the spectacle in contemporary society. Blurring boundaries between true and false; between representation and reality generate the logic of disappearance by way of manipulation and control. The spectator is drawn into the logic (of the spectacle) that obliterates itself within the representation. This doctoral research, in the analysis of the spectator’s attitude in Western culture, probes the modes of reading and understanding the images of death and the logic behind the representation.

Separateness: A term borrowed from Guy Debord¹⁴ where he describes the spectacle as producing its devoid of meaning; making it impossible to isolate the means of real and therefore giving rise to a separation between the spectacle and the spectator. The separateness is mediated by the image, by the representation and by its ephemeral seduction of symbolic reproduction. The research refers his term in the process of examining the representation as the spectacle.

Callous treatment: This is a term that Zygmunt Bauman¹⁵ describes in his configuration of the new and contemporary attitude as the result of fluid modernity. The callous treatment becomes part of the survival mechanism in the face of brutality and cruelty, generating disengagement, ambiguity and superficial escape. His description stands to deduce and re-describe the individual’s position, conditional interest and existential insecurity which are analogous to the spectator’s attitude in the face of representation.

The unmediated - visual I: The doctoral study brings together two different perceptions: visual and theoretical practice. These two conceptual terms offer distinctive ways of handling and ‘managing’ the unsettling encounter from a witness point of view inasmuch as from a/the researcher and a/the film-maker’s viewpoint. ‘The unmediated – visual I’ refers to the subjective experience of the witness as a film-maker, reflecting the trauma’s unmediated status¹⁶. The witness encounter with the real(ity) is conveyed within the creative practice – the filmic propositions. ‘The unmediated – visual I’ of the witness does not employ language. Rather it reflects and projects the manner in which each film (Apathy, Disaster, The Other and O’Death) defines a way of seeing and perceiving the real(ity), as well as interpreting and manifesting the concepts and theories underpinning this project. Such an attempt involves repetition, metaphors, trembling, a faint, denial, an escape and confirmation of trauma’s irresolvable nature to follow the thought and the event at a distance. The unmediated

and O’Death) defines a way of seeing and perceiving the real(ity), as well as interpreting and manifesting the concepts and theories underpinning this project. Such an attempt involves repetition, metaphors, trembling, a faint, denial, an escape and confirmation of trauma’s irresolvable nature to follow the thought and the event at a distance. The unmediated experience is not reducible to other experiences. It remains an experience of immeasurable force for the witness. ‘The unmediated – visual I’ tends to anchor the traumatic encounter of the witness; enduring fear, anguish, denial, the Other’s unrecognisable image in coma and death. The filmic propositions manifest the external struggles of the witness where the necessity to create (and transform the personal trauma) and the impossibility of a consolation attempt to overcome their mutual antagonism in an artistic expression. ‘The unmediated-visual I,’ in that sense, reveals and unmasks the live interaction of the witness in relation to the reality of the event without offering a consolation which appeals to silence(‘s unheard screams).

**The mediated - theoretical I:** What communicates within ‘the mediated – theoretical I’ is the contextual analysis and conceptual appropriation of the witness as a researcher. It forms and shapes the exegesis and the trajectory of the thesis where theory proceeds to conquer, to defeat what torments and to structure the responsibility and response within consciousness. ‘The mediated - theoretical I’ creates its own logic and rational understanding, bargaining for a resolution and solution while generating a conclusive analysis to the witness’s predicament. It can be understood as conveying the internal conflicts that seeks to determine a decision. It offers a view of human consciousness, undertaking a reflective approach in order to capture and present the possible negotiations and meditations of the witness within language. While ‘the unmediated - visual I’ generates the tension of thought (artistically) as it comes to struggle with its conditions, it formulates (and operates within) ‘the mediated - theoretical I’ whose implications are inescapable. The relationship between these two can be said to resemble the relationship between language and silence. Language comes afterwards in order to reflect, to repair, to formulate, to construct and to consider a possibility of consolation, but silence in that sense will always try to invent its own secret manifestation in order to initially listen to itself.
This project began four years ago, inspired by Rick Poynor’s chapter on the images of death in his book *Obey The Giant*, where he discussed the impact of the images leaving ‘a stain in the mind that no solvent could erase.’ He recalled his own experiences as a young boy trying to understand the reality and the violence of death and dying. He was probing, in the face of death, whether it was ‘possible to cast aside’ our ‘routine ironic detachment or salacious attraction and see the victims as human beings’ because the images - gradually - were desensitising us. That hypothesis triggered a doctoral study which investigates the extent to which the images of death alter an individual's conception of reality in Western culture in terms of the degree of social stigma attached to death. The value, meaning and use of the images of death are examined within sociological and critical discourses as a way of identifying how the viewer perceives and consumes these images in everyday life, and how the understanding of the image cognition is transmitted into creating a desensitised impression within the perceived role of subject matter. The intense stain I have felt - dramatically displayed within the representation - has summoned questions probing our desensitising impression towards death as well as to the subjective experiences of witnesses. Only months later, I was to become a witness and encounter my aunt in a coma. This encounter radically changed the direction of this doctoral study.

The personal trauma, the actuality of the event and the image of coma have prompted a need to formulate the impossible experience of the witness and frame this experience in a doctoral study to be able to create the necessary critical reflection. The questions on the witness’s approach to such encounters could not be dismissed: how does the witness ‘handle’ or ‘manage’ the experience? What kind of self-reflective process of thought does the witness go

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2 ibid. p. 98
3 ibid. p.105
through in the face of death, dying, coma and suffering? How are the challenges of the subjective experiences of the witness modified in and through objective causes in consciousness? How is the knowledge of disaster and the absent Other communicated? How does the witness differ from the spectator and the ways in which they both attempt to come to terms with the reality of death? A careful and detailed analysis of the subject, similar to an autopsy, brings a new insight to the difficulties of the witness. To enact this process and project an intricate weave between film and word create a texture of doctoral scholarship that offers a complex interrogation of the filmic and theoretical space between seeing and dying.

The risk (for the witness) has been the claim of what torments. To quote Sandra Gilbert in her foreword to *Death’s Door*, ‘I think I felt driven to *claim* my grief and – almost defiantly – to *name* its particulars because I found myself confronting the shock of bereavement at a historical moment when death was in some sense unspeakable and grief – or anyway the expression of grief – was at best an embarrassment, at worst a social solecism or scandal.’

The imperative in Gilbert’s assertion is applicable for a doctoral study. In an academic context, to investigate the subjective experiences of the witness and be rigorous as well as critical while seeking to contemplate and generate a response could be interpreted as unnecessary and irrelevant. Certainly, a doctoral study cannot offer justification but rather a recognition of critical and creative analysis, encouraging recognition of and identification with the possible meditations and negotiations of the witness in the face of such encounters. The researcher as the witness – and the plural voices and positions summoned through such a study – is turned into a case study. Had I been representative in some respect for the other witnesses, I could reach to an understanding of the internal and external struggles of the mourner. Yet I have refrained to occupy the words grief and mourning, choosing instead to bring attention to the anguish that has claimed both its sovereignty and annihilation. To concentrate on the consciousness of the witness in order to lay bare the structures of the

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experience, to take responsibility and generate a response to the impossible, have opened up an existential and philosophical approach inasmuch as the creative and artistic one.

I have examined, articulated and formulated the witness’s anguish in the encounter of death, coma and dying, and fixed it to filmic and theoretical form under the shadow of a doctoral story. Yet I cannot pretend there is a consolation within this effort of the witness as a researcher or a film-maker. What becomes evident, in spite of the efforts of any theorist, writer and artist, (as Jonathan Dollimore writes in his closing sentence on *Death’s Incessant Motion*) ‘is that the trauma of mutability is not cancelled,’ negated or obliterated ‘in the identification with change; rather it mutates into something else, and historically that something else has included fantasies of violent purification: annihilation not of the self but of the other.’\(^5\) However intensely the witness attempts to ‘manage’ the traumatic encounter, the experience can only be understood in its language and silence. Researchers may then come close to handling and meditating on the experience without reaching a solution either to our loss, to the witness’s suffering, or to the Other’s pain. Nevertheless what torments us claims identification, demands understanding and empathy. Being a witness is seeing and perceiving something; something that opens a wound, leaves its traces in the mind forever; never reduced to the principle of ‘manageable’ or bearable without difficulty. Witnessing is passive as well as suffering. The passivity becomes only active by engaging in death’s language and silence. Modulating the misery and the suffering provokes an exegesis of failure. Yet this failure preserves in itself the challenges, questions, speculations, possible negotiations and meditations, not as a means of overcoming or justifying but rather to be able to think with pain as Maurice Blanchot would suggest. Death silently opens up like a fissure. Within that fissure it flutters with broken wings in the mind of the witness/victim/survivor and the spectator, the discontinuous imperatives start to gamble to find a way to tolerate the impossibility. If nothing compels one to understand consciousness of this fissure, how is it

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possible to comprehend the discontinuity and human reality? This doctoral study\textsuperscript{6} is an attempt to ‘speak of’ death’s language and silence. Under each formula lies the reason’s mockery and the battle of consciousness. There is no adequate formulation or solution that will annul the suffering of being in the face of death and dying. As a researcher and film-maker - inasmuch as a witness – I have brought an insight, an idea, and a critical and creative approach within this doctoral study.

\textsuperscript{6} If I - as the postgraduate - am to prescribe for the reader and the viewer the suggested order for engagement in the pages, then for the first three chapters and films, read the chapter before viewing the film that accompanies it. For the last chapter, the film is to be viewed before reading the chapter. This order offers a pathway through the configuration of the witness, resonating through the stages of the encounter.