

Death & the Zeitgeist

John Zerzan

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We are in mass society's Age of Pandemics. At this stage of civilization nothing is stable or secure. The Age of Pandemics is also the Age of Extinction, as in no longer existing.

Death as an existential, ontological matter.

Nursing homes, prisons, meat packing factories—where humans and other animals are warehoused under the sign of Death. Meanwhile, life continues at the extremes of representation, the time of the virtual spectacle. Digital validation is the norm in hypermodernity. What exists is what is on the screen, displayed on the display screen and not elsewhere.

James Poniewozik's essay, "Life. Death. And Something Disturbingly Other" in a recent *New York Times*, finds that as life becomes increasingly digitized and simulated, there is more attention to death, especially in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. Imagining one's own death comes quickly to the fore.

Death presents itself, but what of life's substance? In the technosphere, our lives seem to have a decreasing plenitude or fullness, less of a possibility for a full life. A foundation is lacking, and so, fear of death grows.

The coronavirus pandemic is an overlay on an already reduced, transformed life-world. Its death toll is nothing to discount, but it is just part of the bill coming due for civilization's relentless assault on the natural world.

In terms of our orientation to the death count, French historian Dominique Kalifa on France Culture Radio in May, at the height of the contagion fears, argued that the pandemic, while serious, has evoked an overreaction bordering on panic. Neither the "Spanish" influenza of 1918–19 nor the AIDS pandemic (170,000 deaths in the U.S. in the 1980s), though more deadly, prompted the 24/7 fixation of 2020.

Comparisons are difficult, however. For example, the U.S. AIDS death count was the measure of a few years, from the early to the mid 1980s, whereas coronavirus fatalities reached 100,000 in only three months. But Kalifa's overall point may be valid.

Pandemic experience may be exhibiting a heightened fear of death, underlined in the techno-culture context. Lauren Collins' article "Missed Calls: Long-Distance Love, Death, and Grief" in a May *New Yorker*, recounts her encounter with her dying father. Since she was unable to be at his bedside; a phone was pressed to her father's ear. "I listened while Dad gasped for breath, waiting for someone to reclaim the phone. Do you mute something like that if you can?" Deathbed by device; new levels of estrangement. Bound to technology even in death, especially in a pandemic context.

The rapid buildup of pandemic fatalities, the suddenness of mass shooting episodes. Death has a scarier face. In popular culture, the zombie figure looms large. "The Walking Dead," for instance, the wildly popular television series.

Behind it all is the primary threat, identified by novelist Zia Haider Rahman as "the monster of modernity." Modernity, Enlightenment, Progress have been unmasked, their ideological returns very greatly diminished. But Technology continues to promise everything. One of its variants, transhumanism, even pursues an unhinged claim to deliver triumph over death.

The delusions pile up; what is real becomes elusive. In 2013, Henry Allen penned an op-ed piece in the *Wall Street Journal* headlined, “The Disquiet of Ziggy Zeitgeist.” Allen discloses his “sense that reality itself is dwindling.” His “disquiet” is further revealed: “For the first time in my 72 years, I have no idea what’s going on. I used to be Ziggy Zeitgeist, Harry Hip. I like to think I was especially good on the feeling-tone of the world around me.”

Not any more, and Allen, a former *Washington Post* editor, is not alone in his bewilderment. We are more and more rootless, adrift; less and less grounded. Death is robbed of its meaning, its arrival at the end of a life of connection and consequence. Along this trajectory, as civilization runs its fatal, life-draining course, fear becomes more predominant.

How do we live, retain any hope facing the arc of the scythe? Perhaps, just through little gestures. Out walking this morning, I saw lots of Black Lives Matter signs, all to the good, of course.

And, one that read, “A Different World Is Possible.” I love that perspective that implies we won’t get there unless and until we go for more than just patching up the problems of this world, of civilization.

A new green anarchy zine, *Ainriail* from Ireland, shows a poster reading, “Whose Streets? No Streets! Tear Up the Concrete!”

There’s some strong energy these days, but it needs to be deepened.

John Zerzan lives in Eugene, Ore. and writes frequently for the *Fifth Estate*.

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