
Paradigms of Death as Absence

Andi Mihalache: *Grafemele absentei: indolieri, inscriptionari, anamneze*, Cluj-Napoca: Editura Argonaut/Mega, 2023/*Graphemes of Absence: Mourning, Insignia, Anamnesis*, Cluj-Napoca: Argonaut/Mega Publishing House, 2023

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This paper sets out to review Andi Mihalache's *Grafemele absentei: indolieri, inscriptionari, anamneze*/ *Graphemes of Absence: Mourning, Insignia, Anamnesis* published in 2023. Andi Mihalache is a culture historian with the Institute for History in Iasi, a branch of the Romanian Academy and has published research on cultural representation. It is with painstaking rigor that Mihalache (2023) lays out and analyses the socio-cultural and anthropological tenets of the imagery of death in literary and non-fictional texts. His is a comprehensive and astute look at all things thanatological; the slew of cultural anthropological theories he submits are aptly illustrated, indeed bountifully so, with salient examples from universal literature. Death can arguably be mis/construed in myriad ways, each in turn in fact failing to detect its quintessence. Death is idiosyncratic - and, subsequently, the representations thereof are idiosyncratic as well, - as circumstances of death hardly resemble one another. Mihalache (2023) identifies sites of semiotic significance whereby death is represented, and the following paradigmatic configurations: names, bodies, scars; and of remembrance: statues. Indeed, these constitute the structure of the chapters, under the arch-category of death as absence. The book also comprises a post-intro and a name index.

Much of fiction writing, Mihalache (2023) argues, is sarcophagus-writing, as it were. What he means by coining this syntagm is that, quoting Handke (2022), "Cand scriu, scriu in mod necesar despre trecut, despre ceva consumat – pe perioada scrisului, cel putin. Ma indeletnicesc cu scrisul, ca de obicei, exteriorizat si

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obiectivat într-o masinarie de amintiri și formulari.”¹ (Handke 2022 quoted in Mihalache 312). Hence the ideological encapsulation of writing into a sarcophagus-like structure. Deferring the act of submitting writing to readership, indeed the procrastination of reception is at times the *modus operandi* of authors, whose act of writing is cherished in and of itself, followed by an absence of sharing. As Annie Ernaux puts it, “(...) n-am nimic de așteptat de la scriitura, unde nu se întâmplă decât ce pui tu în ea. A continua să scriu înseamnă și să amănangoasa de a le da celorlalti să citească acest text.”² (Ernaux 1992 quoted in Mihalache 313). New facets of the concept of absence indeed; to say nothing of what Mihalache (2023) terms ‘*literariness as self-inscription*’ (Mihalache 313).

As such, literariness has more often than not taken the guise of the corporeal, as Mihalache (2023) argues:

Literaritatea a avut, (...) și o componentă corporalizantă. Și nu e nevoie să ne reamintim de tatuajele naziste, destul de relevantă fiind relația dintre trup și limbaj în gândirea unui filosof al culturii de talia lui George Steiner: ‘Fiecare cuvânt, mai mult, fiecare sunet articulat și semnificația lui potențială își are propriul său context non-lingvistic. Limbajul corpului este o stenografie menită să acopere multitudinea de componente ale posturii, gestului și mișcării fizice care însoțesc, califica și adeseori slabesc sau contrazic o afirmație’.³ (Steiner 2015: 170 quoted in Mihalache 314)

Indeed, body language, used in the sense of inscriptions of ideology on the body (in the case of Nazi extermination camp tattoos) reveal the juxtaposed absence of empathy on the one hand and the heralding of impending death on the other hand.

¹ “When I write, I necessarily write about the past, about something that has been consumed – throughout the writing process, at least. I exercise writing, as usual, in an outward manner and indeed my writing gets reified into a machinery of remembrance and wording.” (translation by Anemona Alb)

² “I have no expectations from discourse, where nothing happens except for what you yourself throw into it. Keeping on writing equally means deferring the anguish of giving the others this text for them to read.” (translation by Anemona Alb)

³ “Literariness has had a corporeal component as well. And it’s hardly necessary for us to recollect the Nazi tattoos, the correlation between the body and language being quite relevant in the thinking of a philosopher of culture such as George Steiner: each and every word, moreover, each and every sound that is articulated and its potential significance, they all have their own non-linguistic context. Body language is some sort of stenography meant to cover the multitude of components of posture, of gesture and of physical movement that accompany, qualify and contradict a statement’.” (translation by Anemona Alb)

Absence is more often than not obscured by the remains of the act *per se* or, in Handke's example, by the presence of the corpse of the person he's grieving; as he poignantly writes,

Cum pana la sosire n-am reusit sa descopar nici un indiciu, nici un semn prevestitor, trupul ei mort in camera inghetata m-a luat iar cu totul pe nepregatite (...). In dimineata zilei cand trebuia inmormantata, am ramas multa vreme singur cu moarta in camera. Sentimentele mele concordau dintr-o data cu obiceiul raspandit al priveghiului. Chiar si acest trup mort imi parea ingrozitor de parasit si de avid de iubire.⁴(Handke 2022: 313)

The ultimate abandonment is at work here, in the impossibility of companionship beyond death. Abandonment is used ambivalently here, both in the sense of the next-of-kin abandoning the dead body and of the deceased abandoning themselves into lifelessness.

In terms of the semiotics of inscription, Mihalache (2023) pinpoints the outstanding theories that philosophy and cultural anthropology have put forward to date. As such, frameworks like 'the reification of image' (Alain Besancon, *The Prohibited Image*), 'artistic creation as spectacle' (Horst Bredekamp, *The Image Act*) and 'the temporalized experience of gaze' (John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*) are eloquently discussed by Mihalache (2023). In order to illustrate the notion of memory and the insignia thereof, Mihalache (2023) quotes Marin Tarangul as saying:

Ca sa-si dea seama de simtul de pietate al cuiva, grecii il intrebau daca are un mormant al familiei si daca isi cinsteste stramosii. Prins in fuga zilei, omul nu este prea atent la realitatea pe care o au in memoria noastra aceste lucruri. Omul nu este destul de atent la propria lui memorie. Iar cultul stramosilor este ecoul acestei dinastii sufletesti care este de fapt povestea propriei noastre memorii.⁵ (Tarangul

⁴ "As I had failed to discover the shred of a clue by the time of my arrival, not the tiniest clue, nor any foreboding sign or omen, her dead body in the mortuary took me by surprise yet again (...). In the wee hours of the day when she needed to be buried, I was left by myself with the deceased in the room. My feelings suddenly got attuned to the widespread custom of the wake. Even the dead body seemed terribly forlorn and eager for love." (translation by Anemona Alb)

⁵ In order to assess someone's devoutness, the Greeks would ask that person whether they had a family crypt and whether they honored their forefathers. Enmeshed in the daily rat race, people hardly pay attention to the reality that such things hold in our memory. Man does not heed his own memory quite as much. And cultivating your ancestors constitutes the echo of this dynasty of the soul that is in fact the story of our memory *per se*." (translation by Anemona Alb)

quoted in Mihalache 2023: 381).

The ‘cultural semiotics’, to coin a term that therefore emerges is that of the memory-laden insignia on objects such as the crypt, the sepulchral space thereof carrying history, the family history, but also the history of our relationships. The ‘reification of image’, as Besancon coins it is rife with the plethora of family traumas and subsequent emotional neglect of the vestiges. Therefore, death as the Great Leveler is perceived by Mihalache (2023) not merely in its ontological sense, but in the sense of erasing any recollection of one’s past relationships as well, thus relinquishing all the hedonism associated with past bond.

The imagery of demise and of all things defunct is located by Mihalache (2023) in class-based hierarchies as well – see the semiotics of the royal effigies he refers to in the second chapter, entitled *Of Remembrance: Statues*. In that vein, he states “De-a lungul istoriei au existat mai multe forme de a suplini, in plan artistic, absenta unei persoane din planul fizic (...) efigia regala etc⁶ (Mihalache 2014 quoted in Mihalache 2023: 386)

All in all, *Graphemes of Absence: Mourning, Insignia and Anamnesis* (2023) yields a myriad of possible interpretations of the paradigms of semiotic inscription of absence, of memory, of the recollection of absence and of the sheer absence of memory. At times, anamnesis is an impossibility, as Mihalache (2023) adroitly demonstrates. Arguably, he is a bellwether of innovation in cultural and semiotic interpretation.

⁶ “Throughout history, there have been several means of supplanting, artistically speaking, the absence of a person, physically speaking (...) the royal effigy etc).” (translation by Anemona Alb)