

Desire is Death: The Death Drive and Repetition in Liliana Cavani's *Il Portiere Di Notte*

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Abstract

In 1974, Italian film-maker Liliana Cavani created an extraordinary film. *Il Portiere Di Notte (The Night Porter)* tells the story of Max and Lucia, a Nazi SS officer and his Jewish prisoner who begin a sado-masochistic affair which outlasts both the war and the concentration camp where it began. The film provoked outrage upon its initial release, with many seeing Max and Lucia's unorthodox love story as little more than an excuse to screen politically incorrect and historically insensitive pornography. However, while Cavani's film is certainly provocative and challenging, it is unquestionably much more than a simple work of cheap Nazi exploitation; the complex and often transgressive relationship of its protagonists gives rise to many questions regarding the nature of society and death, and it is only by viewing the film from a psychoanalytic standpoint that the true depth of Max and Lucia's dark relationship can be understood. This article will explore the relationship central to *The Night Porter* from both a Lacanian and Freudian perspective, taking key theoretical concepts from both psychoanalysts into consideration while attempting to better understand the exact nature of Max and Lucia's compulsively destructive relationship.

Keywords: Psychoanalysis, *Il Portiere Di Notte*, Liliana Cavani, Film, Death

Article

In 1920, prominent psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud published *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. It contained a radical rewrite of many of his previous theories, and culminated with the introduction of a principle known as the death drive. This relentless unconscious desire to experience our own deaths often manifests itself through the wilful commission of seemingly incomprehensible acts of self-destruction, as well as the desire to repeat and re-live past experiences of trauma (Freud, 2003). Fifty-four years after Freud published his theory of the death drive, Italian filmmaker Liliana Cavani made a film which shocked the world. *Il Portiere Di Notte* (The Night Porter) (1974) tells the story of ex-Nazi officer Max and his former prisoner Lucia, a pair destined to repeat in the present the sadomasochistic relationship which they had begun in the past amidst the violence and degradation of the concentration camps. The film was met with controversy and confusion upon its initial release, with some outraged critics seeing it as nothing more than fascist pornography, whilst others hailed it as a brilliantly complex work of self-reflection (Marrone, 2004). Through a brave combination of controversial subjects, Cavani brilliantly captured the dynamics of the death drive, placing the attraction for death against the backdrop of deathly decadence which characterized the Nazi era.

Freud first formulated his ideas regarding the death drive after his experiences as a physician during the First World War. If dreams are an expression of repressed desires, why did shell-shocked soldiers continually have nightmares in which they relived the trauma of the trenches? (Freud, 2003). The unconscious desire of the soldiers to repeat their traumas through their dreams seemed to hint at a latent desire buried deep within their psyches – a desire for death. Operating subconsciously and erasing all traces of itself from conscious life, the death drive works in opposition to the life instinct, subconsciously driving us towards the destruction we crave (Quinodoz, 2005). Experiences of trauma are often re-lived due to their extreme proximity to death – it is during traumatic times that we are closest to achieving the elusive fulfilment of our latent desire. This desire for death may override the pleasure principle (that which attempts to avoid unpleasure and seek pleasure), causing the repetition of experiences which seem to offer no pleasure (such as experiences of trauma) (Quinodoz, 2005). This would appear to place the death drive in the hidden realms of the psyche which lie beyond the pleasure principle (Freud, 2003; Lacan, 1979).

In order to understand how the sadomasochistic relationship enjoyed by the protagonists of *The Night Porter* relates to the death drive, it is necessary to understand the role of the masochist and the sadist in relation to their joint desire for death. Due to her passivity during acts of violence, it is the masochist who experiences the majority of the trauma (pain) and consequently comes closest to achieving her desire (death) (Quinodoz, 2005). The sadist may only come close to the realization of his desire (death) through experiencing by proxy the pain he inflicts upon the masochist – the sadist therefore becomes enthralled, not with his capacity for cruelty, but with the recognition and identification with the pain he is inflicting – (Torlasco, 2008).

The voyeurism which results in Max's fascination with filming the acts of violence to which he subjects Lucia during her time in the concentration camp is symptomatic of his wish to identify with her pain. Just as the audience of a film identifies with the characters on the screen, so Max's desire to look at Lucia through his camera is suggestive of his wish to identify with her – to live out his fantasy of trauma through the reality of her trauma. Although it is tempting to inflexibly assign the role of sadist to Max and masochist to Lucia, their relationship is often considerably more complex, characterized by frequent role reversal and their reciprocally interchangeable desire to be both sadistically cruel and masochistically abused (Torlasco 2008).

This reversal of roles is particularly evident during a scene which takes place in Max's apartment after Lucia has left her husband. In an unusually aggressive action which seems to contradict Lucia's passivity, she locks Max out of his bathroom and smashes a glass bottle on the floor; she then unlocks the door and retreats to the far end of the room. Max, who is indignantly attempting to force his way into the bathroom, unexpectedly finds the door has been unlocked, bursts into the room, and predictably cuts his feet on the shards of glass (*The Night Porter*, 1974). He takes visible pleasure in the sensation of pain which follows, whilst Lucia appears to be satisfied with her role as the inflictor. Curiously, Lucia then slips her hand under Max's bleeding foot; he grinds her fingers into the shards of glass, allowing for the mutual intermingling of pain. This incident demonstrates the exchangeable positions of the masochist and the sadist, as Max and Lucia interchangeably

occupy both passive and active roles during this performance, enabling a shared experience of the trauma which brings them closer to their desire for death.

The above sequence demonstrates Max and Lucia's creation of an elaborate, repetitive performance centred around the masochistically exciting motif of the death drive. Max and Lucia's obsessive replication of their past relationship may be reasonably compared to the compulsion to repeat felt by the traumatised subject; although their respective conscious egos attempt to dissuade the pair from rekindling their sadomasochistic relationship, the subconscious pull of the death drive proves too much to resist, returning them unavoidably to the self-destructive spiral which coloured their original relationship.

The repetitive dimension of their association is emphasised in the film, as the majority of the narrative focuses on the almost exact duplication of their past actions in the present, with the most obvious direct transposition centring around Lucia's nightdress. Although Lucia later demonstrates conscious resistance, she has already subconsciously submitted to the inevitable repetition of her performance with Max with the purchase of the pink nightdress from the antique shop – a nightdress to which she is attracted solely because of its resemblance to one given to her by Max during their initial relationship. Later, when Lucia has given up even conscious resistance and joined Max in his apartment, intercut flashbacks of the original event act as representations of repressed memories determined to return to the conscious mind. The repetitive element is further emphasized through spatial and graphic matches, as the spatial positions occupied by Max and Lucia in the diegetic past (shown through flashbacks) are directly mirrored by their positions in the film's diegetic present.

The Freudian formulation of the death drive understands the desire for death only in terms of a desire for physical, biological death. We have an innate desire to return to the organic non-existence which would come with physical death, and it is primarily our desire to reproduce which drives the life instinct (Freud, 2003). However, French psychoanalyst and unorthodox follower of Freudian theory Jacques Lacan added another dimension to the death drive – the desire for symbolic death. According to Lacanian theory, the desire for symbolic death stems from the realization that

the world we experience is merely a fantastical construct of the Symbolic Order (the Symbolic Order being the order joined by the growing infant when he goes through the imaginary phase of the Mirror Stage and begins to use and understand language). (Nobus, 1995). The Symbolic Order is constructed to mask the eternally present terror of the real, which remains unacknowledged and obscured by the conscious ego. Beyond the fantasy of the Symbolic Order, there lies only the reality of death (Zizek, 1989).

The repetition of trauma occurs due to our innate attraction to the lethal Other (death, both symbolic and physical) which lies beyond the Symbolic Order. However, according to Lacan, it is possible to reach symbolic death and depart from the Symbolic Order before achieving the reality of biological death. This opens up the possibility of a space between the two deaths – a 'real' place existing beyond fantasy, which may be entered through the conscious rejection of existence as constructed by the Symbolic Order (Zizek, 1989). As they are caught between the ever elusive fulfilment of their desire for physical death, and the symbolic death they eventually achieve via their departure from the constraints of the Symbolic Order, Max and Lucia may be viewed as existing in this space between the deaths.

The couple do indeed depart from the Symbolic Order in a number of ways. Their initial relationship in the concentration camp may be seen as the original departure, but there is a much stronger departure to be found later in the film, as both Max and Lucia choose to reject their respective roles in the Symbolic Order: Lucia through her action of leaving her socially acceptable husband, and Max through his refusal to participate in the mock "trial" prescribed as therapy by his ex-Nazi comrades. As the compulsion to repeat is seen as a symptom of neurosis by Freud, the seemingly therapeutic process of Max undergoing the "trial" may clearly be viewed as a parallel of the patient going through psychoanalytic therapy. The group's attempt to control Max's compulsion to repeat through the elimination of Lucia, as well as their emphasis on the cathartic nature of exploring past crimes is remarkably similar to a therapist's effort to cure his patient of repetition compulsion through the exploration and elimination of repressed traumas. Failure of therapeutic analysis at this stage often results in the death drive and the compulsion to repeat becoming dominant (Quinodoz, 2005).

Max is well aware that his refusal to participate in the trial – as well as his protection of Lucia – will lead to his banishment from society (and ultimately to his death), and his acceptance of this fact heralds his departure from the reality concealing fantasy of the Symbolic Order and his entrance into the space between the two deaths. Lucia is also fully aware that her relationship with Max will lead to her death, but makes a conscious choice to stay with him even after she is given the opportunity to re-join the Symbolic Order (Max's suggestion that she go to the police is met with nothing but an enigmatic smile). As it is the Symbolic Order which attempts to conceal the certainty of death, this simple acceptance of the reality of their own deaths places Max and Lucia firmly in Lacan's realm between the deaths.

The couple's rejection of language signals their final departure, as linguistic speech constitutes a large part of the power of the Symbolic Order – “the wall of language” (Lacan, 1988, p. 224) which is used to hide the real – (Libbrecht, 1999). During the closing section of the film, Max and Lucia say little to nothing, choosing instead to rely completely on the looks and actions which have already heavily defined their relationship. In a performance which returns them to the origins of their relationship, the couple who have already experienced symbolic death then prepare for physical death. They have gone beyond the fantasy, accepted the eventuality of death, and can never return to the construct of the Symbolic Order. Their only option is to continue into the ultimate fulfilment of their desire – death.

Their performance is over.

“My love is a fever longing still,
For that which longer nurseth the disease...
...and I desperate now approve
Desire is death, which physic did except.”

William Shakespeare

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