

# Politics of death drive: dis/identification, transgression, war

European University Viadrina

Logensaal, Logenstr. 11 Frankfurt (Oder)

Thursday, 16th June 2022

15:30 – 15:45 **Introduction**

15:45 – 17:00 **Monique David-Ménard**

**Death drive: metaphysical entity, clinical reality or political evidence?**

Chair: Katja Diefenbach

The notion of death drive is a controversial one, both in psychoanalysis and outside of it in cultural theory. In fact, many analysts (e.g. Winnicott, Zaltzman), as well as many philosophers (e.g. Deleuze) consider it to be a useless notion. In their perspective, we only need a concept of repetition and not the supposedly biological and speculative notion Freud had coined. By contrast, in politics the death drive appears evident in the phenomenon of hate and especially in war. Silent and impossible to isolate from sexual drives, when it structures the subject of desire, the death drive is often seen as a metaphysical entity responsible for all kinds of destructions. How can we think the paradoxical status and the ambiguities of such a hypothesis: the death drive is the cause of destruction but also a resource of many creations?

Monique David-Ménard has a dual career, as a professor of philosophy and a practicing psychoanalyst. As the Director of the Centre d'études du vivant (2005-2011), she established the research field »Gender and Sexualities« at the University Paris-Diderot. She has published numerous books and articles in continental philosophy, among others *La Vie sociale des choses. L'animisme et les objets* (Edition du Bord de l'Eau, 2020), *Éloge des hasards dans la vie sexuelle* (Hermann, 2011), *Deleuze et la psychanalyse* (P.U.F., 2005).

**Coffee break**

17:30 – 18:45 **Eckardt Lindner**

**From spectral pasts to inorganic futures. On the temporal politics of the death drive**

Chair: Andrea Allerkamp

Freud's spectral archeology of the death drive marks it as the compulsion of the organism to repeat its traumatic origins in the inorganic. It is a demand to assimilate an exorbitant death, which cannot be bound by the living but presents itself paradoxically as its very condition. The impossibility for the organism to recover its condition introduces a radical temporal linearity, which for Freud can only appear as the haunting of an inassimilable excessive trauma insisting within

the conservative economy of the organism; as non-dialectical negativity. Deleuze's critique of Freud's empirical model of Thanatos (in *Difference and Repetition*), attempts to undo this binding and instate the death drive in its proper transcendental function as the pure empty form of time; as non-conceptual positivity.

The paper will use this temporal typology of the death drive to map various political uses of Thanatos in contemporary discourse (including accelerationism, New Materialism and psychoanalysis) and will question their implications and possibilities for current political struggles.

Eckardt Lindner is a lecturer in philosophy at the University of Vienna and Webster Private University Vienna. His research focuses on contemporary French philosophy, Critical Theory and Non-Philosophy. He is currently working on the philosophies and politics of exhaustion. Forthcoming in 2022 are: *Inorganic Life. Deleuze's Aberrant Vitalism* and *Post-Vitalism. Life and Passivity*.

19:00 – 20:15 **Oxana Timofeeva**

**The death drive of the Empire**

Chair: Jenny Kellner

Starting from the dialectics of an empty self, or abstract personality, and the phantasmatic figure of the Lord of the world, which, in the 6th chapter of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel presents as the »state of legality«, the paper will analyse the logic of empires not only as political entities, but also as forms of consciousness, and address fascism as a specific form of imperialism – more specifically, as its death drive.

Oxana Timofeeva teaches contemporary philosophy in Saint Petersburg; she is a member of the artistic collective »Chto Delat« (»What is to be done«), and the author of books *Solar Politics* (Polity, 2022), *How to Love a Homeland* (Kayfa ta, 2020), *History of Animals* (Bloomsbury 2018), *This is not That* (in Russian, Ivan Limbakh Publishing House, 2022), *Introduction to the Erotic Philosophy of Georges Bataille* (in Russian, New Literary Observer, 2009), and other writings.

**Dinner**

**Friday, 17th June 2022**

09:45 – 10:00 **Introduction**

10:00 – 11:15 **Hannah Proctor**

**»The coming to life of inorganic substance«: on life, death and the inorganic**

Chair: Till Hahn

This paper will take the strange speculative fourth chapter of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* as the starting point for a comparative discussion of Freud's seminal text with British Kleinian psychoanalyst Hanna Segal's essay on the threat of nuclear war: »Silence is the real crime« (1987). The traumatic dreams of patients who had fought in »the terrible war which has just ended« prompted Freud to rethink the relationship between pleasure and the compulsion to repeat, leading him to posit the existence of the death drive. Segal, writing during the Cold War, analysed instead the psychic impact of a possible future war so destructive it could only be conceived of as an »unimaginable void«. Freud's scientific detour turns to the origins of life, while Segal contemplates life's possible end in terms that also provide insights into the current climate crisis. Segal invoked her clinical experience working with destructive and self-destructive individuals as evidence of the possibility of quelling destructive forces on a social level, the possibility of mobilising »our life forces against the destructive powers.« Circling themes of

destruction and preservation, annihilation and survival, death and life, denial and acceptance, ends and beginnings, the external and the internal, the social and the psychological – this paper will ask what happens when the death drive is thought in relation to the threat of nuclear annihilation.

Hannah Proctor is Wellcome Trust Research Fellow at the University of Strathclyde in Glasgow, Scotland. Her first monograph *Psychologies in Revolution: Alexander Luria's »Romantic Science« and Soviet Social History* was published in the Palgrave Macmillan series Mental Health in Historical Perspective and she is now working on completing *Burnout: On the Psychological Toll of Political Struggle*, forthcoming from Verso. She is web/reviews editor of *History of the Human Sciences*, a member of the editorial collective of *Radical Philosophy* and a contributing editor at *Parapraxis*.

11:30 – 12:45 **Marc Rölli**

**Learning to rethink war**

Chair: Pablo Valdivia

Can philosophy contribute something to the understanding of the new constellations of war, most recently the war in Ukraine? Are we really dealing with a turning point in time (»Zeitenwende«) – and if so, how can we grasp it more precisely? Freud's concept of the death drive offers some possibilities to rethink the common »realistic« or »idealistic« conceptions of war. But these possibilities can only be seized if they are concretized in terms of a theory of power relations. How exactly do the powers of death and life relate to each other in the present?

Marc Rölli is professor of philosophy at the Academy of Fine Arts Leipzig. He works on the history of anthropology and its decolonial critique, in the area of social and political philosophy with a focus on epistemological and power-theoretical issues, design and art theory, pragmatism, phenomenology and structuralism. His recent publications include *Anthropologie dekolonisieren* (Campus, 2021), *Macht der Wiederholung* (Turia + Kant, 2019), *Immanent denken* (Turia + Kant, 2018) and *Gilles Deleuze's Transcendental Empiricism* (Edinburgh University Press, 2018).

## Lunch

14:15 – 15:30 **Alexander García Düttmann**

**Beyond beyond. Can there be more than one?**

Chair: Philipp Linstädter

Freud, in a famous letter addressed to Albert Einstein, suggests that war, in which the death drive manifests itself outwardly as destructive violence, may be unavoidable though pacifism remains deeply and organically entrenched in so-called civilised beings. Seventy years on, Jacques Derrida takes up the contents of this letter and tries to conceive of a beyond that lies even beyond the beyond in which the death drive situates itself when referred to the principle of pleasure. It is only in relation to this other beyond, more beyond than the beyond of cruelty, destructive violence, and death, that pacifism may be justified, Derrida claims. But can there be two forms of beyondness, two forms of »aneconomy«, if beyondness is to resist, or exceed, its appropriation and reinscription into an »economy« of peace and war?

Alexander García Düttmann teaches philosophy at the University of the Arts in Berlin. His most recent book publications include *In Praise of Youth* (Diaphanes, 2021) and *The Hopeless* (August, 2022). His translation of Jean-Luc Nancy's book *Cruor* was published in Germany in May 2022 (Diaphanes). In 2017, his edition of a lecture course on theory and practice that Jacques Derrida held in the mid 1970s was released with Éditions Galilée in Paris. In 2019, he acted in Albert Serra's film *Liberté*.

## Coffee break

16:00 – 17:30 **Samo Tomšič & Katja Diefenbach**

**Wasting politics. Death drive and its farewell in Deleuze and Lacan**

Chair: Rebekka Wilkens

Freud's concept of the death drive sparked controversies and divided the psychoanalytic community ever since its introduction in 1920. However, the concept obtained its full fame in post-Marxist philosophy, which used it for sketching out a politics of the unconscious. Without a doubt, this was due to Lacan's and Deleuze's affirmative return to the disputed notion. While today's »conflict of interpretations« revolving around the death drive still draws from both Lacanian and Deleuzian sources, a symptomatic development remains rather unacknowledged: Soon after they proposed their influential readings, Lacan and Deleuze dropped the death drive from their conceptual arsenal. Starting from De Certeau's remarks on the relationship between mysticism, psychoanalysis and torture, the joint presentation examines the reasons for this disappearance of a concept, and which other notions and problems replaced or displaced it. The paper attempts to shed new light on the Lacan-Deleuze controversy, initiated in 1972 through the publication of Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus* and Lacan's crypted response in his Seminar *Encore*. What can we think through this controversy and which divergent figures of radical politics emerge in its frame?

Samo Tomšič is visiting professor of philosophy at the University of Fine Arts Hamburg and research associate at the Humboldt University Berlin. He obtained his PhD from University of Ljubljana, Slovenia. His research areas comprise political philosophy, history and theory of psychoanalysis, continental philosophy and epistemology. Recent publications include *The Capitalist Unconscious: Marx and Lacan* (Verso, 2015) and *The Labour of Enjoyment. Toward a Critique of Libidinal Economy* (August, 2019/2021).

Katja Diefenbach is professor of cultural philosophy at the European University (Frankfurt/O.) and member of the publishing collective *b\_books* (Berlin). Her research areas include 20th century French philosophy, Spinoza research, Postcolonial and Gender Studies as well as decolonial readings of Western philosophy and its history. Besides numerous articles in these research areas her publications comprise *Spekulativer Materialismus. Spinoza in der postmarxistischen Philosophie* (Turia + Kant, 2018) and *Encountering Althusser. Politics and Materialism in Contemporary Radical Thought* (Bloomsbury, 2013; ed. with S. Farris, G. Kirn, P. Thomas).

**Organized by Katja Diefenbach, Till Hahn, Jenny Kellner, Philipp Linstädter and Rebekka Wilkens.**

This is primarily an in-person-event in Frankfurt. A link for online attendance will be provided at <https://www.kuwi.europa-uni.de/de/lehrstuhl/vs/kulturphilosophie/zukunftvortrag/index.html>

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