

УДК - 811.111

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THE EVOLUTION OF DEATH PERCEPTION THROUGH DISASTER WORLDVIEWS: AN INTERDISCIPLINARY ANALYSIS

Abstract. *The study presents a comprehensive interdisciplinary analysis of the problem of death through the prism of catastrophe discourse. The work reveals the evolution of death perception from primitive forms of fear in prehistoric societies to modern interpretations in a globalised world. The research explores the interconnection between anthropological, religious, philosophical, psychoanalytic, existentialist, and sociocultural approaches to understanding death. Special attention is paid to how catastrophic events transform the collective perception of mortality. The analysis begins with the anthropological origins of death awareness in primitive societies, tracing the emergence of ritual practices in funeral culture. Religious interpretations of death are examined through concepts of animism and beliefs in the afterlife. The philosophical dimension is presented through the evolution from classical to modern interpretations of death, particularly Heidegger's concept of "being-toward-death." The psychoanalytic approach is revealed through Freud's theory of thanatos and Jung's archetypes of the collective unconscious. The existentialist understanding of death is analysed through the works of Camus, Jaspers, and Sartre, who consider death an integral part of authentic existence. Of particular value is the analysis of the sociocultural dimension of the death problem in the context of contemporary global catastrophes, where not only individual but also collective perception of mortality is transformed. The biopolitical, symbolic, and mediated aspects of death in the era of technology and global risks are explored. The research demonstrates that in the discourse of catastrophes, death acquires additional dimensions — collective traumatic experience, biopolitical regulation, and mediated consumption—making its perception more complex but potentially more alienated from personal experience.*

Keywords: *problem of death, catastrophe discourse, interdisciplinary approach, thanatology, existentialism, collective trauma, biopolitics, death simulation, risk society, mediatization of death.*

DOI 10.34079/2415-3168-2025-18-32-166-171

Introduction. Human life cannot last forever, despite various religious concepts that assume the immortality of the soul. Life, as we know, has a beginning and an end – attributes of all living things. However, while birth is a phenomenon that has been thoroughly studied from various angles, death cannot be considered fully understood at this stage of scientific development, especially in the context of catastrophic events that transform the collective perception of mortality.

Today, there are many approaches to the study of death. Among the most developed are: *philosophical, psychoanalytic, existentialist, anthropological and socio-cultural approaches.* Their intersection becomes especially significant in the discourse of catastrophes, phenomena that massively overturn the idea of death and change its perception in the public consciousness.

Understanding the problem of death is a process of accumulating knowledge from different fields, analysing different historical periods and continuously growing human reflection. As Bauman (2004) notes: “Death is the great unknown majesty of our existence, and our knowledge that it is inevitable is the main source of our fear” (Bauman, 2004, p. 46).

The object of the study is to comprehend the problem of death in an interdisciplinary dimension. **The subject** is the evolutionary movement in understanding this problem through the prism of the disaster worldview in the most representative approaches.

The aim of the work is to demonstrate the evolution in the understanding of the problem of death by representatives of philosophical, psychoanalytic, existentialist and socio-cultural approaches in the context of disasters and to search for manifestations of this evolution in the cultural changes of a globalised society.

The methodology of the research. This research employs a qualitative interdisciplinary methodology to examine the evolution of death perception through disaster worldviews. The methodological framework encompasses three complementary approaches that together provide a comprehensive understanding of how catastrophic events transform collective perceptions of mortality across historical periods and theoretical traditions.

The historical-comparative approach traces the development of death perception from prehistoric societies to contemporary culture by examining burial practices, comparing death concepts across different epochs, and identifying transformative moments associated with major catastrophic events. This diachronic analysis reveals how societal attitudes toward death have evolved from what Aries (2016) terms the “taming of death” in medieval periods to the “death inverted” phenomenon of modernity, with each transition influenced by collective traumas such as wars, epidemics, and natural disasters.

Theoretical content analysis constitutes the second methodological pillar, involving a systematic examination of seminal texts across multiple disciplines. The research synthesises philosophical perspectives from antiquity to postmodernity, psychoanalytic theories of death instincts, existentialist conceptions of mortality as fundamental to authentic existence, and sociocultural analyses of death representation in contemporary society. This cross-disciplinary analysis employs close reading techniques to identify conceptual patterns and theoretical developments that illuminate how catastrophic events reshape understandings of mortality.

The third methodological component, discourse analysis, examines how catastrophe narratives construct and transform death perception in public consciousness. This approach analyses linguistic and symbolic representations of catastrophic death, media narratives surrounding mass mortality events, biopolitical discourse on life and death, and visual representations of mortality in contemporary culture. Through this analysis, the research reveals how catastrophic events produce particular discursive formations that mediate collective experiences of mortality.

The study draws upon diverse data sources, including primary theoretical texts from key thinkers across disciplines, anthropological and archaeological studies of prehistoric death concepts, historical records documenting societal responses to catastrophes, and contemporary cultural artefacts representing death in the context of global disasters. These materials are interpreted through an analytical framework that integrates anthropological perspectives on cultural evolution, philosophical hermeneutics, critical theory, and cultural studies approaches.

While acknowledging limitations regarding the predominance of Western theoretical traditions and challenges in synthesising diverse disciplinary approaches, this methodology enables a comprehensive examination of how catastrophic events function as catalysts for evolutionary shifts in death perception. The research maintains appropriate scholarly distance while addressing sensitive topics related to human mortality and catastrophic events, contributing valuable insights into how societies conceptualise and respond to death in the face of collective trauma.

Background. The question of the emergence of the concept of death will probably remain open forever. As Arias notes: “It is impossible to pinpoint even the moment when man first used the term. However, man began to feel human in our usual sense when he realised that his life was finite” (Arias, 2016, p. 28).

For the first time, intentionally created burials of the dead were found among Neanderthals. As Tokarev points out: “For our topic, the discovery in the famous Chinese cave Zhoukoudian is of particular interest. The location of the tibiae of two synanthropes led researchers to believe that the legs were bound, and bound posthumously” (Tokarev, 2005, p. 53). This may indicate a certain fear of the resurrection of the dead.

Anthropologist Levy-Bruhl states: “Primitive conceptions of death have always combined fear and awe, as well as an attempt to control what cannot be controlled – the transcendence of life” (Levy-Bruhl, 2010, p. 73). This demonstrates the primary connection between death and catastrophe as a destructive force that requires special ritual processing.

Primitive forms of religion, such as animism, totemism and fetishism, offered their own interpretations of death. According to Taylor, “Animism is of interest to us primarily because it is a kind of ‘primitive idea of the soul and is the same in its general features among many peoples’” (Taylor, 2008, p. 328). Wundt believes that “most likely, the concept of the soul did not first emerge from reflections on the life of consciousness, perhaps its original source is the phenomena of complete or partial cessation of conscious processes (death, sleep, fainting, pathological states)” (Wundt, 2012, p. 10).

In the context of disasters, ancient societies often interpreted mass deaths as punishment from deities. Ellingham notes: “Any natural disaster in ancient civilisations was perceived as a cosmic signal, a transcendental message, often associated with a violation of moral norms and collective guilt” (Ellingham, 2018, p. 142).

The philosophical approach to death has evolved from the ancient perception of death as a natural law to more existential interpretations. Plato (2002) argued that death is the soul’s transition to another dimension, and therefore is not evil, but only a transformation. Heidegger developed the concept of “being-to-death”, arguing that “the awareness of one’s own mortality is key to authentic existence” (Heidegger, 2013, p. 289). In the context of disasters, this is of particular importance, as disaster reveals the fragility of human existence and bring the issue of death into the centre of public attention. Baudrillard considers death in contemporary society as a “displaced symbol”, noting: “Catastrophic death as a mass phenomenon in the information society is turning into a simulacrum that loses its original horror due to the oversaturation of symbolic representations” (Baudrillard, 2011, p. 156).

The emergence of psychoanalysis is associated with the name of Sigmund Freud, who was heavily influenced by Schopenhauer. As Freud noted: “The problem of death, according to Schopenhauer, stands at the threshold of all philosophy” (Freud, 2019, p. 3). Freud developed the concept of thanatos – the desire for death, which is opposed to eros. “Every creature carries within itself a destructive impulse aimed at returning to an inorganic state. Catastrophes only intensify this instinct, bringing it from the individual to the collective level” (Freud, 2020, p. 201).

Jung developed the concept of the collective unconscious, which contains archetypes, including the Shadow archetype associated with death. “Mass disasters activate archetypal structures associated with death, creating a collective experience of transgression that can both destroy and renew society” (Jung, 2017, p. 105).

The existentialist approach focuses on the personal experience of death. According to Camus, “The only real philosophical problem is the problem of suicide. To decide whether life is worth living or not is to answer the fundamental question of philosophy” (Camus, 2010, p. 24). Jaspers has developed the concept of “liminal situations” where death is central: “Disasters create massive liminal situations when people face death not as an abstract possibility but as an immediate reality. It is in these moments that the true comprehension of existence takes place” (Jaspers, 2013, p. 87). Sartre saw death as an absurd element that undermines the meaning of any human project: “Catastrophic death demonstrates the absurdity of existence in a particularly acute way, because it interrupts life without regard to individual intentions and plans” (Sartre, 2016, p. 145).

Sociologist Bauman analyses contemporary attitudes towards death: “In a globalised world, disasters are becoming part of everyday media consumption, leading to the ‘banality of horror’ – the phenomenon of devaluing the perception of mass death through its virtualisation” (Bauman, 2004, p. 189).

Aries (2016) identifies five historical stages in the evolution of attitudes towards death in European culture, each of which was associated with certain catastrophic events: “From the ‘taming of death’ of the Middle Ages, through the ‘death of one’s own’ of the Renaissance, to the ‘death inverted’ of modernity, each transition was triggered by the collective trauma of war, epidemics, and natural disasters” (Aries, 2016, p. 251). Sontag explores representations of catastrophic death in contemporary culture: “Photographs of suffering simultaneously attract and repel the viewer, creating a specific ethical paradox of consuming someone else’s grief as an aesthetic product” (Sontag, 2013, p. 97).

Contemporary perceptions of death are transformed by global disasters such as pandemics, climate change, and technological accidents. Beck developed the concept of a ‘risk society’: “In today’s world, the production of risk exceeds the production of wealth, with death becoming a statistical indicator rather than an existential experience” (Beck, 2018, p. 75). Agamben analyses the biopolitical dimension of modern disasters: “Modern power turns biological life into a political tool, regulating the right to life and death through the state of emergency caused by disasters” (Beck, 2019, p. 118). Žižek considers the symbolic dimension of catastrophic death: “Contemporary pandemics and environmental disasters are bringing back the displaced image of death into the public consciousness, exposing the contradictions of the capitalist system and its inability to cope with fundamental finitude” (Žižek, 2020, p. 203).

Conclusion. This research has examined the evolution of humanity’s understanding of death through various disciplinary lenses, particularly in the context of catastrophic events that reshape collective perceptions of mortality. Our analysis reveals several key findings across philosophical, psychoanalytic, existentialist, and socio-cultural approaches.

The primitive conceptualisation of death began with burial rituals among Neanderthals, demonstrating early human attempts to process mortality through cultural practices. These early approaches to death were deeply intertwined with catastrophe, as ancient societies interpreted mass deaths as divine punishment or cosmic messages. This connection between death and catastrophe has remained consistent throughout human history, though its interpretations have evolved significantly.

Philosophical perspectives on death have transformed from Plato’s view of death as a natural transition to Heidegger’s concept of “being-to-death” as central to authentic existence. In contemporary philosophy, Baudrillard’s analysis reveals how catastrophic death in the information age has become a simulacrum, losing its original horror through symbolic oversaturation. This transformation reflects broader changes in how death is processed collectively in response to mass catastrophes.

The psychoanalytic tradition, from Freud’s concept of thanatos to Jung’s collective unconscious, provides valuable insights into how disasters activate deep psychological structures related to death. Catastrophes intensify the death instinct, bringing it from an individual to a collective level and activating archetypal structures that can both destroy and renew society.

Existentialist thinkers like Camus, Jaspers, and Sartre emphasised the personal dimension of mortality, with disasters creating “liminal situations” where immediate confrontation with death enables authentic comprehension of existence. These approaches highlight how catastrophic death demonstrates the absurdity of existence in particularly acute ways by interrupting life regardless of individual intentions.

Socio-cultural analyses by scholars such as Bauman, Aries, and Sontag track the historical evolution of attitudes toward death, noting how each transition between epochs was often triggered by collective trauma from wars, epidemics, and natural disasters. In our contemporary

globalised world, disasters have become part of everyday media consumption, leading to the “banality of horror” through the virtualisation and aesthetic consumption of others’ suffering.

Contemporary theoretical frameworks from Beck, Agamben, and Žižek demonstrate how modern perceptions of death are transformed by global catastrophes. The emergence of the “risk society,” the biopolitical regulation of life and death, and the symbolic dimension of catastrophic death all point to profound shifts in how mortality is understood in relation to social structures and systems.

This research contributes to the understanding of how catastrophic events function as catalysts for evolutionary shifts in death perception across cultures and historical periods. As humanity faces unprecedented global challenges such as climate change, pandemics, and technological risks, this interdisciplinary approach to understanding death becomes increasingly relevant for addressing collective trauma and building resilience in the face of mortality.

Future research should expand the cultural scope and develop integrated methodologies that can better capture the complexity of death perception in the context of global disasters.

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Стаття надійшла до редколегії 05.04.2025

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ЕВОЛЮЦІЯ СПРИЙНЯТТЯ СМЕРТІ ЧЕРЕЗ СВІТОГЛЯДНІ УЯВЛЕННЯ ПРО КАТАСТРОФИ: МІЖДИСЦИПЛІНАРНИЙ АНАЛІЗ

У дослідженні представлено комплексний міждисциплінарний аналіз проблеми смерті крізь призму дискурсу катастроф. Робота розкриває еволюцію сприйняття смерті від примітивних форм страху в первісних суспільствах до сучасних інтерпретацій у

глобалізованому світі. Досліджено взаємозв'язок між антропологічним, релігійним, філософським, психоаналітичним, екзистенціалістським та соціокультурним підходами до осмислення смерті. Особлива увага приділяється тому, як катастрофічні події трансформують колективне сприйняття смертності. Аналіз починається з антропологічних витоків усвідомлення смерті в первісних суспільствах, де простежується зародження ритуальних практик похоронної культури. Далі розглядаються релігійні інтерпретації смерті через концепції анімізму та вірування в потойбічне життя. Філософський вимір представлений через еволюцію від класичних до сучасних трактувань смерті, зокрема концепцією "буття-до-смерті" Гайдеггера. Психоаналітичний підхід розкривається через теорію танатосу Фрейда та архетипи колективного несвідомого Юнга. Екзистенціалістське осмислення смерті аналізується через праці Камю, Ясперса та Сартра, які розглядають смерть як невід'ємну частину автентичного існування. Особливу цінність має аналіз соціокультурного виміру проблеми смерті в контексті глобальних катастроф сучасності, де трансформується не лише індивідуальне, але й колективне сприйняття смертності. Досліджено біополітичні, символічні та медіатизовані аспекти смерті в епоху технологій та глобальних ризиків. Дослідження демонструє, що в дискурсі катастроф смерть набуває додаткових вимірів – колективного травматичного досвіду, біополітичного регулювання та медіатизованого споживання, що робить її сприйняття більш комплексним, але потенційно більш відчуженим від особистого досвіду.

Ключові слова: проблема смерті, дискурс катастроф, міждисциплінарний підхід, танатологія, екзистенціалізм, колективна травма, біополітика, симуляція смерті, суспільство ризику, медіатизація смерті.