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“OH... AND JENKINS... APPARENTLY YOUR MOTHER DIED THIS MORNING”: MONTY PYTHON’S MEANING OF DEATH

Streszczenie

Analizując *Sens Życia wg Monty Pythona*, Stephen T. Asma zauważa, iż film ten jest w dużej mierze „krytyką niedorzecznych i niebezpiecznych elementów społecznych, które sprawiają, że stajemy się nie-ludźcy, a do których należy zaliczyć między innymi różne ideologie religijne, podziały klasowe, naukę, medycynę, edukację czy też korporacyjną chciwość”. Ta opinia dobrze podsumowuje wymowę większości twórczości Pythonów, ponieważ specjalnością grupy jest wyśmiewanie „różnych sposobów, na jakie ludzie się od siebie nawzajem alienują oraz sposobów, na jakie alienują się na własne życzenie od szczęścia”. Ten esej analizuje wybrane dzieła Pythonów dotyczące śmierci i ludzkich postaw wobec niej, postaw, które najczęściej polegają na wyparciu śmierci ze świadomości. Grupa Monty Pythona podchodzi do tego tematu w równie surrealistycznym stylu co do innych zjawisk społecznych. W wypadku śmierci jest to wyjątkowo celne, gdyż śmiech pomaga uwypuklić bezsens ludzkich wysiłków i różnych prób negowania śmierci, które często zamiast ułatwiać, znacznie utrudniają nam życie. Terry Eagleton trafnie komentuje ten paradoks twierdząc, iż „gdybyśmy częściej myśleli o śmierci, z pewnością zachowywalibyśmy się dużo lepiej niż się zachowujemy. [...] Nieśmiertelność i niemoralność są ze sobą bardzo ściśle związane”. Pythoni testują ten moralnie wzbogacający aspekt śmierci, jak również jej inne oblicza, przypominając nam, iż śmierć czyni nas ludzkimi, a to, iż potrafimy się z niej śmiać, zbliża nas do siebie.

In *After Theory* Terry Eagleton writes, “My death is *my* death, already secreted in my bones, stealthily at work in my body; yet it leaps upon my life and extinguishes it as though from some other dimension. It is always untimely”¹. Present and absent, dormant yet always at work, “[d]eath is both alien and intimate to us”². As an often unacknowledged yet principal organizer of life and of much of our psycho-

¹ Eagleton, Terry: *After Theory*. New York: Basic Books 2003. P. 167.

² Ibidem. P. 211.

logical experience, “[d]eath represents Nature’s final victory over culture [and] the fact that it is culturally signified does not stop it from being a non-contingent part of our creaturely nature”³. In other words, death does not care how it is handled, portrayed and explained as long as we do not fail to die. This stance makes pretty much everything that has been said and written about death quite irrelevant or even absurd. Thus, it is only natural that the most absurd TV series in the history of British television should open with progressively wacky images of annihilation and a sketch about “some famous deaths”⁴. After the unforgettable opening sequence, where a man’s head sprouting flowers gets crushed by the famous giant foot, a woman in cabaret gear makes her head explode in a grenade-like fashion and a cardinal Richelieu type gets squashed by a falling angel, the audience is greeted by a smiling, grey-suited announcer who sits behind a desk only to get up promptly as “a squeal of a pig being sat upon” can be heard⁵. The screen cuts to a blackboard with several lines of pigs drawn on it and a hand with a piece of chalk crosses out one of the pigs. Next, the tallest Mozart in history (John Cleese) welcomes us to the show that looks at some famous deaths:

Tonight we start with the wonderful death of Genghis Khan, conqueror of India. Take it away Genghis. *Cut to Genghis Khan’s tent. Genghis strides purposefully. Indian-style background music. Suddenly the music cuts out and Genghis Khan with a squawk throws himself in the air and lands on his back. [Cut to] judges [holding up] cards with points on, in the manner of ice skating judges*⁶.

Genghis Khan scores 28.1, apparently not an impressive result as Mozart with a wide grin comments: “Bad luck Genghis. Nice to have you on the show. And now here are the scores”⁷. The scoreboard includes seven historical figures with St Stephen in the lead with his stoning, followed by Richard the Third’s grand death at Bosworth Field and Genghis, grand warrior as he was, is only number six. The sketch continues with Mozart introducing us to “this week’s request death of Mr Bruce Foster of Guildford”⁸, who dies in his armchair as unspectacularly as Genghis. At the end, “one of the evergreen bucket kickers”, Admiral Nelson, flies out of a window with a scream “Kiss me Hardy!”⁹

³ Ibidem. P. 163.

⁴ Chapman, Graham, John Cleese et al.: *Monty Python’s Flying Circus: Just Words*. Vol. 1. London: Mandarin 1990. P. 1. Most quotations from Monty Python’s Flying Circus’ sketches will be indicated by page numbers from this edition of the first and second series’ scripts. For additional clarification, in certain cases, the abbreviations E. for “episode” and S. for “series” will be used in the text of the essay.

⁵ Ibidem. P. 1.

⁶ Ibidem. P. 1. The italicized part of the quotation is action description and appears in this form in the original script.

⁷ Ibidem. P. 1.

⁸ Ibidem. P. 2.

⁹ Ibidem. P. 2.

And now for the thesis statement: the opening sketch of Monty Python's Flying Circus¹⁰ series signals several issues this essay will also attempt to address: first, death the great annihilator proves as always artistically prolific and limitless in its range (the opening sketch supports this part of the thesis); second, death in all shapes and degrees will be featured in the series and to what purpose it remains to be seen; third, the recurring theme of death and animals serves an additional and noble purpose in the Pythons' work; fourth, the denial of death is as problematic and dangerous as the overeager acceptance of it; fifth, one of the best ways to address the absurdity and necessity of death might be through singing. Apart from these five stages of dealing with death, the famous deaths sketch also mocks, among other things, everything this analysis and many other cultural creations intend to do. Just like the judges rating the famous deaths in the manner of an ice skating competition, humans, in their need to feel secure, love to categorize, compartmentalize, commodify, classify, rate and theorize, which is something the reality of death does not easily comply with. Mozart's artificial smile and smooth yet completely ridiculous announcements only emphasize death's leading characteristic of being random, unexpected, cruel, and ultimately chaotic, a characteristic that only a healthy dose of humor and acknowledgment can possibly help us handle but not necessarily make sense of.

And now for something quite alike: various ways to die according to Monty Python and what they add to the meaning of death. The TV series as well as the Pythons' feature films present multiple methods of becoming bereft of life, among which there are: a) rather probable causes of death: for instance, being shot in war while trying to present one's commanding officer with multiple clocks and watches instead of hiding in the trenches; being squashed by a 16 ton weight, or other heavy objects (multiple episodes); dying while donating organs; being poisoned by salmon mousse; crucifixion; or quitting the rat race by throwing oneself out of a window under the pressure of corporate heartlessness; b) less probable causes: dying while donating organs on the table in one's own home; being struck on the head with a large axe while trying to recite the Bible in one second; exploding since "[e]xplo-ding is a perfectly normal, medical phenomenon [and] [i]n many fields of medicine nowadays, a dose of dynamite can do a world of good" (E28 S2)¹¹; falling apart while coughing; or being thrown out of a window due to being an unsuccessful encyclopedia salesman c) totally absurd although not entirely improbable causes: the aforementioned annihilation by a giant foot; being swallowed by a fish with a swastika on its side; being shot with an arrow by an enraged pantomime goose; or being torn to bloody shreds by the legendary Killer Rabbit. This, of course, is just an insignificant selection of interesting deaths according to the Pythons. Regardless of what way we choose to rate or classify them, one thing remains certain: death has

¹⁰ The abbreviation MPFC will be used instead of the series full title, unless indicated otherwise.

¹¹ Chapman, Graham, John Cleese et al.: Monty Python's Flying Circus: Just Words. Vol. 2. Monty Python's Flying Circus: Just Words. London: Mandarin 1990. P. 65.

many faces and while some of them still remain hidden to us, the ones the Pythons offer may serve as a post-modern memento mori, which, while absurd and entertaining, seriously testifies to the reality of death. The more improbable the cause of death, the more likely our sense of illusory security and the stronger our tendency to ignore death's omnipresence and feel invincible. Through piling one absurd death on top of another (in E11 S1, in the murder sketch, framed by sketches featuring undertakers, the piling up of deaths is representative of the overall Pythonesque technique), the Pythons poke fun at how easily we take in violent deaths from multiple sources and, at the same time, how untouched we remain by death's true horror, the result of which is frequently manifested in increasing insensitivity and dehumanization. Psychologists claim that we tend to deny the reality of our own death, "but can conceive our neighbor's death, ... [which] only supports our unconscious belief in our own immortality and allows us – in the privacy and secrecy of our unconscious mind – to rejoice that it is 'the next guy, not me'"¹². The irrationality of most deaths featured in the Pythons' work exemplifies how unbound our imagination can be when it comes to conceiving and assimilating the demise of others, often in order to feed "our infantile wish for omnipotence and immortality"¹³. It is less than coincidental that many sketches and scenes in *MPFC* feature the army, soldiers, war, violence and horror. Critical of many "ridiculous and dangerous social distractions that dehumanize us"¹⁴, the Pythons expose the absurd human predilection to witness and cause gratuitous violence and senseless annihilation on a local and global scale, the epitome of which is the killer joke sketch significantly featured at the end of their first episode which begins with the aforementioned famous deaths sketch. More often than not, such destructive behavior that allows one to constantly shun one's own mortality yet easily abide, or inflict, deaths and suffering of others stems from the lack of an overall social "ability to face death with acceptance and dignity"¹⁵.

Obviously, no amount of serious psychological arguments makes the absurd deaths in the Pythons' work less ingeniously twisted and hilarious. But here is the rub, they still testify to death's omnipresence and unpredictability in a very real and grim way. One might not get annihilated by a killer sheep, but death by a trapped snake coiling itself around the shotgun and activating the trigger with its thrashing tail is apparently an option, which one Iranian hunter experienced in 1990 while pressing a gun butt behind his killer's head¹⁶. Thus, being struck on the head with

¹² Kübler-Ross, Elisabeth: *On Death and Dying*. New York: Scribner 2003. P. 28.

¹³ Ibidem. P. 28.

¹⁴ Asma, Stephen T.: "Against Transcendentalism: Monty Python's The Meaning of Life and Buddhism". *Monty Python and Philosophy: Nudge Nudge, Think Think!* Eds. Gary L. Hardcastle and George A. Reisch. Chicago: Open Court 2008. P. 94.

¹⁵ Kübler-Ross, Elisabeth: *On Death and Dying*. P. 28.

¹⁶ John, Andrew, Stephen, Blake: *The World's Stupidest Deaths*. London: Michael O'Mara Books 2005. P. 13.

a large axe while trying to recite the Bible in one second and being able to say only "In the ..." (E11 S1) is not as far-fetched as it may seem, reminding us yet again that the beginning and end might be nearer each other than we expect.

"Humans throughout history have enjoyed a relationship with animals – sometimes symbiotic, sometimes fatal"¹⁷. In *The World's Stupidest Deaths*, Andrew John and Stephen Blake give several gripping examples of human deaths caused directly or indirectly by various animals and resulting, most often than not, from man's stupidity or/and cruelty. For instance, in 2003 in Philippines, "a seasoned cock owner [...] had failed to wear any protective clothing" while preparing his trained bird for a fight and, as a result, died of multiple wounds delivered to his groin by the vicious cock¹⁸. Considering that cockfighting is "a cruel and barbaric so-called sport"¹⁹ and mindless entertainment for emotionally disturbed people, this lethal accident evokes little sympathy, testifying nonetheless to general human recklessness when it comes to danger and death. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross points out that such thoughtless or daredevil behavior is often a common defense mechanism in dealing with the fear of death – "if we cannot [successfully] deny death we may attempt to master [or challenge] it" by racing on highways,²⁰ taking up extreme sports or, for that matter, attending to a fight-hungry cock without a proper genitalia guard. The frequent pairing of animals and death in the Pythons' work is another reflection of the uneasy and dysfunctional relationship between humans and mortality. At first glance, a killer sheep, a killer rabbit or a killer pantomime goose are preposterous. They act not only against these particular creatures' instincts but first of all against our expectations. The absurdity of cuddly killer creatures could, of course, be read as a classic projection of human killer instincts and cruelty both towards men as well as towards other beasts inhabiting the earth. Although death and cruelty have always been present in nature, only humans have created the institution of war for purposes other than survival. Our inventiveness and unmatched intelligence have also intensified the awareness of the possibility of being annihilated, which, in turn, has resulted in an increasing fear of death and elaborate ways of defending ourselves against extinction²¹. Apart from weapons of mass destruction, humans have also invented and perfected complex machines to kill, chop, mince and prepare other living species for consumption. In episode thirteen of *MPFC*, which ominously opens with four undertakers carrying a coffin with the "It's" man inside, the Head Waiter (Palin) welcomes a married couple (Cleese and Idle) to a vegetarian restaurant:

This is a vegetarian restaurant only, we serve no animal flesh of any kind. We're not only proud about that, we're smug about it. So if you were to come in here asking me to rip open

¹⁷ Ibidem. P. 9.

¹⁸ Ibidem. P. 12.

¹⁹ Ibidem. P. 12.

²⁰ Kübler-Ross, Elisabeth: *On Death and Dying*. P. 27.

²¹ Cf. Kübler-Ross, Elisabeth: *On Death and Dying*. P. 25–27.

a small defenceless chicken, so you could chew its skin and eat its intestines, then I'm afraid I'd have to ask you to leave. [...] Likewise if you were to ask us to [...] drain the life blood from a pig before cutting off one of its legs or carve the living giblets from a sheep and serve them with the fresh brains, bowels, guts and spleen of a small rabbit... WE WOULDN'T DO IT. Not for food anyway²².

As he delivers the above tirade, the waiter audibly raises his voice and becomes oddly excited, indicating that such painstaking ways of preparing animal flesh are not foreign to him as the final comment confirms. On the one hand the sketch seems to be mocking the rants of vegetarian activists, but on the other, it clearly hints at a certain bestiality of the bloody methods that enable humans to process animals for consumption, methods that many take for granted and never care to question. Yet, when it comes to the disintegration of our own bowels, guts and spleen, most humans take ridiculous precautions to keep their body as intact as possible and preferably forever. We swiftly and dispassionately dispose of a sat-upon pig, but when faced with the swine flu or other lethal health threat, the indifference is immediately replaced with fear and panic caused by a sudden discovery of our ephemerality and mortality. Another reminder of how conveniently unaware of the other side of the coin we choose to be comes near the end of the sketch. Terry Jones' half-naked character enters the scene being pushed on a large serving dish with an apple in his mouth, which he promptly takes out to announce to the married couple: "I hope you're going to enjoy me this evening. I'm the special. Try me with some rice"²³. When the husband wants to greet "the special", Jones slaps him on the hand and quips: "Don't play with your food"²⁴. Indeed, don't play with your food because it has come at a price which sooner or later we all have to pay. In the midst of life, we are indeed in death, as much our own as that of other creatures, and yet, just as we prefer to remain ignorant in the case of slaughtered animals, unless a deranged waiter rubs the gory details into our faces, our own end also remains an issue that one seldom is prepared to consider ahead of time, which is why so many of us exit this world with a rebellious scream rather than a short squeal.

After a short intermission, the restaurant sketch is followed by a brief sketch at a cinema where "*a man [(Cleese)] in an ice-cream girl's uniform is standing in a spotlight with an ice-cream tray with [a dead] albatross on it*", announcing loudly: "Albatross! Albatross! Albatross!"²⁵ Cleese's character looks nothing like Coleridge's "bright-eyed Mariner", but selling the albatross lying in the middle of an ice-cream tray hints at the famous ballad whose main protagonist has a very close encounter with death due to the reckless killing of the harmless bird. The poem's moral "He prayeth best, who loveth best / All things both great and small" could serve as part of a punch line to the point being made here. Unappetizing as it might be, from time to time,

²² Chapman, Graham, John Cleese et al. Monty Python's Flying Circus: Just Words. Vol. 1. P. 165.

²³ Ibidem. P. 166.

²⁴ Ibidem. P. 166.

²⁵ Ibidem. P. 167

while eating animal flesh, one should pause and consider the sacrifice our fellow creatures make for us, which could be a healthy exercise in trying to accept the fact that our own bodies are perishable and, generally, far less useful after death. Yeats said "Nor dread nor hope attend / A dying animal; / A man awaits his end / Dreading and hoping all"²⁶. Animals live with death much more naturally than humans do, which is also a lesson the Pythons imply in their multiple sketches featuring animals. While a cuddly killer bunny or a lethal pantomime goose are hysterical in their unnatural behavior, they also, quite seriously, comment on the absurdity of human disrespect for natural order reflected, among other things, in the unwillingness to acknowledge mortality while freely dealing death to others. The human need to sugar-coat the reality of death is succinctly rendered in episode six of *MPFC*, in which a proud manufacturer of "frog" chocolates boasts to two representatives of the hygiene squad about the freshness and crunchiness of the product's filling, stating that his company uses "only the finest baby frogs, dew picked and flown from Iraq, cleansed in finest quality spring water, lightly killed, and then sealed in a succulent Swiss quintuple smooth treble cream milk chocolate envelope and lovingly frosted with glucose"²⁷. As in most good comedy genres, here too, the laughter helps bring to light the vices of man, many of which could be avoided if we dared keep death in mind more often. As Terry Eagleton observes, "[i]t is partly the illusion that we will live forever which prevents us from [...] behav[ing] a good deal more virtuously than we do"²⁸.

The prospect of having to die shapes our lives be it consciously or unconsciously. This knowledge underpins our complex fears, rituals and responses to death, one of which is the difficulty to address death openly in ways that involve more than only fixed phrases, euphemisms or media images. The Pythons mock this ineptitude to adequately and constructively talk about death in several sketches. Episode thirty of *MPFC* (second series) opens with a "[s]tock colour film of vivid explosive action for fifteen seconds: dog fight RAF style; trains crashing; Spanish hotel blowing up; car crashing and exploding; train on collapsing bridge; volcano erupting; [...] forest fire blazing"²⁹. From this a caption with four individual words zooms into focus: "BLOOD, DEATH, WAR, HORROR" and "*we cut to an interviewer in a rather dinky little set*" with words "Blood, Devastation, Death, War and Horror" displayed on a sign in the background³⁰. After briefly greeting us to "another edition of 'Blood, Devastation, Death, War and Horror'," the interviewer (Palin) announces: "and later on we'll be

²⁶ Yeats, W. B.: „Death". The Works of W. B. Yeats. Ware, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Ltd. 1994. P. 198.

²⁷ Chapman, Graham, John Cleese et al. Monty Python's Flying Circus: Just Words. Vol. 1. P. 72.

²⁸ Eagleton, Terry: After Theory. P. 211, 210.

²⁹ Chapman, Graham, John Cleese et al. Monty Python's Flying Circus: Just Words. Vol. 2. P. 91. The reason why this passage and some other passages are both italicized and in quotation marks is because they are action description and appear in italics in the script. This one describes the film images featured at the beginning of the episode.

³⁰ Ibidem. P. 91.

talking to a man who *does* gardening. But our first guest in the studio tonight is a man who talks entirely in anagrams”³¹. Needless to say, the words in the program’s title are never mentioned again. The triple meaningless repetition of the caption “Blood, Devastation, Death, War and Horror” leads to an equally pointless conversation between the interviewer and the man who talks entirely in anagrams, most of which are hardly typical anagrams and none of which makes any sense. The disparity between the program’s title and its content is amusing as much as it is alarming. The block capital letters of the opening words not only imply but clearly state that death is a fact, just as the rest of the grim footage is, yet we often choose to talk about mortality in linguistically inadequate formations. Paradoxically, although various media representations of death fill our lives daily, mortality as such is rarely discussed in a socially and psychologically constructive way. And yet, our inability to coherently converse about death does not impair our increasing obsession to witness the deaths of others via the mass media. In fact, it so often happens that “the greater our fear of death the greater our fascination [with it] despite the horror that accompanies it”³². This mediated acknowledgement of death, however, leaves the overall denial and fear of death unaddressed, just as it is done in the Pythons’ sketch.

In his study on death and humor, Allen Klein points out that while “there is nothing funny about death itself”, especially when it involves suffering, there is plenty of humor in situations “surrounding [...] death and lingering loss”, the most common example of which are all the “euphemistic substitutes for death” we use, such as, for instance, “met his end (Was the deceased double-jointed?)”³³. The Pythons have coined and gathered their own collection of circumlocutory phrases for death and dying in “Decomposing Composers”, a song first released on their 1980 Contractual Obligation Album, and in the unforgettable “Dead Parrot” sketch. “Decomposing Composers” enumerates a number of famous composers and matches each of them with a different euphemistic phrase for their current, non-viable state. Thus, “Mozart don’t go shopping no more”, “Elgar doesn’t answer the door”, “There’s very little of [Schubert and Chopin] left to see” and “You can still hear Beethoven / But Beethoven cannot hear you”³⁴. The decomposing composers definitely have “no fun anymore”³⁵, and yet their “music lives on” providing not only unending esthetic satisfaction to enthusiasts of classical music but also an excellent opportunity for the Pythons to mock the human tendency to avoid direct references to death. The realization that sooner or later, like Mozart, all of us won’t “go shopping no more” does evoke at least a chuckle and, hopefully, can make the

³¹ Ibidem. P. 91.

³² Tyson, Lois: *Critical Theory Today*. New York: Garland 1999. P. 26.

³³ Klein, Allen: *The Courage to Laugh: Humor, Hope and Healing in the Face of Death and Dying*. New York: Tarcher/Putnam 1998. P. 10.

³⁴ Palin, Michael: “Decomposing Composers”. *Monty Python Sings*. Virgin 1989. CD.

³⁵ Ibidem.

unpleasant subject of death more open for discussion. The “Dead Parrot” sketch (E8 S1) also uses euphemisms to expose and ridicule the common human inability to communicate the finality of death in a straightforward manner. In the sketch, an annoyed customer Mr Praline (Cleese) and a pet store owner (Palin) argue over the vital state of an undeniably dead “Norwegian Blue” parrot, which, according to the shopkeeper, is only resting or simply “prefers kippin’ on its back”³⁶. Death denial is ridiculed through a reversed process here: Praline actually calls death by its name (“It’s stone dead”, “That parrot is definitely deceased”), but the pet shop owner, reluctant to refund his money, convinces him otherwise and claims that the bird is merely “stunned”, forcing Praline to resort to a torrent of euphemisms ranging from the simple “This parrot is no more!” to the more sophisticated: “It’s rung down the curtain and joined the choir invisible”³⁷. Unlike the “Blood, Devastation, Death, War and Horror” sketch, the “Dead Parrot” dialogue features death at its center, but here the shop owner is actually able to grasp the reality of the parrot’s death only through more descriptive references, alluding to the general human inclination to talk about death in euphemisms. What makes the sketch an additionally apt comment on the tendency to ignore the awkward topic of mortality in everyday situations is the fact that Praline originally purchased the bird dead, allowing himself to be assured that “its total lack of movement was due to it being tired and shagged out after a long squawk”, while, in fact, “the only reason that the parrot had been sitting on its perch in the first place was that it had been nailed there”³⁸. The stiff creature in question is of equal importance here: first, the successful sale of the ex-parrot proves that death might be awkward to mention but is extremely marketable and sells easily (the afore-discussed death and devastation in the media); second, the bird becomes the object of an absurd refund hassle, as if any satisfactory reimbursement was possible in the case of death; and third, parrots, being tropical birds, do not come from Scandinavia, so the Norwegian Blue is a truly “remarkable bird” as it is non-existent. Apart from the general human reluctance to seriously deal with death, the multi-layered absurdity of the sketch also points to what has been mentioned in the introduction: even if we finally muster our courage and verbal resources to define, expose, discuss and name death, it does not make non-being an easy commodity to handle because, by definition, non-existence eludes being grasped³⁹.

Part VII of *Monty Python’s The Meaning of Life*, titled “Death”, also comments on the pointlessness of both death denial and the efforts to discuss and argue about mortality, especially when it is done to culturally and socially tame it rather than accept one’s own natural limitations. When a traditional image of Death with a scythe appears at the door of a middle class country house, the host fails to recognize

³⁶ Chapman, Graham, John Cleese et al. *Monty Python’s Flying Circus: Just Words*. Vol. 1. P. 104.

³⁷ *Ibidem*. P. 105.

³⁸ *Ibidem*. P. 105.

³⁹ Cf. Eagleton, Terry: *After Theory*. P. 213, 215, 217.

Death's grimness and treats Him as a mere inconvenience, assuming this is just someone who, unscheduled, came to trim the hedge. More gracious, the hostess invites Death in, offers "Him" a drink and introduces Mr Death to the rest of the company. It takes Mr Death a while to get the message about who He is across, as even when He demonstrates His otherworldliness by walking through the table, both the hosts and the guests pause only for a moment and then, "delighted", tell Death that it is "a unique experience" and that they "were just talking about death only five minutes ago", wondering "whether death is really the end [...] or whether there is ... and one so hates to use words like 'soul' or 'spirit'"⁴⁰. One of the guests, Debbie from Philadelphia (Palin), asks Mr Death directly about an afterlife, a question which Death, flabbergasted, ignores, announcing bluntly instead, "I have come for you"⁴¹. After Debbie glibly challenges Mr Death about the impossibility of all of them dying at the same time, Death announces the cause by pointing to the salmon mousse and, "quite casually", orders everyone to follow Him, to which the host reacts by grabbing a gun and shooting the Grim Reaper. The attempt to get rid of Mr Death is obviously futile and the frightened Host hurriedly apologizes, "Just testing, sorry". No matter whether treated politely or with hostility, death can be delayed, interrupted or tamed with talking and theorizing only temporarily, and all efforts to eliminate it are invariably bound to fall through. To paraphrase Eagleton, society and culture are "right that a natural event like death can be signified in a myriad of cultural styles", but the bottom line is that "we die anyway"⁴² and, as Praline might have concluded, culture "don't enter into it"⁴³.

Regardless of how unable we are to talk about death on a less abstract and more down-to-earth level, or when we finally do how ineffective it often proves, the issue of overt morbidity and the unconditional acceptance of death can also be problematic and, as such, are not left unridiculed by the Pythons. A brilliant spoof of the legendary King Arthur's quests and battles, *Monty Python and The Holy Grail* takes on multiple medieval quirks, including the low life expectancy, the Black Death, and the morbid obsession with death. The less than healthy atmosphere of *vanitas* is satirized in the "Bring out your dead" scene, in which the Dead Collector refuses to take on his cart a half-dead man not because it is not humane but because it is "against regulations", which, however, can be easily sidestepped by hitting the seriously ill yet still undead on the head with a club⁴⁴. Similarly, the song merrily chirped in praise of Brave Sir Robin ridicules the chivalric code and the willingness to sacrifice one's life:

He was not afraid to die,
Oh Brave Sir Robin,

⁴⁰ Monty Python's *The Meaning of Life*. Dir. Terry Jones. Universal 2004.

⁴¹ Ibidem.

⁴² Eagleton, Terry: *After Theory*. P. 163.

⁴³ Chapman, Graham, John Cleese et al. *Monty Python's Flying Circus: Just Words*. Vol. 1. P. 104.

⁴⁴ *Monty Python and The Holy Grail*. Dir. Terry Gilliam and Terry Jones. Sony Pictures 2006.

He was not at all afraid to be killed in nasty ways
Brave, brave, brave, brave Sir Robin.
He was not in the least bit scared to be mashed into a pulp
Or to have his eyes gouged out and his elbows broken;
To have his kneecaps split and his body burned away,
And his limbs all hacked and mangled, brave Sir Robin⁴⁵.

When it comes to Sir Robin's penis, Sir Robin stops the scop. Death is ok but having one's manhood mangled is less than ok since one cannot enter the eternal kingdom without being properly equipped. The medieval indifference in the face of death seems neither healthier nor more logical than the modern denial of death, and, as historians report, it went hand in hand with religious fervor leading to many an unethical crusade in the name of recapturing the Holy Land. All the brutal ways of inflicting death on Brave Sir Robin are in fact what the medieval crusaders were often accused of. Many Brave Sir Robins, blinded by greed and the promise of immortality, gave as little attention to their own annihilation as to that of others.

And speaking about immortality: is there a life after death according to the Pythons? The answer comes in episode thirty six of *MPFC*, in which chairman Roger Last (Cleese) gathers three “late” guests in “*a late-night religious-type discussion*”⁴⁶. After posing the aforementioned question to the three dead interviewees, one of whom is “the very late Prebendary Reverend Ross”, chairman Last faces utter silence and then promptly concludes: “Well there we have it, three say no”⁴⁷. As far as the general absurdity of most sketches goes, this one is quite unequivocal and the punch line is surprisingly logical for a change.

So what is the meaning of death according to Monty Python? Struggling for a coherent conclusion when it comes to the Pythons is very much like struggling to impose order on the chaos that death causes for all of us. The Pythons would probably prefer to paraphrase their own words: “Well, [just like the meaning of life, the meaning of death] is nothing special. [...] [T]ry to live in peace and harmony with people of all creeds and nations”⁴⁸, and, if possible, try to apply the same creed of balance and moderation to death. In the view of psychologists and cultural critics, most suffering in the world stems from the fear of death, which, when acknowledged and handled, can be coined into a lesson of humanity, preventing one from curtly informing another person in the fashion of the unfeeling school-teacher: “Oh... and Jenkins... apparently your mother died this morning”⁴⁹. While trying to make sense of mortality, it might be difficult to always look on the bright side of life, but one does not have to be morbid to simply remember that grim as death might be, it is not a punishment for sins or life's enemy. In the last scene of

⁴⁵ Ibidem.

⁴⁶ Chapman, Graham, John Cleese et al. *Monty Python's Flying Circus: Just Words*. Vol. 2. P. 188.

⁴⁷ Ibidem. P. 188.

⁴⁸ Cf. Monty Python's *The Meaning of Life*. Dir. Terry Jones. Universal 2004.

⁴⁹ Monty Python's *The Meaning of Life*. Dir. Terry Jones. Universal 2004.

Monty Python's Life of Brian (1979), the crucified companions teach Brian a valuable lesson: "life is quite absurd" and "death's the final word"⁵⁰. Life is chaotic, haphazard, and unjust (Brian is crucified by mistake); death, on the other hand, becomes the only constant that bears witness to life's absurdity and, thus, validates it. Like the rest of the movie, the final song is also a critique of the symbol which Christianity regards as helpful in making sense of death, while, in fact, what the cross testifies to is human cruelty and disregard for life, so indeed, "Life's a piece of shit, / When you look at it / Life's a laugh and death's a joke it's true"⁵¹.

Since the Pythons frequently formulate their morals in songs, it seems appropriate to end this analysis with one that provides an additional perspective on the place of death in life. Here are a few lines from a little number Eric Idle tossed off in the 1990s for the videogame *Discworld II: Mortality Bytes*, proving that the spirit of Monty Python literally lives on in another dimension:

There's a place you're always welcome,
It's as nice as it can be,
Everyone can get in,
'cause it's absolutely free,
That's Death.
No need to take a breath,
Just lie around all day,
With not a single bill to pay,
Hooray.
That's Death,
No more sicknesses or flu,
If you've lived beyond your means,
You can die beyond them, too,
Boo-hoo.
That's Death.
It's a tête à tête with fate,
If you're not feeling great,
Then it's the best way to lose weight,
Mate.⁵²

Too good to be true? Oh well, that's death and there is nothing we can do about it.

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⁵⁰ Monty Python's *Life of Brian*. Dir. Terry Jones. Columbia TriStar, John Goldstone 2003.

⁵¹ Ibidem.

⁵² Idle, Eric: „That's Death". *Discworld: Mortality Bytes*. Psygnosis 1997.

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