



Memento Mori and Modern Medicine: A Study of the Artwork of Damien Hirst

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Theoretical Study

Abstract

Death from the biomedical standpoint is a negative and technological issue. We need to be aware of death in order to have an authentic life and medical practice. Some philosophers and artists have shed some light on this dark side of modern medicine. This article is an interdisciplinary discussion on some of the conceptual art works of Damien Hirst which are focused on death and medicine. Hirst's installations and his critical point of view, which we have discussed in this essay, are some examples of how contemporary art can bring medical care closer to real-life human concern and disclose some ontological aspects of medical practice.

Keywords: Death, Modernity, Medicine, Ontology, Damien Hirst

"There is still something uncanny in the silence..."

Hans-Georg Gadamer

The experience of death, p: 66

"I can't understand why most people believe in medicine and don't believe in art, without questioning either."

Damien Hirst

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Introduction

Death, traditionally, is considered as the end of medicine and thinking about death is entrusted to theology and metaphysics. Even thinking about death is a marginal experience which leads us to encounter our existential condition in the word (Yalom, 1980).

Some thinkers and artists try to explore this

condition without reducing the solemnity and ambiguity of death. Damien Hirst is one of the prominent artists who shed some light on the main topics of medical discourse; illness, death, and drug and medical equipment.

His aesthetic and critical view could be helpful and inspiring for health care providers.

The present text is a collective reading about the works of Damien Hirst, contemporary British artist, due to the displaying of his works in Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art, Iran, entitled 'Pioneers of Modern British Sculpture' in February 2003. Damien Hirst was born in 1965

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in Bristol, England. He spent his childhood with his mother and stepfather. He first studied fine arts in Leeds College of Art, and then, in Goldsmiths College, University of London, and graduated in 1989. During his university years, he and 16 of his classmates established an exhibition called 'Freeze' in an abandoned warehouse; an exhibition which has now become a legend. Since then, different works of Hirst, such as paintings, sculptures, and installations, have been displayed in Europe, America, and Iran. The main theme of his work is the confluence of death, life, and illness. The unconventional imagination and strange metaphors of Damien Hirst have rendered art critics speechless each time with a new strategy. They have named him the most controversial living British artist and the worthy successor of David Hockney. Our incentive for collecting and writing a text regarding the abstract works of Damien Hirst was his poignant readings of modern medicine in his sculptures, posters, and installations (see <http://www.damienhirst.com/the-physical-impossibility-of>).

Unfortunately, the major creators of modern medical discourses, physicians, have rarely criticized and assessed the principles and rules of their specialized fields. It seems that the compact nature of this knowledge has not provided them the permission and opportunity to contemplate. However, scientific and cultural seismic logs have recorded dangerous tremors in the figure of the medical paradigm for decades. Foucault (1975) has stated that the organization and establishment of modern medicine was provided by silencing other scientific and cultural fields. However, presently, from within that silence, we are observing the emergence of images, texts, sounds, and imaginations that not only have slowly penetrated into the self-sufficient and self-referential myth of medical knowledge, but, by offering parts of their silence to this knowledge, have provided the opportunity for

hesitation and doubt for the masters of this field of 'science'. The remarks of cultural philosophers, literature of the novelists, and works of the artists have illuminated the medical paradigm each time with a different perspective and gradient. Damien Hirst, in his collection of unconventional and controversial works in the final two decades of the twentieth century, is one of these sounds and imaginations raised from the daunting silence. The cycle of life and death, modern medicine, and the category of medication and treatment are among the predominant themes of his works.

The experience of death, which has been marginalized from modern culture and hidden from sight, has reappeared at the center of life due to the natural imagination of. Gadamer (1996) has explained the denial of death by modernity follows: "It is not only that the funeral procession....is something that has disappeared from the life of the town. The real depersonalization of death reaches deeper still in the modern hospital. Alongside the loss of any public representation of what takes place, the dying and their relatives are removed from the domestic environment of the family. Death is thereby adapted to the technological business of industrial production."

One of Hirst's controversial installations is the display of animal corpses in glass cubes using preservative fluid. Installations that are sarcastically called 'Hirst's natural history museum'. Encountering these dead animals suspended in their transparent environments evokes in the observer's mind the forgotten thought of death and destruction, in the term "Memento Mori".

The latent awareness of death in these works is one of the factors differentiating humans from animals. Gadamer (1996) considers the categories of awareness of death and language as two fundamental features of humans. He considers the awareness of death, compared to language, as even more authentic and longstanding. However, the awareness of death

is the context of intellectual repression in modern culture. Death, from the perspective of modern thinkers, is a marginal and insignificant problem, to the extent that it can be said that thinking about it is entrusted to the arts, literature, psychoanalysis, and theology. Moreover, it seems that writing about it has a 'non-philosophical' characteristic. Although in the opinions of Tolstoy, Freud, and Bultmann more can be found on death than other topics in the writings of analytic philosophers who write about logic and cognition (Ahmadi, 2002). It seems that modern philosophy has not considered the experience of death as a worthy experience, but as a difficulty that has been solved and forever cast aside. The awareness of death in modern philosophy might be the forgotten death experience. This philosophy has never sought confrontation with hidden perspectives in the categories of nothingness and absence. This frozen awareness of death has rarely attempted to return dynamism and blood flow to its awareness. However, if this experience has forever been suppressed in modern thoughts and philosophy, why have we observed its presence in literature and modern art works in many different forms?

From the literature of Nietzsche and today's philosophical contents we have learnt that the components of a binary opposition, when encountering each other, are recognizable and distinct. Therefore, death is not the end of life, but its explanation and sign. By equalizing death and life, that which can be observed from the awareness of death is the 'courage to be'. This awareness of death is neither a faithful vision with the ambition of supernatural flight, nor a modern vision seeking to freeze 'death and awareness'. Perhaps the appearance of this passionate awareness of death can be found in the branches of modern art. Nevertheless, to what extent has modern medicine, along with other sciences of this century, been effective in the latency and suppression of thoughts of death? Death is the internal structure of the

universe and the background music of medicine (see: Foucault 1975). However, modern medicine has not attempted to listen to that music. Moreover, while it has emptied it from any vision, it has not replaced it with any other perception. Referring to death, like referring to any other taboo, is done with signs, silence, and other nonverbal gestures. Death, with the first dissection in the history of medicine, had an epochal role in the 'birth of clinics' and the appearance of modern medicine. However, the crucifixion of death in the lifeless body of men and on the dissection table by a physician's mind has pushed into oblivion its ontological dimensions. A physician does not normally know much more than a normal person about the meaning of death and his knowledge is limited to the methods and actions that can postpone it. Does Damien Hirst not want to return the courage of thinking about death to his readers while revealing the transformation of death, and is not a dimension of his criticism of modern medicine related to the lack of courage regarding the thought of death?

Hirst, in an installation named 'A Thousand Years' displayed the head of a cow in a glass cube this time without preservative fluid. What he displayed was the process of destruction and collapse. His work was a deconstructive movement to reveal the meaning of death in an unexpected environment. He deconstructed the environment and what would generally occur in silence and hidden under the ground was brought onto the surface and revealed. His work had brought death from its unconscious darkness to the light of consciousness. Nonetheless, this work, with its bitter sociocritical dimensions, sparked many political controversies.

Hirst (1996), in another work entitled 'Some Comfort Gained from the Acceptance of the Inherent Lies in Everything', made transverse cuts from the head to the tail of a cow and displayed them in separate glass cubes next to each other but out of order. His work showed

dispersion and separation while the title of this work noted the comfort in the continuity of things. However, the main point of the work was the entropy, as the underlying construction of every coherence and unity. This intangible entropy is, on the one hand, the memory of chaos, the chaos before creation and, on the other hand, the concrete and organized foundation of life, which suddenly appears and disappears into oblivion by death (see: <http://www.damienhirst.com/some-comfort-gained-from-the-a>).

Hirst (1991), in another work entitled 'The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Who is Alive', displayed a floating carcass of a 12 feet shark in a glass cube with preservative fluid. Charles Hall, contemporary critic, wrote of this work: "The floating shark, seemingly in balance and harmony, is confined in a container that is created for it. This intuitive visualization is an allegory of compromise of any hope and belief in the system the base of which is an unfair struggle to survive. Damien Hirst, with no hope of establishing order in life, is directed towards eternal death, the most constant fact is death." (Lucie-Smith, 1995).

The approach of Damien Hirst towards concepts such as death, illness, and medicine is not a clear approach. His works are paradoxical and ironic. Moreover, His works do not aid in solving today's complex problems. The method of naming his works and other ironies that lie in the content of his works and the environment of the exhibition are the unique features of Hirst's works. His works, as he has noted himself, do not require an observer with exploratory intelligence. With his works, he is trying to change the mind and body function of the observer; a change from an intelligent discoverer to a suspicious participant. These works need experience not discovery. The contemplation of the body's existence, whether human or animal, in Hirst's works might be the awareness of death in his works. In reality, if we are supposed to live with knowledge of and by referring to the

body, it is critical that we are aware of the inevitability of the death of our body. It is in the perspective of this fearful knowledge regarding Hirst's works that we ask ourselves if this decaying body belongs to us or this floating animal. In this strange suspense, where and what was the point of difference between me and that animal?

Hirst (1990), in 'A Thousand Years', has displayed two large glass cubes beside and in order with each other.

In one cube we observe the actual conversion of insect larvae and worms to adult insects, and then, their feeding from a dead cow head. In another cube, we observe their burning and dying due to their contact with a hanging Insect-O-Cutor in the glass area. Glass is the element most favored by Hirst in illustrating death. He described glass in a discussion as: "...hard and dense, but does not have anything to hide. It shows you, but does not provide it to you. It is dangerous but bright and clear." (Hirst, 1990). This delightful paradox exists in each layer of Hirst's works, and continues until it also deconstructs the work itself. It seems that mortal art is the most appropriate medium for the emergence of the death-focused imagination of Damien Hirst (See: <http://www.damienhirst.com/a-thousand-years>).

The position of pharmacy and chemical medications in modern culture and their role in modern medicine are other dominant themes of Hirst's works. Among these provoking works is the installation of 'Pharmacy', which was displayed for the first time in New York in 1991. At first glance, these works may be considered as a clear criticism of medication and their adverse effects. Nevertheless, it is not believed that Hirst would condemn medications because of their harmful effects, because any intervention has hazards and complications. We might be able to extend his critical reading of medications from the scope of their function to the position of their meaning. It seems that medications, in modern culture, have extended

the boundaries of their role, and have gained metaphorical and metaphysical roles. In these works, medication is both panacea and poison, therapeutic and destructive. These abstract works show how pharmaceutical companies, by creating a meta-reality, instead of meeting the existing needs, have created a need and attempt to present it as original and real. In fact, medications have departed from their scope of function in treatment and have entered the cycle of human needs. What you choose to wear, eat, and as your hobby, is equivalent to the medication you choose to use (see: <http://www.damienhirst.com/exhibitions/solo/2009/pharmacy-baltic>).

The idea of 'pharmacy' in Hirst's installation is a range of multiple meanings or a meaningless range. Hirst, with a deconstructive approach, is seeking to suspend the perplexity of language and visual signs. He has tried to represent the exact medical occasion by changing the location of the medication shelves from a pharmacy to a museum without disturbing the visual arrangement of the pharmacy, and color, graphic, and form of medication boxes. However, by entering anomalous objects, such as stools on which honey jars are placed or Insect-O-Cutor hanging from the ceiling, into the pharmacy environment, it seems that the respectable status of the medications have been challenged. The form and color of the objects, and the appropriate relation among them in the pharmacy environment induce an icon-based reading. In the wake of such an induction, the four same size jars containing colorful liquids can be mentioned, which are the symbols of traditional medication and perhaps alchemy. They apparently are also an allusion to the four main elements of water, air, soil, and fire. As Damien Hirst has stated, the electrical insecticides can be a symbol of divine power that, without any pity or selection, removes the insects from the circle of life; insects which have been led to the pharmacy due to the tempting presence of honey jars (medication boxes), like

the visitors of the gallery or museum (Hirst & Burn, 2001). In this installation, bowls with honeycomb are placed to attract flies, which are then eliminated by an Insect-O-Cutor. The honeycombs represent the natural world and contrast with the artificiality of the pharmaceuticals.

This sterile, sparse, clean space is at the same time reassuring and ominous. It may speak of help and recovery or of decay and dependence (Dominiczak, 2011).

The hidden paradox and metaphors in the other works of Hirst are also present in this work. Is honey a symbol of the deceptive and deadly aspect of modern medicine, or a symbol of the natural world against the 'civilized' or artificial world created at the hands of humanity? In this pharmacy, each medication shelf can be a symbol of the human body, because the medication boxes in each shelf are placed from top to bottom in the same order as organs in the human body. Therefore, medication related to the illnesses of the brain and nerves are placed on the top shelves. Then, respectively, the medication related to cardiovascular illnesses, diseases related to the liver and biliary system, and etcetera is placed. Nevertheless, no tablets or capsules are found in Hirst's pharmacy. The boxes of medications are empty. What attracts customers and their trust is probably not the knowledge of their effectiveness and adverse effects, but their attraction, and colors and forms in different packages. Modern medicine, in Hirst's perspective, is a faith-based organization and a powerful authority. The 'scientific belief' imposed by this system has introduced medication as the most powerful savior of humans against disease and the most trusted guardian of his life against death. People do not think for a moment about the adverse effects of medications, and wholeheartedly trust the colorful and bright forms of medication, but medicine only postpones death, and with all this I believe that art, compared to medication, is

more therapeutic (Hirst, 2005). Damien Hirst is an artist who has not remained silent about his works, and thus, the symbolic aspects and symbolism that have been mentioned here about his 'Pharmacy' are mostly derived from his discussions. Undoubtedly, a provoking work cannot be drowned in the dilemma of symbolic interpretation and its interpretation possibilities cannot be decreased. Thus, why does Hirst lead his work critics to these constraints? Does he want to debase his work? Is he testing if and when his critics will be deceived? Or, is he ridiculing our seriousness in dealing with his work and calling them contemplative?

Did Hirst, in his 'Pharmacy', have in mind the etymology of the Greek word 'Pharmakon'? Pharmakon is among the words or signs of interminable dispute in Derrida logs. Pharmakon, supplement, hymen, gram, spacing, and etcetera are interminable signs that do not have a clear meaning. They simultaneously reject and approve the two opposite conceptual poles in them; this and that, neither this nor that. Pharmakon not only means poison and medication, but it also neither means poison nor medication. Jacques Derrida, in a conversation with Jean-Louis Houdebine in 'Positions', stated that: "the pharmakon is neither remedy nor poison, neither good nor evil...neither speech nor writing ..." (Derrida & Bass, 1982). Like a woman who simultaneously has the pleasure of embracing and hatred of seduction in her arms. Pharmakon and other 'interminable signs' are certainly not able to perform the role of a third part in a dialectical relation "that can no longer be included within philosophical (binary) opposition, resisting and disorganizing it, without ever constituting a third term, without ever leaving room for a solution in the form of speculative dialectics." (ibid, p: 43) With this approach, it can be felt that the idea of 'pharmacy' according to Plato in "Phaedrus" and the idea of 'pharmacy' according to Damien Hirst in the Dallas Museum of Art have specific similarities. In "Phaedrus", Plato used

pharmakon in two strategic, but interacting meanings; medication and poison. Hirst's 'Pharmacy' also included honey and chemical medication. An environment, with multiple and paradoxical meanings, that simultaneously spreads absurdity and laughter in itself. The environment of Hirst's 'Pharmacy' is a suspicious environment in which emptiness (nihilism), beauty, sickness, death, anxiety, and laughter are pounding.

In another work by Hirst entitled 'The Last Supper', 13 medication posters in large commercial scales were displayed (see: <http://www.damienhirst.com/search?query=The+last+supper>).

The color and graphic designs of the posters and the name of the medications are perfectly consistent with their true form. However, what makes the observer suddenly laugh in front of these apparently serious posters is the name of different foods written at the top of each poster with the same hand writing, color, and graphic design of the poster (this is why the names are not seen at first glance). This work creates a biblical allusion where the breaking of bread is replaced by the consumption of drugs, most of which are for terminal illnesses (O'Brien, 2013). It seems that today, drugs are not only feeding, but also blessing us. In this work, the humorous aspect of Hirst is also seen. The observer is faced with an environment in which, simultaneously, the factual and conventional are not betrayed, and loyalty to reality is to the extent that no damage is imposed on the visual forms and signs, but in fact those familiar signs are silently changed from within. It is interesting that Damien Hirst's name, like the name of medication producing companies, shines at the bottom of each poster. Thus, drugs with all their respect and importance as one of the foundations of biomedicine are at a moment flouted. This concord between the name of food (steak, hot dogs, chips, and beans, and etcetera) and medication (amiodarone, morphine,

pyrimethamine, and etcetera) within a work called 'The Last Supper' is a rhythm that warns us of the little distance between us and death due to our 'innocent coexistence with drugs'. Hirst (2005) in a poetic form stated that "I can't understand why most people believe in medicine and don't believe in art, without questioning either."

However, is not the same humor and hidden seriousness observed in this statement present in all works of Hirst? Hirst's piercing gaze to medication and treatment in medicine is not a faithful glance believing in the healing effects of medicine. Instead, it is a painful gaze at the imposition of modern medication and medical instruments on our everyday lives in a breathtaking way. Although Hirst destroys familiar implications in the medication and treatment field, he pays attention to their aesthetic aspects. The rhythmic and consistent environment of the 'Pharmacy', attractive colors, harmonic placing of the medication posters adjacent to each other, and also the attraction and order of the steel medical tools in a work entitled "still" (Hirst, 1994) are evidence of the precision of Hirst regarding aesthetics in medicine (<http://www.damienhirst.com/still>).

Paradoxical resonance associated with the imagination of Hirst causes the fluctuation of his works between seriousness and humor, beauty and destruction, and nihilism and laughter. A fluctuation which causes turmoil in the gravitational field between two opposite poles in its every motion. Seeking refuge in the healing practice of medicine and, simultaneously, questioning the seriousness of such a practice is the origin of this fluctuation.

Medical knowledge, by disregarding philosophical knowledge and global-environmental relations, with the excuse of professionalism, has turned physicians into thousands of medicine boxes and a variety of advanced diagnostic devices. The doctor's cold, empty, and escaping glance in reply to the patient's concerned look has replaced the

meaningful doctor-patient relationship; that meaningful relationship with the whole mental and physical life of the patient, which is also effective on the practitioner's environment. Awareness of death, as the intersection of art and medicine, is the background music of Damien Hirst's works. This music, in its different variations, may be an indication of the different ways leading toward death, and within its long and short silences is a deferment to contemplate the most philosophical and most forgotten therapeutic and ontological dimension of modern medicine, "Memento Mori".

Conflict of Interests

Authors have no conflict of interests.

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