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To Each Their own Heaven — *Dead Like Me*, Secularism and Consumer Culture

Abstract: The article begins with arguments for the importance of popular culture studies. The author then refers to Jane Feuer's cautionary notes on precipitate conclusions about supposed correlations between observed changes in representations of certain narrative elements in television shows and the assumed "needs of the audience". The second part of the article contains an analysis of *Dead Like Me* (2003–2004), a Showtime network dark comedy created by Bryan Fuller and showrunned by John Masius. Religious motifs represented in the show are interpreted through the lens of the theory of secularization.

Keywords: popular culture, popular culture studies, religion, secularism, secularization, TV shows

The man is what he watches

When Ludwig Feuerbach coined his well-known phrase "*Der Mensch ist was er isst*" ["The man is what he eats"][1] in 1850, the German philosopher probably did not expect how it would eventually be used. As Melvin Cherno rightly points out, the author of "Principles of the Philosophy of the Future thought of it as consistent with the whole of his naturalistic Weltanschauung."[2] It may appear quite odd to open this discussion with a quotation from a philosopher whose attitude towards religion may be described as unfavorable at best. Recognizing the indisputable dangers of contextomy, one needs to admit that the phrase in question has separated itself from its original meaning and is now frequently interpreted in a metaphysical way. With myriads of existing academic and colloquial variations of the phrase, the one that I would like to address reads as follows: "The man is what he consumes".[3] The metaphorical power of Feuerbach's quote is used here

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[1] L. Feuerbach, 'Die Naturwissenschaft und die Religion', *Blätter für literarische Unterhaltung* 1850, no. 271, p. 1082.
[2] M. Cherno, 'Feuerbach's "Man is what He Eats": A Rectification', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 24, 1963, no. 3, pp. 397–406.
[3] D. Brinkerhoff et al., *Essentials of Sociology*, Boston 2007, p. 47.

to summarize the essence of consumerism. The presumption that in modern Western societies people are what they consume is the main argument for the importance of studies in popular culture.

The way in which one's consumer choices define their individual identity is in itself a part of a self-replicating system. By buying a certain brand of watch or living in a popular neighborhood, customers satisfy their need to express themselves and to adhere to a group. It is crucial to note, however, that this consumerist belonging is quite different from simple participation or the sense of organic membership in a nation, which was an experience shared by people in the pre--consumerist era. Charles Taylor, Canadian philosopher and attentive observer of contemporaneity, positions the alterations of human bonds in the consumer societies in the context of a broader process of the forming of individual identity. On the path that has lead into "the age of authenticity", humanity has undergone an expressivist turn and an egalitarian revolution.[4] The former had liberated individuals from their respective social roles (formerly conditioned entirely and permanently by the place they occupied in a social hierarchy). The expressivist turn, subsequently, relied on "the idea which grows in the late eighteenth century that each individual is different and original, and that this originality determines how he or she ought to live".[5]

The author of *The Malaise of Modernity* also points out another turning point that paved the way for the modern identity — consumer revolution. Emerging as a consequence of the post-WWII affluence in the United States and the countries of Western Europe, this alteration of social bonds allowed most of the society to enjoy the privileges that so far were restricted to the few rich.[6] In this brave new world "commodities become vehicles of individual expression, including the self-definition of identity".[7] Mass-produced symbolic commodities in the form of popular culture texts hence provide the horizon of styles and identities one can assume while searching for their authentic way of living. Therefore, works of popular culture are often seen as expressing the *zeitgeist* of the era they were produced in. In fact, it is an economic necessity for the creators of pop culture texts to appeal to the broadest possible audience and resonate with the deep-seated beliefs shared by the majority of consumers.[8] That is why numerous scientists turn to popular culture in their research of western societies.

All of the above notwithstanding, any conclusions must be drawn with extreme caution. Studies of popular culture have come a long way from the time when

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[4] C. Taylor, 'Źródła współczesnej tożsamości', [in:] *Rozmowy w Castel Gandolfo*, ed. K. Michalski, Kraków 1995, pp. 12–16.

[5] C. Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*, Cambridge, MA 1992, p. 375.

[6] C. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, Cambridge, MA 2007, p. 474.

[7] Ibid., p. 483.

[8] L. Schofield Clark, 'Why Study Popular Culture?', [in:] *Between Sacred and Profane: Researching Religion and Popular Culture*, ed. G. Lynch, London 2007, p. 9.

Frankfurt School's philosophers condemned the baneful influence that the capitalist culture industry supposedly has on the masses.[9] The fact that those allegations are not frequently repeated in a serious tone today does not mean, however, that a reverse approach should be adopted. One should be particularly careful when examining television shows. The relationship between the creators of the show, network executives, advertising companies and the audience is indeed a very complicated one. Jane Feuer provides an inspiring example of a television show's attentive, critical reading that takes into account said complexity. In her essay *Genre Study and Television*,[10] Feuer discusses situation comedies, or sitcoms, and recapitulates important analyses of the genre conducted by David Grote, Horace Newcomb and David Marc. Her comments in that section of the article are valuable primarily because they bring to light the methodological assumptions and maneuvers behind the conceptions formulated by mentioned authors.

Feuer shows how deeply Grote's inferences are rooted in literary and aesthetic background of his work. In *End of Comedy*[11] Grote states that television sitcoms break with the tradition of theatrical and literary comedies. Those comedic forms of the bygone era told the stories of young couples' romantic relationships threatened by the resistance of his or her father. The pattern, as it is described by the author of *Best Actors in the World*, can be traced back to ancient Greek plays, but is also visible in Shakespearean dramas and romantic comedies made in Hollywood. In Grote's opinion, the paternal figure (or whomever/whatever stands in the way of the lovers) is a representation of social authority. Hence, young generation's struggle for their love symbolizes defiance against dominant ideology of the society. The struggle is resolved in a happy ending, in which the boy finally marries the girl, and the father acknowledges his mistake — or at least attends the wedding ceremony. According to Grote, the episodic nature of television sitcoms prevents them from offering any definitive resolutions to the audience. The "problems of the week" will get solved in every consecutive episode of the show, but the characters will never really change their mind or demeanor, as genre's humor relies heavily on the repetitiveness and familiarity of the clichés. Feuer notes that Grote's "entire argument depends on an acceptance of his belief that after centuries of progressiveness, the meaning of comedy suddenly shifted to a regressive one for no reason other than that the television medium has transformed history. Many would find this difficult to accept as an historical explanation".[12]

Jane Feuer then goes on to examine two other sitcom studies. Horace Newcomb's ritualistic analysis also describes the genre as static, platitudinous and reactionary. Unlike Grote though, the author of *TV: The Most Popular Art* does not stop at condemning such a state. In his opinion it explains why the medium

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[9] Ibid., p. 13.

[10] J. Feuer, 'Genre Study and Television', [in:] *Channels of Discourse, Reassembled*, ed. R.C. Allen, Chapel Hill, NC 1992, pp. 138–60.

[11] D.G. Grote, *End of Comedy: The Sit-Com and the Comedic Tradition*, Hamden, CT 1983.

[12] J. Feuer, 'Genre Study and Television', p. 111.

is so popular. David Marc draws upon the same assumptions that informed the previously mentioned theorists, but arrives at altogether different conclusions. For Marc, the static and repetitive formula of unsophisticated sitcoms such as *The Beverly Hillbillies* is far more subversive than that of openly political domestic comedies in the manner of Norman Lear's *All in the Family* or *Maude*.[13] Taking into account Bertold Brecht's suppositions about the role of distancing effect in performing arts, one can argue that the staleness of the genre makes it more "progressive" in Marxist terms, or generally more susceptible to political readings. Feuer proceeds to present her own analysis of sitcoms, which provides an example of a synthetic approach to genre theory. The author of *Seeing through the Eighties: Television and Reaganism* puts emphasis on the changes within the genre, explained as an intertextual process of developing new shows "by reacting to and against previous sitcoms".[14] In that perspective, the situation and domestic comedies no longer appear to be intransigent. On the contrary, Feuer shows that over the course of its history the genre changed dynamically, with new productions building upon predecessors' heritage and in the context of narrative changes that were going on in other television genres, gradually transforming itself from series into a serialized form.

Feuer's examination tackles implicit assumptions that taint media studies, including, but not limited to, projecting evolutionary and teleological models onto the history of television forms; or the use of a "need of the audience" as a *deus ex machina* explanation for shifts in culture, industry and narrative forms. Remarks such as those make *Genre Study and Television* an important reference point for my interpretative efforts, even though I do not aim at analyzing a whole genre as such. The complexity of Feuer's argumentation provides a pattern worth replicating when pondering the interconnections between the producers, products of popular culture, audiences and advertisers in the context of a consumer society. The preferred approach would seek to integrate perspectives of all the parties involved and at the same time to abstain from hasty conclusions.

In light of those insights, the initial metaphor still stands, although it should be sharpened. The man is what he or she consumes, to some degree. As a member of an interpretive community, he or she also directly or indirectly negotiates the final form of the products he or she consumes. Therefore, the study of those products — in this case popular television shows — can shed light on at least some of the social trends that they strive to reflect and capitalize on. I do not expect to prove an exact adequacy between the interpreted shows and their audience's worldview or to uncover how the culture industry manipulates the masses. In comparison with the early works in the field of popular culture analysis, the scope of the expected results certainly reduced, but at the same time the hope of arriving at adequate explanations expanded, since the conclusions are focused on detailed cases.

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[13] Ibid., pp. 112–113.
[14] Ibid., p. 113.

Enchanted inhabitants of a disenchanted world

The aforementioned synthetic approach, while emphasizing industrial aspects of the mediation, does not disprove readings of television shows which interpret them as a field of negotiations of shared beliefs and values. Such readings become even more sought after in the context of recent changes that occurred in the countries of the West, or the North Atlantic world, and which numerous researchers labeled as "secularization". The term, originating from Max Weber's sociological observations and predictions, and the phenomenon behind it were recently analysed by Charles Taylor in his second *magnum opus*, entitled *A Secular Age*. Canadian philosopher attempts to answer the question "why was it virtually impossible not to believe in God in, say, 1500 in our Western society, while in 2000 many of us find this not only easy, but even inescapable?".[15] Or in Bruno Latour's words — how did it happen that "the obvious framework of ordinary experience" switched from "God" to "non-existence of God"?[16] The Latourian term should be broadened here, because what people stopped believing in during the process of secularization was not only God, but also other forces previously embedded in the "ordinary experience". Taylor provides a concise and apt description of the discussed shift, also referring back to the Weberian terms of enchantment and disenchantment:

> The enchanted world […] is the world of spirits, demons, and moral forces which our ancestors lived in. […] If we look at the lives of ordinary people — and even to a large degree of élites — 500 years ago, we can see in a myriad ways how this was so. First, they lived in a world of spirits, both good and bad. The bad ones include Satan, of course, but beside him, the world was full of a host of demons, threatening from all sides: demons and spirits of the forest, and wilderness, but also those which can threaten us in our everyday lives. Spirit agents were also numerous on the good side. Not just God, but also his saints, to whom one prayed, and whose shrines one visited in certain cases, in hopes of a cure, or in thanks for a cure already prayed for and granted, or for rescue from extreme danger, e.g., at sea.[17]

At least some of the tales of the supernatural (which include the stories of miracles, ghosts and personified death) in the enchanted world were interpreted as "realistic," fitting in the framework of ordinary experience. Now, all of those stories are categorized as "fantasy," and those that believe them to be true must explain and defend their position, not the other way around. While analyzing contemporary television shows that include religious motifs, it is worth asking a question: how is it possible to incorporate religious motifs as structurally important and meaningful parts of the narratives in contemporary media fiction? Can these portrayals of religious themes be seen as a proof of the secularization processes

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[15] C. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 25.
[16] B. Latour, *Rejoicing: Or the Torments of Religious Speech*, trans. J. Rose, Cambridge 2013, Kindle file, loc. 114.
[17] C. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 26.

described above, or do they stem from a different social landscape, where the Eurocentric concepts of secularism and/or post-secularism cannot be applied?

I would now like to take a closer look at *Dead Like Me*, a dark comedy created by Bryan Fuller and showrunned by John Masius for the Showtime network, where it aired for two seasons (2003–2004). The main character and narrator of the show is Georgia "George" Lass (Ellen Muth), an eighteen-year-old college dropout, struggling with a plethora of teenage problems. Her inability to communicate and to share feelings with anyone (especially members of her family) borders on sociopathy, and her lack of any discernible interests brings her to a mundane temporary job in a corporate office. During the lunch break of her first day at the job, George gets killed in a very unfortunate, yet darkly humorous accident. A toilet seat of a zero-gravity toilet falling from the deorbiting Mir space station hits her and kills her on the spot. Georgia does not disintegrate, however, nor does she move into the afterlife. Instead, she joins a team of grim reapers. The lack of capitalization in this case is intentional — in the world of *Dead Like Me* there is no single personified death in the form of Grim Reaper. Rather, the task of assisting people who pass into "the great beyond" lies in the hands of the selected "undead", suspended between this world and the other.

The metaphysical foundations of the show's worldview are explained by Georgia herself, in a prologue section of the pilot episode. Its first shot portrays the globe from a God-like perspective (later on the viewers learn that it is in fact the perspective of a toilet seat travelling through space — it is worth keeping that meaningful detail in mind), and it is accompanied by the off-screen narration by George:

> Let's go for a ride. My name is George Lass. I'm 18 years old and I'm down there… somewhere. I'm gonna tell you a story. Not my story, that's later. This is just a story. Ready? Once upon a time, or more specifically at the dawn of time, god, lower case g, was getting busy with creation as the kids these days are saying. He gave Toad a clay jar and said, "Be careful with this. It's got death inside." Pleased as punch and oblivious to the fact that he was about to become god's fall guy on the whole death issue, Toad promised to guard the jar. Then one day Toad met Frog. "Let me hold the jar of death or whatever you call it." Frog begged. With a nod to Nancy Reagan's pearl of wisdom, Toad just said NO. But Frog was determined and after much whining, Toad finally gave in. "You can hold it, but only for a second." He said. In his excitement, Frog began to hop around and juggle the death jar from one foot to the other. Frog was an asshole. "Stop!" Toad cried out, but it was too late. Frog dropped the jar and it shattered to the ground. When it broke open death got out and ever since all living things have to die. Makes you wonder how much better the world would be if Frog stuck to hawking beer. So there you have it. The mystery of death finally revealed.[18]

In this brief, one-and-a-half-minute introduction, creators set the sardonic tone of the show, but they also do much more in terms of establishing its mythos and attitude towards religion. The plot of the prologue follows the pattern of a cosmological myth. If it was presented in a less ironic manner, the audience could probably believe that what they are watching is actually an adaptation of some little-

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[18] *Dead Like Me*, season 1, episode 1, prod. B. Fuller, J. Masius, USA 2003.

known tribe's myth of the origin of death. However, the way in which the story is presented, is crucial. The combination of George's deadpan delivery and her choice of words that suggests an ironic distance clearly signal that the cosmogony she just narrated is in fact a parody of a theodicy and not a serious attempt at tackling the issue of death. The motif of Frog tempting Toad brings to mind biblical Adam and Eve, although "the death jar" resembles Pandora's box rather than the forbidden fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The two final sentences of the prologue can also be read — in the context of the whole series — as a sneer at any supernatural explanations of the mystery of death.

Such an interpretation is reinforced by the staging, understood here in both metaphorical and literal way, of the whole sequence. When George is done introducing herself, the image of the globe dissolves into that of a theatrical stage. The following scenes all play out on the stage, it is implied, even though the framing changes to a mid-shot and then to close-ups, consequently leaving the theatrical surroundings in the off-screen space. Thus, the viewers are constantly reminded, both by the narration and the production design, that what they are witnessing is not to be taken seriously. What the audience watches is indeed a farce, laughed at not only by the viewers, but also by the characters within the show. This distancing seems to go beyond the usual postmodern detachment from the presented narrative.

The idea of the distance between the characters and the religious worldview is developed further in the show. When George joins the ranks of the grim reapers she learns that the afterlife is almost as much of a mystery to them as it is to any chosen mortal. Their task is to collect the soul of a person that is supposed to die beforehand. Failing to do so results in the soul experiencing the pain of dying and then being stuck, fully conscious but immobilized, in a dead body.[19] After a brief period of suspension between the stages of existence, soul supposedly reaches the afterlife. Supposedly, because reapers know close to nothing about "the great beyond". They cannot even be sure if the soul moves into some other dimension or just dissolves. The only peak the reapers get at the hereafter is its gate which opens for the souls individually. If what awaits the souls behind this gate is indeed heaven, then the only clue about it is that it is different for each human being. For the innocent girl in the pilot episode it takes the form of a funfair; for the Irish-American from the fifth episode of the second season it looks like the Cliffs of Dover,[20] the Christian transsexual is welcomed to "the other side" by the Blessed Virgin Mary and the yoga instructor in the final episode sees an entity that resembles the Hindu goddess Lakshmi.

Those brief (and mutually exclusive, from a classical religious standpoint, one should add) moments of closeness to the transcendent aside, the reapers lead a relatively mundane life, which is perhaps best summarized in the show's title

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[19] Ibid.

[20] The creators made a mistake here, as the Cliffs of Dover are located in England.

sequence. In it, the reapers, cloaked in black robes and equipped with scythes (a uniform they never wear beside the sequence mentioned above), perform tasks associated with mortals rather than the undead: they walk their dogs out, play basketball, work in an office and do laundry. The vision of the supernatural portrayed in the show could thus be summarized as celestial bureaucracy. The entities responsible for the matters of death and life are structured in the manner of a corporation (the angels are even referred to in the title episode as "the upper management types"[21]).

The approach to the transcendent which prevails in *Dead Like Me* is that of a reversed parable. The term I am referring to was coined by Krzysztof Kornacki in his essay *God and the Afterlife in Postmodern Cinema*, where he used it to describe films such as *Bruce Almighty* (dir. Tom Shadyac, 2003), *Dogma* (dir. Kevin Smith, 1999), *What Dreams May Come* (dir. Vincent Ward, 1998) and the television miniseries *Angels in America* (dir. Mike Nichols, 1999). Kornacki explains that reversed parables "present stories of the characters which come from the hereafter (such as God, angels or Devil) in order to elevate the condition of man and the worldly matters".[22] The ultimate goal of such texts is the anthropomorphisation of the Divine and the sanctification of mundane reality, which quite fittingly describes the portrayal of celestial business in *Dead Like Me*.

Bearing in mind Feuer's cautionary notes, it is still worth pondering if the approach towards the Transcendent presented in *Dead Like Me* can be read as an indication of a wider tendency in American society. When one takes into account other contemporary television shows which meet the criteria of reversed parables — such as The CW's *Supernatural* (2005–?) or SyFy's *Being Human* (2011–2014) and *Dominion* (2014–2015) — it certainly seems that the predisposition towards the immanentization of the Transcendent is quite common among current media portrayals. However, this fact does not prove that such a secularized vision of the world represents the beliefs of the majority of Americans. Recent studies show that while fewer members of the American society associate with organized religion, "[a]theism is barely growing".[23] Therefore, if *Dead Like Me* and similar shows were to be interpreted as a sign of secularization, it would have to be within a very narrow understanding of the discussed term, seen not as a devaluation of religion in general, but rather as a retreat from organized religion and well established denominations.

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[21] *Dead Like Me*, season 1, episode 1.

[22] K. Kornacki, 'Bóg i zaświaty w kinie postmodernistycznym', [in:] *Sacrum w kinie dekadę później*, eds. S.J. Konefał, M. Zelent, Gdańsk 2013, p. 358.

[23] M. Hout, T.W. Smith, 'Fewer Americans Affiliate with Organized Religions, Belief and Practice Unchanged: Key Findings from the 2014 General Social Survey', *General Social Survey* 2015, http://www.norc.org/PDFs/GSS%20Reports/GSS_Religion_2014.pdf [acc.: 4.04.2017].

Każdemu niebo według jego potrzeb — *Trup jak ja*, sekularyzm i kultura konsumpcyjna

Abstrakt

Autor rozpoczyna artykuł od przedstawienia argumentów przemawiających za istotnością badań nad popkulturą oraz opisuje sformułowane przez Jane Feuer przestrogi przed zbyt pochopnym wyciąganiem wniosków na temat korelacji między zmianami w portretowaniu poszczególnych elementów fabularnych seriali telewizyjnych a zakładaną „potrzebą publiczności". Druga część artykułu poświęcona została analizie serialu *Trup jak ja* (*Dead Like Me*, 2003–2004), stworzonego dla stacji Showtime przez Bryana Fullera i Johna Masiusa. Religijne motywy obecne w opisywanej czarnej komedii interpretowane są w odniesieniu do teorii sekularyzacji.

Słowa-klucze: kultura popularna, studia nad kulturą popularną, religia, sekularyzm, sekularyzacja, seriale telewizyjne

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