

INTRODUCTION

Ricarda Vidal and Maria-José Blanco



In the most general terms death is defined as the final and irreversible cessation of the vital functions in an organism, the ending of life. However, the precise definition of death and the exact time of the transition from life to death differ according to culture, religion and legal system.

The essential insecurities and doubts over the nature and state of death have affected cultural production since the beginning of civilisation. Likewise our attitude towards death is characterised by anxieties and ambiguities. Death can be 'a consummation devoutly to be wished' in the words of Hamlet, or 'a wonderful gain' to quote Schopenhauer. While philosophers and poets explore the dark attraction of death, in everyday life we tend to push all thought of it aside. Death, and above all our own death, must not impinge upon the living. And yet death is everywhere: it vies for our attention on blood-splattered posters advertising the latest blockbuster films or on grisly crime fiction book-covers announcing graphic descriptions of violent death and murder. Death, it seems, is rather entertaining – at least as long as it is confined to fiction. But even when it manifests itself in all its gruesome reality in the daily news reports on wars, murders, natural catastrophes and fatal accidents, death to some extent resists reality. Shocking though it may be, it is mediated through radio or television, controlled by the framework of the news story and kept at a safe distance. It is something that happens to others, somewhere else. However, besides the mediated violent death of news broadcasting and besides the ostentatious celebration of brutal and essentially fictional death in popular culture, we are also haunted by the undeniable presence of a much more real and frightening death – death by cancer or heart disease or the often protracted dying process of old age, which is becoming more and more common in the ageing societies of the West.

As Ariès (1981) and Dollimore (1998) have shown, amongst others, these contradictory notions of death have always been part of society. However, where they have earlier been subsumed and to some degree resolved in religion, the increasing secularisation of society combined with advances in medicine, which allow an almost infinite prolongation of life (often in stark contrast to quality of life), has led to a situation which is very specific to contemporary times.

As Kellehear observes, '[d]ying – now far far away from its otherworld beginnings – has become a set of this-world trials and tests' (Kellehear 2007: 8). In his extensive study *A Social History of Dying* (2007), which spans the customs, practices and experiences of dying from the Stone Age to present times, Kellehear diagnoses a deep confusion and sensation of being adrift within contemporary approaches to death and dying. Indeed, he argues, that the process of dying has become separated from death itself by having been institutionalised to such a degree that it is almost negated:

In our modern world, deaths do indeed occur in nursing homes, in poverty or in modern detention centres, but not dying. Dying – as a shared set of social exchanges between dying individuals and those who care for them – is increasingly unrecognised in institutional settings outside hospital or health service settings in both global or domestic contexts. Public recognition, even some personal recognition of dying, has become an abstract political affair now severed from its earlier biological, psychological and interpersonal moorings. (Kellehear 2007: 253)

However, this disappearance of the dying process has not gone unnoticed nor without protest from those nearing the end of life or those accompanying loved ones on their final journey. In fact, it has been the subject of a variety of cultural responses in recent years, such as, amongst others, Derek Jarman's *Blue* (1993), which deals with the artist's coming to terms with his own death from AIDS, Isabel Allende's autobiographical *Paula* (1994) which narrates the author's taking leave of her dying daughter, the TV drama *Wit* (2001) which follows the protagonist's journey from her cancer diagnosis to her death, Joan Didion's autobiographical *The Year of Magical Thinking* (2005) and *Blue Nights* (2011), which trace the author's mourning process after losing first her husband and then her daughter, or, most recently Michael Haneke's award-winning film *L'Amour* (2012), which charts the slow deterioration of old age and the inability of the dying protagonist's immediate family to accept her death and accompany her in her leave-taking. These personalised stories of death and loss answer to a demand within society to re-examine our approach to the process of dying and leave-taking. In January 2012 this demand was met by a four-day festival at the Southbank Centre in London, *Death: Festival for the Living*, which included poetry readings, music performances, art installations, philosophical debates and hands-on workshops in all matters relating to death. Amongst the presenters were obituary writers, funeral directors, philosophers, writers and artists, but

also a group of terminally ill children. As obituary writer Harry de Quetteville remarked in a review of the festival: 'those most intimately acquainted with death are the least bashful discussing it', but all too often, we are too squeamish to listen to them. The hugely successful festival gave the dying as well as the bereaved and the 'as-yet-to-be-bereaved' the opportunity to confront and overcome this squeamishness in a genuine dialogue which was embedded within the wider framework of cultural approaches to death.

Within the interdisciplinary field of death studies a number of scholars have explored this search for a more humane, intimate (and perhaps communal) death further (amongst others Morris and Thomas 2005; Grainger 2006; Madrell and Sidaway 2010; Walpole 2011; see also the chapters by Jenkins, Blanco, Horne, Lushetich, Isla and Campbell in this volume). Madrell and Sidaway's edited collection *Deathscapes: Spaces of Death, Dying, Mourning and Remembrance* (2010) focuses on the importance of space in the process of dying, mourning and memorialisation. As the collection shows, the space of death reaches far beyond the site of its occurrence and transcends institutional limitations, thus opening ways to resituate death and dying within the community.

Kellehear suggests that stepping back and looking at the social history of death and of past ways of dying may help us to reconnect and reclaim our own final departure and that of our loved ones from over-institutionalisation (2007: 8). The popularity of the *Festival of the Living* or of exhibitions such as *Death: A Self-Portrait – the Richard Harris Collection* at London's Wellcome Collection in winter 2012/13 indicates that many of us already turn to past customs (our own and those of others) in search for alternative (and perhaps better) ways of dealing with death and dying. Showcasing around 300 works from medieval images of the German dance-of-death via nineteenth-century Victorian death photography to contemporary Mexican artefacts for the Day of the Dead, the Wellcome exhibition aimed to provide an international and cross-cultural overview of 'our enduring desire to make peace with death' (Wellcome Trust 2012).

At the outset of our introduction we mentioned the spectacular side of death. While *Death: A Self-Portrait* certainly asked its public to reflect on death and dying rituals and customs across cultures, the exhibition also included a decisive element of sensationalism. Death was not only represented but also tantalisingly present. Mediated through art and the exhibition setting, it could be consumed both with the critical distance of the (art) historian and with the intimate thrill of the spectator. Just as the Southbank Centre festival, Harris's extensive collection of artefacts and artworks from across the globe made it clear that death is not only a universal occurrence that needs to be dealt with by culture and society but also a potent source of entertainment.

In the last decades several books have been published which analyse death and its perception in the contemporary world from different points of view. The great majority of these explore contemporary death, dying and mourning

with a focus on the customs, rituals and processes involved (e.g. Hockey et al. 2010; Maddrell and Sidaway 2010; Rotar and Teodorescu 2011), while a smaller number look at the purely sensationalist and spectacular aspects of death (e.g. Goldstein 1998; Piven 2004; Schmid 2006). The present volume aims to combine the study of the contradictory aspects of death as entertainment with death as the natural end of life. Like the essay collections edited by Kellehear (2009) or Madrell and Sidaway (2010), our volume cuts across a wide range of disciplines combining the arts and humanities with the social sciences. Music, the visual arts, exhibition practice, the media, literature as well as serial killers, longevity, euthanasia, cemeteries, and bereavement are explored. From their various vantage points (which in some cases are intimately personal experiences) but always with reference to Western society, the authors reflect on the response of institutions and individuals, and how death is part of our day-to-day lives even if we don't want to confront it.

The essays in our collection are organised into five broad themes which interconnect with each other: Death in Society; Death in Literature; Death in Visual Culture; Cemeteries and Funerals; and Personal Reflections on Death.

The volume begins with Catherine Jenkins's thought-provoking and at times chilling exploration of the effects that medical progress has on our quality of life as we approach death. Reiterating Ariès's (1981) and Kellehear's (2007) observations on the disappearance of death into institutionalisation, Jenkins focuses on the many contemporary cases in Anglo-Saxon societies, where death and dying are confined to the hygienic, clean and sterile spaces of hospitals, hospices and morgues. As mentioned above progress in medical science has led to an increase in life expectancy in the Western world, resulting in an ever ageing population, and it seems as though we have almost found a cure for death. However, as Jenkins shows, the flipside of a longer life expectancy is an increase in long-term illnesses and a longer dying process. With medical apparatus allowing us to keep a body alive and prolong physical existence even after the brain has died, it becomes increasingly hard to differentiate life from death. What then, Jenkins asks, does it mean to be human and how can we die in a humane way?

The next chapter shifts the focus from the dying to those left behind. Focusing on grief and bereavement, Lynne Simpson has compiled a comprehensive survey of theoretical developments since Freud's 'Mourning and Melancholia' (1917). Many of the concepts and theories she analyses in her chapter form the basis for subsequent chapters on grief and mourning in the volume. With reference to Ariès's *The Hour of our Death* (1981) and Geoffrey Gorer's much-cited 'Pornography of Death' (1955) amongst others, Simpson discusses the notion of the disappearance of death with the beginning of Modernism. However, she also draws on more recent studies which reflect more recent developments in the study of grief which contest this view and show a perhaps healthier and more

involved method of dealing with death than the institutionalisation described by Jenkins.

Moving from the personal and private aspects of dying and mourning into the realm of the public commemoration of loss, the section closes with an essay by Wolfgang Marx on the requiem. Taking into account the changes in the old belief systems and the waning of religious faith, Marx examines the continued presence of the requiem in twentieth-century memorial compositions by comparing three war requiems: the collaborative *Requiem of Reconciliation*, Benjamin Britten's *War Requiem* and Bertolt Brecht/ Kurt Weill's *Berliner Requiem*. He argues that many requiem compositions have now become a vehicle of political or social critique, addressing not the death of a lost individual relative or friend but rather the death of thousands or even millions in war. The focus thus lies no longer primarily on the deceased but rather on the people or institutions responsible for their deaths. Marx investigates different techniques of applying the traditional Latin text (or sometimes just movement titles derived from it) to this entirely secularised task.

Maria-José Blanco opens the next section, 'Death and Literature', with her investigation of writing as a therapeutic tool for coping with bereavement. She looks at four professional writers who all took up pen and paper and wrote down their personal experiences after the death of a loved one. Blanco not only analyses these autobiographical texts but also asks why they were written and why the authors felt a need to publish them and share their mourning with their readers. Many of the theoretical reflections on bereavement which appear in Simpson's essay return in Blanco's as they served as inspiration or support to the authors as they wrote their way through their mourning process.

In the following chapter Eleanor David takes us from the intimacy of personal loss and grief into a no less intimate encounter with bereavement and mourning on a much larger scale. David's chapter explores the religious (in particular, the Catholic) tradition of institutionalised mourning by examining Italian poet Margherita Guidacci's collection *La Via Crucis dell'umanità* (1984). Just as Marx had traced the transformation of the requiem from a religious to a secular art form, David shows how an originally religious text or concept (i.e. the Way of the Cross) can be applied to a secular context. In the form of contemporary poetry, it can serve to deal with the traumas and collective suffering of the mass deaths of the world wars and other human catastrophes. Just as for Blanco's authors, for Guidacci, writing – and for her audience, reading – here become a way of dealing with grief and ultimately overcoming it.

Corina Crisu also looks at writing as a way of gaining control over death – albeit within the fictional realm of Edward Gaines's *A Lesson Before Dying* (1993). Arguing that death, and in particular violent death, has played a prominent role in the construction of black identity in North American literature, Crisu analyses the emancipation of Gaines's black hero from physical bondage to spiritual liberation.

Triggered by the proximity of his (unjustified) execution, the hero's development is facilitated by intimate conversations and by his decision to learn to write and share his thoughts and fears of death. Crisu also examines Gaines's criticism of the racist American justice system. This system is also the focus of Iuliano Fiorenzo's chapter on John Grisham's novel *The Client* (1993). Linking to the utilisation of the corpse in the construction of identity and feelings of superiority, Fiorenzo's chapter investigates the symbolic use of the dead body in the novel. While he points out that the novel's obsession with the corpse seems somewhat unmotivated, the detailed descriptions of cruel murder fit in with what Rebecca Shillabeer describes in the next chapter with reference to crime fiction of the past twenty years in general. Shillabeer examines the growth of explicit descriptions of torture and violent death in recent crime novels. While she traces the fascination with violent death back to the ancient Greeks, she also explains that there appears to have been a remarkable increase of violence since the 1990s. Shillabeer investigates the reasons why authors such as Patricia Cornwell, Tess Gerritsen or P J Tracy feel the need to describe violence in such excruciating detail and why readers are so fascinated with this. With reference to the happy endings which occur in almost all crime novels, i.e. the murderer is caught and justice prevails, she argues that fiction allows both authors and readers to take control over the quagmire of death and violence they fear might threaten them in real life as well.

The third part, 'Death and Visual Culture', opens with Ricarda Vidal's chapter on art by serial killers, which continues the themes introduced by Shillabeer and looks at our fascination with violent death and the curious popularity of the serial killer. Starting from an exhibition of artworks created by serial killers, Vidal draws on the writings of George Bataille on murder, transgression and taboo to examine the paradox of repulsion and attraction such artworks exert on the viewer. She argues that while desiring and buying such artworks, and hence admitting to a fascination with violence and death, constitutes a transgression in itself, owning them can become a way of participating in the transgression of the murder – even if only on an imaginary plain. At the same time, ownership of an object produced by a serial killer also implies taking control over the murderer's creation, the artwork and to some degree also the murder.

In his chapter, John Horne takes up a point made earlier in the book by Jenkins and others about the institutionalisation, social exclusion and clinical objectification of those who die. Horne argues that cinema can contest such isolation of death. Analysing three films, *Lightning over Water* (1980), *My Life* (1993) and *Wit* (2001), Horne argues for the significance of film as a key site for interrogating and ethically rethinking the encounter with the dying individual. However, a meaningful engagement with death can only happen if the film manages to open up an ethical space of reflection and encourages the spectator to recognise the objectifying potential implicit in their subject position and to consider their responsibility towards the dying individual.

Julia Banwell also focuses on death on screen and the position of the spectator. However, where Horne explores films which bring the slow death by terminal disease onto the screen, Banwell looks at accidental death (Ayrton Senna's fatal crash in 1994) and injury (David Beckham's metatarsal injury from 2002) in spectator sports. While Horne's cinema audience can prepare for what they will see, the encounter with the sudden violence of death or injury during a sporting event is entirely unexpected and raw. Advances in visual technologies allow sports spectators to enjoy a privileged view of events through close-ups and slow-motion replays, and YouTube has made it possible to access and repeatedly view footage of unpredictable and disturbing occurrences. Banwell focuses on the visual location of death and injury in the media, exploring the potential for reading the repeat viewing of slow-motion footage and still images of death and injury in close-up, as ritualistic. Spectating may here also be viewed as a way of taking control not just of the athlete's body and their death, but also over death more generally.

The section closes with Diana York Blaine's study of the exhibition *Mummies of the World*, which debuted at the California Science Center in Los Angeles in 2010. While York Blaine acknowledges the museum's attempt at lending meaning to the meaninglessness of death, she also criticises the exhibition for reflecting Western ideologies of racial superiority and transcendence over the body. She contends that the exhibition ultimately operated as a modern freak show rather than giving the audience the opportunity to engage meaningfully with death and their own mortality.

The fourth part of the volume looks at cemeteries and funerals, giving voice to individuals (either the authors themselves or people they interviewed) and their private experiences of death. Focusing on the Merry Cemetery of Săpânța in Northern Romania, Marina Cap-Bun looks at how the personalised colourful wooden crosses of the cemetery, with their light-hearted epitaphs, pick up and update traditional Romanian funeral rituals. Cap-Bun shows that while the cemetery originated from the personal vision of its founder, the wood-carver Stan Ion Pătraș (1908–1977), it can also lay claim to a much wider Romanian funeral tradition which links death intimately to laughter and joy.

Bel Deering also takes us on a journey to the graveyard – albeit in the dead of night. Rather than merry epitaphs we encounter the shadows and strange lights, which are so familiar from horror films and ghost stories. Deering's chapter draws on a series of interviews she conducted with individuals on nocturnal visits to graveyards in the UK. With recourse to Foucault's concept of heterotopia, she examines the extent, nature and qualities of real or imagined supernatural forms and thus conceptualises the sense of place of the cemetery and the contingency of experience and meaning. She postulates that the manifestation of supernatural deviance in dead spaces is in part an expression of the fear of death and disease that Foucault identified, but shows that this is located within a wider suite

of personal and social needs for the spooky and ghostly. Fear, after all, can be courted in order to produce feelings of excitement and pleasure, and to reinforce the sense of being alive.

Clara Saraiva and José Mapril's contribution, too, is based on interviews, albeit here the focus lies on the bereaved and on those who help them deal with their loss – both in terms of ritual and the practicalities of the funeral. The cemeteries at the centre of Cap-Bun's and Deering's research were seen as part of the community they served, i.e. final resting places for those who lived nearby or at least for their ancestors. Focusing on emigrants from Guinea Bissau and Bangladesh in Portugal, Saraiva and Mapril, in contrast, examine the journey of the dead body to its final resting place, which is often thousands of kilometres away. Death, they argue, entails an intense circulation of material goods and wealth, but also of highly symbolic significant universes which circulate along with the goods and the people: the corpse, but also the spirits and the relations with the other world that people bring with them into a diaspora situation. Based on ethnographic data, the chapter explores the work done by immigrants' associations, as well as hospitals, funerary agencies, diplomatic and border authorities and religious institutions.

The section closes with Natasha Lushetich's reflections on the increasing popularity of self-styled 'dying parties' in the Netherlands. Her chapter explores the relationship between performance efficacy and intertextuality in the dying ritual. Aided by performance theory and departing from the notion of performance as a doing, staging, attainment and judgment, she argues for a different, *ludic-concretist* model of ritual efficacy. Lushetich takes us back to the ideas discussed by Horne of death as a spectacle and develops Jenkins' idea of dying in a humane, self-determined way.

The final part of the volume is dedicated to personal reflections on death by the writer Lala Isla and the photographer Briony Campbell. Isla gives a personal and anecdotal view of the social changes that Spain and the UK have experienced in the past thirty-five years regarding attitudes towards death. Isla recollects the funeral traditions she witnessed as a child in Castile and describes the recent introduction of the '*tanatorio*' in Spain, a kind of public morgue that has all but replaced the intimate rituals of mourning within the family home. She compares these developments to the changes which have occurred in the UK in funerary customs since the 1980s which are partly due to the influence of AIDS-related deaths of young men who brought a lot of sense of humour to funerals as well as a need to personalise them. Isla concludes that Spain seems to follow Britain's lead and vice versa: while Spain is taking death outside the home and increasingly dehumanising it, death in Britain becomes more personal and, in some cases, even returns to the home.

The volume closes with a photographic essay by Briony Campbell. Campbell spent the last six months of her father's life photographing and filming their

relationship, before he died of cancer in August 2009. In 2010, the work, 'The Dad Project', was exhibited and published internationally, and provoked a response she had never anticipated. While presenting selected images from the project, she reflects on the way this initially very intimate piece has developed since it was first published. As Campbell asserts through her own experiences, her willingness to share her grief touches a nerve in contemporary society. Many of us have lost, or are perhaps about to lose, someone close to us, but are unsure of how to deal with death. Campbell's work offers a way to think about leave-taking, death and mourning in a gentle, consoling and ultimately optimistic way. And it also looks towards the future, a future that is not bereft but rather enriched by the experience of death.

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