

The representation of death in modern society

Luca Bifulco – Università degli Studi di Napoli Federico II
Antonio Cavicchia Scalamonti – Università degli Studi di Roma “La Sapienza”
Gianfranco Pecchinenda – Università degli Studi di Napoli Federico II
Alessandra Santoro – Università degli Studi di Napoli Federico II

“Don’t think of death as an ending.
Think of it as a really effective way
of cutting down your expenses”
Woody Allen

Death represents one of those few experiences that every society throughout history faces. It has been defined as the marginal situation par excellence (Berger, 1969). Since it cannot be known concretely, it exists at the margins of every symbolic system, of any solid structure of meaning that a society can possess.

Conceiving one’s own mortality and coping with the death of loved ones bears a threat to the typical way of understanding and defining the social world. The awareness of death is difficult to handle, since it sheds light on the whole existence of those who must cope with it. Therefore, every group as well as every individual, faced with the end of human life, the loss and the mourning process, must also ask oneself about the sense and the meaning of death in order to face its scope.

Every era has its own commonly established ways of dealing with the burden of death through a wealth of symbols, prevailing ideas, as well as more or less widespread individual and collective strategies. Analysing this symbolic repertory of the ways in which death is represented and perceived, but also resisting or novel ways, means to decipher aspects of entire social consortia.

Death and its representations highlight below the surface various connected social issues, from religious phenomena to the stratification that the dominant meanings can support, from social conflicts to the characteristics of everyday life etc. This results in the ability to assert that death must be considered as one of those fundamental indicators that enable the investigation of collective behaviour, as well as one of the central themes to analyse the imagery of an era. Through transformations in death representations it is possible to identify cultural transformations.

The approach towards death can be divided into two views. The first one considers death as a definitive end, and precisely by virtue of this belief, it shapes the meaning of one’s own existence. Per contra, the other view is in search for immortality, believing that a life without the victory over death is a meaningless life.

If death is the traumatizing reality par excellence, it is no coincidence that a typical element of most pre-modern or modern cultures has been its negation, and often its replacement with a false certainty: the one of immortality. This has been modulated in different ways.

Denial, after all, is a form of defence. This is similar to what Sigmund Freud meant by the

term *Verleugnung*, which consists in the refusal to recognize a too traumatic reality. Denial exists in many forms, and the most common, as it is the most effective, consists precisely of replacing the unwelcome awareness with a false certainty.

From a historical point of view, at least in the Western World, only one culture accepts death as a real, natural fact – the Greek. This is a culture that accepted finitude, and therefore had no need for forms of denial.

Instead, the system and the culture of the so-called traditional societies, as well as those of modern society, all employ a collective denial of death. The pre-modern cultures, and the mythical-religious cultures in the first place, have developed more effective models of legitimation, but remained in substantial denial.

Historically, the creation of different immortality myths, the most consistent form of denial, has often been the most widespread response to the burden of death. It is not by chance that in many cultures, mourning and the relationship with the dead – or with death – were based on symbols and signs linked to an afterlife.

This form of delusion was based on a magical-religious pattern, with its representational tools, with its rites and the reference to a sacred and transcendent universe. It presupposes human beings who are well integrated in their community and respectful of the prescriptions linked to the transcendent world. Thus, man can think of going beyond his own end because death is only corporeal, while human nature, as anyone endowed with faith or appropriate awareness knows, is immortal. An approach that is capable of justifying, and to some extent mitigating, the collective impact of death was possible in such societies (Ariès, 1975).

The Western Christian world, for example has been characterized by a culture pervaded by a religious nature in which the awareness of death and its inevitability was completely denied. The extraordinary success of Christianity was based on the fear of death, on the one hand, and on the promise of immortality, on the other.

It must be assumed that men throughout all historical periods lived with the nightmare of death. Due to this reason they were inclined to embrace any magical-religious solution to such terrifying problem. And what is a promise of immortality if not a substantial “denial of death”? In the Christian world fear, denial and faith were, and still are, connected. This belief has been so strong and so in tune with the widespread desires to encourage the majority of the population not only to make it their own, that is to internalize it, but to also accept the domination of a religious-political elite based on this assumption and the ideology to shape all its legitimacy.

Moreover, Christianity has left a heavy legacy: the belief that a life without immortality is a meaningless life (Cavicchia Scalamonti, 2015). Even though the value of religious guidelines has lost its hegemony, modern man has often continued to project himself into the hereafter. From this perspective, as a matter of fact, the notion that life without a prolongation after death is a wasted life is such a deep-rooted and so comforting idea, that it is very difficult to renounce. And this notion is still alive in many current orientations and beliefs about death, even if in a disguised form.

At least in Western modernity, the prevailing way to comply with the desperate yearning of immortality is of rational-scientific nature. This search has primarily placed its trust in medicine, which sooner or later shall be able to eradicate all diseases and defeat death. If it is true that, from a self-aware point of view based on reason, we acknowledge that men must die, it is also true that we rely on the ideology of scientific progress, towards which we maintain an attitude based on a form of faith. We rely on scientific skills and knowledge, especially

medicine, which insinuates itself into every aspect of everyday life.

Complying with this trust in science, we believe we can prolong human life more and more, postponing death indefinitely. Death is believed to be rather caused by unexpected events, accidents or diseases that science will have to defeat sooner or later. If people die, it is due to some specific fault, an accident or a momentary lack of scientific knowledge. However, in principle, scientific and medical achievements have the power to postpone death to the threshold of some form of eternity. This idea is part of the so-called medicalization of death in Western society, evidenced by the persistence of public debate on the topic of health. In fact, it is no coincidence that medical topics in radio-television programs or in the press are prevalent. The request for information, advice and medical assistance is incessant.

This phenomenon is accompanied by an increasingly widespread cult of youth, expressed through the enhancement of body, health and dominant aesthetic models. All this reveals the widespread obsession of old age, the fear of disease and finitude that the biological degeneration of the body and physical suffering displays.

Thus, the medicalization configures a technical relationship with death and disease, which defines a second mode of denial or concealment. The patient is relegated to technologically equipped facilities, and left in the hands of experts in order to receive adequate treatment (Cavicchia Scalamonti, 1991; Bauman, 1995). In the hospital, rather than in the domestic environment, he faces the end. The doctor becomes part of a “thanatocracy”, an exponent of an idealized expert system, which provides faithfully followed, scientific prescriptions and with which people entrust their hopes. He stands between the sick and the dead, he allows us to avoid facing death directly and, above all, he represents the aspiration to immortality.

Death and disease, concealed inside medical institutions, are often hidden from the public eye, resulting in isolation of the dying (Elias, 1985). In contrast to pre-modern times (Ariès, 1975), the dying retires from public life and is surrounded by a silent society that is fearful of the image of him, which was created as a mean of protection.

Anthony Giddens (1991) precisely defined the “sequestration of experience” as the distancing of day-to-day life from potential shocking and traumatic experiences such as suffering and death. By concealing them from general view, sickness and death are rendered inoffensive. Thus, death is an individual rather than a collective experience. This is why, in modern society it is more difficult to find a symbolic embrace and a sense of community accompanying death and dying. Traditional collective coping strategies for death, whether religious or secular, like appealing to the continuity of values such as nation or family, have less force.

Modern death, in Geoffrey Gorer’s opinion (1955), is a taboo. Speaking about it is considered unseemly, especially in the presence of children, who can be spared from participating in funerals, while mourning is privatized and reduced, since relatives are expected to mourn for a short time. This kind of segregation and separation is also related to the increasing infrequency in which we encounter death, by virtue of the improved hygienic-sanitary conditions and of a certain social pacification. Consider, for example, the decline of child mortality or the reduction – at least in the West – of epidemics, famines, wars, etc.

However, at least in contemporary times, the denial of death in the public sphere coexists with the profusion of images in all the media. Death becomes visible, producing new modes of representation, rituality, commemoration and narration. Of course, exhibited and mediated death is distinct from an experience close to real death, the ability to prepare for mourning or one’s own end. It is possible that they remain distant experiences, since the mediation of death

could be tied to the fascination with the violation of the boundaries between public and private (Gibson, 2007), rather than an exhibition of shared meanings, symbols and rituals.

In any case, meaning remains the fundamental problem, since in modern society meaning seems lost or problematic (Mellor & Shilling, 1993). In every historical epoch, every society has endeavored to build cultural tools that provide a plausible legitimation to death, a legitimation that, all in all, is essential to make the whole existence meaningful. Thus, every culture in every past socio-historical context has elaborated a vast and articulated system of ideas, beliefs, rituals, techniques to elaborate mourning in order to deal with grief and separation, and to keep anguish under control. These sophisticated tools clearly indicated how to manage the social presence of the dead, their final resting place and how to separate their world from the world of the living. This benefits those who remain.

Instead modernity, and even more so contemporaneity, seems incapable to represent death symbolically, nor to construct a symbolic system that can support grief and a collective understanding of death (Cavicchia Scalamonti, 2007). The representations of death are numerous and often contradictory, especially in the individualized Western society (Pecchinenda, 2017). Here, death is inscribed in a broader narrative that directly concerns the individual and his personal ability to take charge of it (Seale, 1998). Moreover, the existential dimension of death, which calls religious and transcendent aspects into question, faces completely practical aspects of the ability to transform its deepest representations and symbolic meanings (Thomas, 1975).

Religious institutions are making one last attempt, which Peter Berger (1967) has defined as a process of adaptation to the new intercultural scenarios. The religious pluralism to which we are exposed has combined the new beliefs with the old traditional systems, while the old systems of thought have been modernized. However, if despite adaptations, such systems are no longer able to provide meaningful and effective coping mechanisms for dealing with death, they lose their appeal. Consequently, the search for new views and religions, which are able to provide new sense and meaning to life and death, spreads.

Referring to scientific backgrounds in order to develop new theories about life after death seems, as we have seen, an effective alternative. Science shapes the idea of a prolongation of existence that can supposedly be endless. Thus, the reassuring idea remains: in order to be significant, life needs to be prolonged after death.

Traditionally, as mentioned before, myths and stories embodied the curious darkness surrounding death. Almost all the ancient myths and religions provide symbolic representations of death. In this way, instead of remaining amorphous and chaotically threatening, death is made concrete and visible by our creative imagination.

This construction of images takes place at all levels of consciousness, in all cultures and throughout time (Guthke, 1999). The representations can be different and change over time. In many myths and narratives, death is symbolically represented as a messenger from a mysterious afterlife. In others, it can be portrayed in completely unconventional ways: ranging from a bad person in black and white to a complex, morally ambiguous and strongly humanized character.

If myths and narratives have always represented death through a multitude of symbolic features influencing and contaminating the productions of collective imaginary, then in modern times the new media are the preferential place for the “*mises en scène*” of this phenomenon. The press first and, then the electronic media and finally the digital media, seem to provide a new relationship with death and the dead. Thus, the invasion of corpses, zombies and symbolic characters embodying death in the media takes on a multitude of perspectives and

representations. On the one hand, they are perceived as an incentive to overcome the fear of death. On the other hand, they seem to signal a symbolic regeneration and an advanced form of its metabolization that goes beyond, and blurs the lines between the worlds of the living and the dead.

However, if death imagery presented in the media provided new means of bridging the gap between the living and the dead, then the emergence and the spread of new digital media provide new and unique opportunities to observe and represent death, as well as to deal with grief.

In recent years, the World Wide Web is turning more and more into a place of death. The term “digital death” has been coined in order to describe this phenomenon. It is a kind of death that would be combined and added to the well-known idea of physical death. The notion of digital death on the Internet has changed, or more simply is added to the way in which one has always thought about the transitional moment from the physical world to the afterlife. The rituals dedicated to the commemoration of the deceased are also increasingly delegated to digital tools that remove them from the urban area and physical proximity to the dead, displacing them not only in a private space, but also in a mobile and digital space (Duteil-Ogata, 2012). Nowadays it is impossible to gain an understanding of the social and cultural significance of death without considering the influence of digital culture has on the way we live in this world. In these mobile societies (Urry, 2000; 2007), the practises related to death are a hybrid between the physical and the digital reality. Because technology is continuously available, it produces symbolic and emotional representations of death and commemoration, which foster innovative forms of genuine belonging. Nonetheless, their effectiveness will have to be analysed in depth.

References

- Ariès, P. (1975). *Essais sur l'histoire de la mort en Occident. Du Moyen à nos jours*. Paris: Seuil.
- Bauman, Z. (1992). *Mortality, Immortality and Other Life Strategies*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Berger, P. (1969). *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*. New York: Anchor Books Edition.
- Cavicchia Scalamonti, A. (1991). *Tempo e morte*. Napoli: Liguori.
- Cavicchia Scalamonti, A. (2007). *La morte. Quattro variazioni sul tema*. S. Maria C.V.: Ipermedium libri.
- Cavicchia Scalamonti, A. (2015). *L'illusione senza avvenire*. S. Maria C.V.: Ipermedium libri.
- Duteil-Ogata, F. (2012). *Emerging Burial Spaces and Rituals in Urban Japan*. In N. Aveline-Dubach (ed.), *Invisible Population: The Place of the Dead in East-Asian Megacities* (pp. 50-73). Plymouth: Lexington Books.
- Elias, N. (1985). *The Loneliness of the Dying*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Gibson, M. (2007). *Death and Mourning in Technologically Mediated Culture*. *Health Sociological Review*, 16(5), 415-424.
- Giddens, A. (1991). *Modernity and Self-Identity*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Gorer, G. (1955). *The Pornography of Death*. *Encounter*, 5, 49-52.
- Guthke, K. S. (1999). *The Gender of Death: A Cultural History in Art and Literature*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Mellor, P.A., & Shilling, C. (1993). *Modernity, Self-Identity and the Sequestration of Death*. *Sociology*, 27(3), 411-431.
- Pecchinenda, G. (2017). *The Neuronal Identity: Strategies of Immortality in Contemporary Western Cultures*. In Michael Hviid Jacobsen (Ed), *Postmortal Society. Towards a Sociology of Immortality* (pp. 138-155). New York: Routledge.
- Seale, C. (1998). *Constructing Death: The Sociology of Dying and Bereavement*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Thomas, L.-V. (1975). *Anthropologie de la mort*. Paris: Payot.

Urry, J. (2000). *Sociology Beyond Societies: Mobilities for the Twenty-First Century*. London & New York: Routledge.

Urry, J. (2007). *Mobilities*. Cambridge: Polity Press.