

Where does the road go? Reflections on the cult of death Eric Venbrux*

"A short-cut, taken but not by death", the work of Hans van Houwelingen exhibited at the Vijfhuizen Fort forms the starting point of this essay. The path with gravestones, mostly acquired from survivors, provides those markers with a second lease of life. Death cannot be avoided, even here at this fort, where never a soldier gave his life, but that is far from everything which needs to be said. Why, and that is what Van Houwelingen means, are the dead allowed so little peace? Has Dutch mercantilism struck yet again? Are the rituals of death no longer observed and have they become lacking in meaning?

These reflections on the death cult observe a fine distinction between biological and social death, which are not necessarily synchronous. Death can be seen as the result of social process, a change of status which is generally marked by a ritual. A development which has required a great deal of time to pass has shifted this change of status, the transition from the living to the dead in terms of categories, from after-life ever closer to the time of physical death. Which is why the dead can be removed so quickly. Seen in terms of the periods which historians are so fond of, our current period is one in which death is psychologized. We no longer focus on the fate of the dead in their after-lives but rather concentrate on our grief as survivors in the here and now. The marketing of dealing with death is closely interwoven with expressions of personal identity, the posthumous dearly departed, to which those who remain behind relate. Collectively, we remember those who have died and those memories become increasingly significant for creating new community spirit. This provides us with a sense of direction for our lives, but how are we to face up to the inevitability of death?

Twice dead

A pronouncement of death is arbitrary. When is someone actually dead? When their heart stops beating, when they cease breathing for good, when their brain no longer functions or when their body begins to decompose? We often think about death as that moment in time at which it may be said: time of death..... The definition which applies remains the subject of debate but there really is a point at which life and death meet.(i) On the one hand, life, and on the other death. Death, no longer living, is not only a biological phenomenon but also a social one.

Social death does not necessarily have to coincide with biological death. The loneliness of many older people and those who are dying in our society abuts social death. Many of these people have to make do without any significant relationships.(ii) In small-scale societies of hunters and gatherers, like that of the Australian aborigines, social death or exclusion is often more feared than physical death. On the other hand, people are welcomed long before their birth into social life, as we see in gifts of baby clothing and cuddly toys for the as yet unborn baby. Many societies do not however view newborns as full human beings. Social birth does not necessarily take place at the same time as physical birth. The beginning and the end of life, as anthropologists remind us, are viewed very differently in different cultures. They are therefore not universal and natural facts, neither can western societies maintain that social values play no role in pronouncing a person medically dead. (iii)

The French ethnologist, Robert Hertz, sees death as a social event. Instead of it taking place at a given moment in time, the transition from life to death is a gradual process which is ritualized. (iv) Allan Kellehear, professor of sociology at the University of Bath has shown that historically people have slowly shifted this process in relation to physical death. In societies of hunters and gatherers, that transition took place primarily after biological death in the form of a journey to another world.

Thereafter, it commenced during physical life at the death-bed in sedentary agrarian societies and formed a good death (a fulfilling life) as an ideal, and upon death was further completed. In urban societies, ever decreasing parts of the community became involved and professionals made their appearance at the death-bed, particularly in the cases of the elite and the middle class. While in industrialized societies, and in what Kellehear refers to as the cosmopolitan period, the transition from life to death has practically shifted entirely to this world. The acknowledgement given to death was originally community based, then went on to be celebrated in the intimate circle of the family and friends and became even smaller with the use of professionals and has finally become solely a matter for the person dying, together with those who work in institutions and for governments. That development is one of increasing privatization and has culminated in the medicalization of death; and narrowed down to death as a matter of shame. (v). In the Netherlands, more openness appears to prevail about death. What is interesting about Kellehear's historical model is the gradual shift of the transition from life to death, the change in social status, from what was primarily after to what has primarily become before physical death. The work of the historian Phillipe Ariès shows that this was not a linear development (vi) but Kellehear does provide us with a larger picture of the general tendency. It explains the relatively limited time period we take for rituals after death. (vii). Those form the closure of the transition of the dearly departed from the category of the living to the category of the dead.

Psychologizing death

The classical model of rites of passage, rooted in small-scale societies, comprises the transition of the dearly departed from this world to another. (viii). The idea of life after death occupies a central position in most religions. According to the anthropologist Edmund Leach, it is based on the confusion of two views of time. We all know about repetition, and repetitive time, like the Seasons which always return. On the other hand, we experience the passage of time as irreversible, for example, in the process of our personal aging. In religious ideas, these two kinds of experience are confused, according to Leach. The irreversible death, the transition from life to death, is seen as reversible in the form of a transition from death to (a new) life. (ix). A symbolic death and rebirth often mark a change of social status in rites of passage: it reconfirms taking on new status or a new position. Those rituals often go hand in hand with a spatial transition, a territorial passage, as can be pithily expressed in rites of death. (x)

The classical model seems less applicable to a large part of our contemporary society. (xi) During the last fifty years, the way we shape the most crucial rites of passage, those surrounding death have undergone a complete transformation. From the nineteen sixties, many people started to consider conventional and uniform funerals as unnecessarily restrictive. They were thought to be too formal and impersonal. Mourning clothes started to disappear, speeches became more and more customized to fit the dead person concerned, and, increasingly, funerals became private events. (xii). People distanced themselves from authorities, even religious ones, and attention for the soul of the dearly departed gave way to more and more attention paid to the survivors grief. Despite secularization and individualization, death is still spoken about in whispers. Ideologically, the need for social engineering to make society a better place expanded its field to include death; as in life, people want to maintain their ability to stage direct death too.

From the nineteen eighties, more and more people wanted a more active role in funerals which were to become more personally arranged and hence become more personal. This idea was most at its most extreme in the extravagant funerals and memorial ceremonies held for young people who had died of HIV/AIDS. Although initially intended for what were very much Do-It-Yourself funerals, the funeral industry adopted the idea of the personal funeral towards the end of the twentieth century. Women also joined the ranks of what had for long been a traditional male bastion. Cremations increased in number. Publications and advertisements placed more and more emphasis on ritual creativity; funerals were to be unique, original and especially personal. While the role taken by priests and ministers declined, funeral directors and occasionally ritual counselors, in close collaboration with their clients, provided the styling for the last obsequies.

Rituals and elegies have, since then, placed increasing emphasis on the biography of the deceased. A productive life is a project deserving of celebration; speechifying, accompanied by the use of personal symbols. Despite or perhaps precisely because of the secularization of our society, an ever greater need is felt for rituals. The sociologist, Cas Wouters makes a connection between this and the effects of globalization and the erosion of social cohesion. New rituals are seen as a means of coping with uncertainty and as a way of publically acknowledging a sense of belonging to a symbolic community. Silent marches and demonstrative displays of grief for public figures are seen by Wouters as expression of this. (xiii). Funerals allow connections we have and want to have with those around us and with the deceased to come to full expression. More than with a distant God, many of us seek significance in our social relationships with a small circle of friends and family. At places where we allow ourselves the pleasure of reverie, at home or elsewhere, in ritual gestures and practices such as prayer, burning candles and when placing gifts on tombs, together with objects we revere, our relationships with the dead remain alive after funerals. The dead become as it were the objects of our thoughts.

Psychologically we may speak of the posthumous self which maintains symbolic immortality. This postself stands for how someone wants to be remembered after his or her death and is also shaped by the way in which survivors remember the deceased. It functions in a social context where relationships between the living and the dead continue. (xiv). But this does revolve around who the deceased was, with hindsight on the part of the survivors of the life-story of the deceased and what he or she did, rather than a continued destiny of that person in some other world or the hereafter. Attention has shifted from the other side to this side. (xv). The symbolic immortality referred to above has a sell-by-date as it resolves and dissolves in the mixture of memories of deceased.

Where the transition of the deceased to another world has become less important or at least something which lacks delineation, the sense of loss remains the most burning issue for survivors. The passage of the survivors, their grief, carries the funereal melody. They become the *dramatis personae* of funerals and memorial services who are frequently referred to with the term mourning rituals. Interested parties sometimes suggest that certain rituals are beneficial for coping with grief. Those suggestions are rarely substantiated. (xvi). So much is possible and may in fact be part of a funeral that choices are difficult to make. A memorable funeral is supposed to be a personal one. In their book "How would you like it? Saying your loved one farewell in a personal way", Ton Overtoom and Hermien Embsen provide guidelines. (xvii). Dealing with loss has become an industry. Books and reports of ritual counselors and people with a great deal of experience in the field of funerals do well and are many in number. There are even publications devoted to life-threatening diseases. Early diagnoses, more successful methods of treatment and increased life expectancy all make people more aware of the greater leeway they have to deal with and anticipate death. The funeral industry profits by acquiring customers using funeral planning with a personal touch, together with insurance specially designed for the purpose. To the extent those wishes are many years later still those in place and cohere still with those of the survivors are issues which are difficult to chart. But acknowledging personal identity and significant relationships with others seems to be the goal, and the impression is sometimes even given that after death social connections with the deceased are emphasized which in life were perhaps not all they might have been. Emphasizing grief, the role attributed to rituals in the process of mourning, as well as the relationships with the deceased all point to the psychologizing of death.

Current market conditions

Soul-searching is part of current funeral market conditions. Gary Laderman points out in his history of the American funeral industry that the last picture, seeing the embalmed body of the deceased was propagated by the industry as being in the interests of dealing with grief. The reasons given are not very compelling in his view and quasi-theological by nature. (xviii). In organizing the funeral industry and its marketing, the United States takes a prominent role. In the Netherlands, measures are currently being taken to introduce a less stringent form of embalming.

What is remarkable is that many of the women who during recent years have joined the funeral industry have done so by leaving health care. They get job satisfaction from their work. But female funeral directors and ritual supervisors combine their ideals with commerce. Innovations in the sector, the array of goods and services that are part and parcel of the so-called personalized funeral, are partly driven by competition; and economics. Major parties want to enlarge their market share. They like to take on new concepts which are gaining in popularity. At the beginning of the twenty first century, competition increased and intensified when for a few years an unexpected decrease in the number of deaths took place. No unexpected increase in life expectancy had been factored into the business plan. Funeral insurance companies compete with one another to acquire the business of the one remaining part of the Dutch population (of about one third) that still does not pay premiums for such insurance. Young people in their prime frequently figure in advertising campaigns.

This has a certain parallel with recording special moments in life on film or photograph. Recordings of a funeral are, it is true, not as yet standard practice but they are beginning to be seen. Entrepreneurs make professional, biographic films by compiling footage taken during the life of the deceased specifically for viewing at the funeral. A background of a beach, a water-fall or a cloud studded sky, please choose, we see a portrait of the deceased which then fades. Religious ideas which might be part of this remain unarticulated. This also applies to the small-scale rituals and gestures such as releasing white balloons or white doves which rise into the atmosphere. Nature and our own lives inspire us as do many elements taken from other religious traditions: ranging from dream-catchers, putting pebbles on graves, offerings of food and beverages, etc. to cremations on an open pyre and scattering ashes on open water. The open days held by crematoria and funeral homes not to forget the specially convened public trade fairs are intended to acquaint the public with a entire array of possibilities and it is not only providers of funerals which offer their goods and services as their suppliers also show and praise their wares. Masons, florists, eulogists, ritual specialists, grief therapists, jewellers, coffin manufacturers, urn-makers, weavers of corpse-ropes or shrouds, they are all on parade. Garden centre products, such as statues and other decorative objects are also increasingly used to accessorize graves and urns. Resembling the manner in which garden design has entered popular consumer culture, such features compete with one another for attention. (xix) Those things are loving signs that the deceased continues to belong to the lives led by survivors.

Hans van Houwelingen observes that death is dealt with extremely efficiently. The rights to remain buried expire after ten or twenty years. (xx) A turn around rate which contrasts distinctly with the gravestones which can withstand the test of time. There are no rituals which mark exhumations, states Van Houwelingen (xxi). Two survivors I spoke with decided to make the gravestone of their parents available for the project as extending burial rights and positioning the urn containing the ashes of the other parent in that grave would otherwise have cost five thousand Euro. That was thought to be too expensive. They thought themselves fortunate that the gravestone could be assembled as part of the art exhibit. (xxii)

Criticism of the commodification of death is nothing new. (xxiii). The aforementioned Laderman commented that scant attention is paid to the cultural needs of customers. (xxiv) Trade goods, like coffins or cuddly toys and statues on graves, attain another significance in the context of the cult of death and are set apart from economic transactions and cease being trade goods any longer. Demonstrative consumption, and history shows us that death is in no way the great equalizer, was also part of death rites in hunter-gatherer societies such as that of the Tiwi (the inhabitants of Bathurst and Melville Islands, north of Australian coast) prior to the introduction of money into that society. In contrast to Japan, where according to Hikaru Suzuki the funeral industry discourages people from taking an active role in shaping funerals which are currently commercially arranged, that same industry in the Netherlands is trying to encourage active design of the ritual in all kinds of different ways. The so-called personalized funeral makes the mixture of a deeply personal experience of death and loss and commerce more acceptable. (xxv)

Major funeral organizations are developing initiatives to obtain greater control on burgeoning forms of community memories of the dead. This fits in well with the spirit of the times in which social values are regaining importance and hence our need to remember the deceased as individuals but do so

collectively. Manifestations shape this requirement as the power previously held by religious organizations and the specialists connected with them to define religious content has declined drastically. (xxvi) The suggestion is made that death can be overcome by survivors connecting with one another and coping with the death of individuals. Even if such memorializations do create a means by which those involved share their pain and feel at one with one another, they signpost the way death returns to life. Does the art work made by Hans van Houwelingen offers a means of escape from embracing life and pausing to reflect in innocence on the inevitability of death?

Where does the road go?

"A short-cut, taken but not by death", is an incomparable monument for death. The gravestone path, which breaches the artillery wall of the Vijfhuizen Fort, forms a dike against the destruction of alertness, which the philosopher, Bernard Stiegler identifies in contemporary consumption culture and the mass media. The psycho-power which Stiegler acknowledges also applies, according to his colleague Jean-Pierre Wils, to the Dutch funeral industry, which in turn goes hand in hand with cultural amnesia. In the reinvention of rites of death he sees some signs of resistance, but Wils doubts that volatility and subjectifying death does justice to the rituals which are deeply rooted in traditions and which are intended to form a means of slowing down. (xxvii) Van Houwelingen's short-cut sets a mark in the ground as he has re-positioned the focus on death right into traditional Dutch landscape. The short-cut of Van Houwelingen makes death tangible in its absence. This physical location never performed according to its intended military function and remained undisturbed by death. The paving which seen in terms of landscaping seems harmonious, is made of recycled gravestones and sheds light on the fortification as a site where death can be pondered. The gravestones have a new function; taken from their original graves they form an imaginary space in which death transfigures itself on the short-term and exceeds economic utility. A walk along the path, varied in its composition, invites us to remain alert. The series of stones placed at a height and with a view of the end calls upon the absent major player. At the same time, the short-cut is tranquil. The artist has translated his mental images into a ritual with great clarity; an ode to eternal death. And the ritual works. (xxviii) In a certain manner, a disaster plays itself out here in reverse because we do not have to identify directly with the victims of the Grim Reaper and the hurried cult of death can be refrained from. The ritual area stands outside time and space. The road to unknown death results in deep thoughts. What is it all about? What is permanent? Why do we ignore death? Which meaning can be given to death? It continues the tradition of contemplating death we know from the Middle Ages, brought about by proximity to places where death could be sensed. A high-point of this was the mid-eighteenth century excavation of Pompeii, a small town near Rome, which in the first century after Christ had been disastrously inundated under lava as well as other forms of disaster or thano-tourism which include a direct or symbolic confrontation with death but in their sensational and commercial forms do not require us to concentrate. (xxix). The processing of death, which is more or less industrial in modern cemeteries, seems equally lacking in inspiration. (xxx). Death needs peace. Loud gestures and heavy decoration can also be left out. This makes "A short-cut, taken but not by death", the work of Hans van Houwelingen exhibited at the Vijfhuizen Fort unique and a blessing.

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