



### **The sound of the unsaid**

What do we leave unsaid for fear that saying it will cause something unpleasant or frightening? What we don't say is influenced by a multitude of rules and principles that determine our behavior both culturally and psychologically. Repression is a mechanism for concealing things that are unsolved or traumatic, a means of not dealing with a problem, or for preventing feelings of pain and grief to arise. Nevertheless, as we know since Sigmund Freud, this does not make the problem, pain or grief disappear. What is repressed rather reappears again and again in the form of symptoms of various sorts. And yet, repression serves as a protective mechanism to make reality bearable. What seems decisive here is the balance between what is not repressed and what is, as well as the question of the form the repression takes on when it reappears. How does this confront us at the social or personal level? One of the most common things we repress, and thus the number one thing that we avoid, is death – our own mortality. We do not want to be reminded of it. But how is repression connected to perception or language? Even if I cannot see or hear something, it can still exist. If a word is said out loud, does its meaning escape from the files of the repressed? Or to say it another way: to what degree does the unspoken contribute to something being tabooed, and what role does the sound of words play in this?

### **On words that sound the same**

In Japanese, the phonetic kinship of the kanjis 死 (*shi* = death) and 四 (*shi* = four), the fact that they are pronounced the same way, means that people avoid saying both words. Since death is taboo, the number four, as an unlucky symbol, is eliminated from daily life as much as possible.

The bad karma of the number four does not come from the character itself, but from how it is pronounced. However, not only the sound of the word is avoided, the character itself is also avoided as far as is possible. Thus, four is left out when numbering floors of buildings, doors, tables, important dates, and the like. In various cultural contexts, there are numbers which are ostensibly unlucky and thus are related to death. And there are also ambiguous numbers, numbers that can represent both luck and misfortune. In such cases, numbers are charged with meaning. Religious, mystical, esoteric, or irrational assumptions are reflected in number symbolism and the relationships between numbers, this all based on beliefs about how they influence people.

Number symbolism can be seen as a means for orientation or understanding, as a way to classify events in a mythology of luck or misfortune. In Italy, for example, the number four stands for «the mystery of everything and nothing.» a poetic way to describe death and its inexplicable nature.

By not pronouncing the word *shi*, four, and not using its kanji or hearing the word, it is thought that death and misfortune can be fended off. In order to suppress the greatest of all ordeals, thinking about it is suppressed as much as possible, and ways to paraphrase it are created. Death is pushed into the unconscious, or packaged in its own religious narratives. It is a blank space that reflects what is left unsaid. The blank space of death thus corresponds to a blank space in spoken language.

### **Happy Dying or Live Forever**

How does the repressed or unspoken find its voice then? By being horrified by reality; when faced, for example, by death itself. When dying becomes a problem in society, new narratives and marketing strategies emerge as schemes for solving it. Currently there is a boom in death workshops, workshops for learning how to face one's own death. Reflecting on one's life, mortality, and death, including the physical experience of lying in a coffin, is thought to counteract the taboo and remove the fear. And above all, death workshops teach people how to organize their own funerals. This is linked to the increasing phenomenon in large cities of single people dying alone, with no relatives to look after them or take care of the necessary formalities. The dying person thus has to take this responsibility upon themselves so they don't burden neighbors or society in general. Socio-political conditions and social developments have thus lead to a marketing context in which the culturally unspoken is not only being confronted, but glossed over: Death workshops are advertised under the motto of «happy dying.»

But people are also trying to get around mortality by striving for the immortality promised by biogenetics and transhumanism, for example. Here, realizing the human dream of eternal life is being conceived as the entry into a post-human era, the model for the future. One of the main aims of optimized machinery is overcoming death. Death results in the loss of the body, so to overcome it, what is needed is hybridization, enhancement, or genetic modification. What is interesting here is to look at the context in which the taboo of death is being abandoned, where the unspoken is beginning to have a say, the contexts in which death and dying are being addressed.

Are they socio-political and scientific, or are they simply a marketing strategy?

### **Live and Let Die\***

When living conditions lead to premature death, this has to do with socio-political structures. Unwritten laws come into play here. This is the case, for example, if overtime hours are not regulated and working overtime until dropping from exhaustion is seen as an expression of loyalty, or is even required. It is life itself that is being exacted and exploited, concealed economically and culturally as a work ethic. The value of a person is measured by the hours they have worked, this seen as a sign of loyalty and commitment to the company. If there are no limits to overtime under the ever-increasing pressure of competition, the consequences are deadly.

What falls by the wayside because there is no time left is everything that is not work: health and privacy, followed by psychological and social consequences such as depression and demographic changes.

The word *karoshi* is used to describe death caused by overwork or job-related exhaustion. It is the result of a culturally rooted, socio-political problem. Policies of silencing also aim at keeping everything as it is; there should be no uncontrolled changes. But to be heard, every protest and viewpoint must be stated out loud.

### **The passage of time**

Death is what defines a lifetime, it is what delineates and signifies the span of a life, as well as time in general. At the moment of becoming aware of one's own mortality, especially the vulnerability it represents, questions arise about the meaning of life, the way one is living, the importance of loved ones. Looking at one's own life and death, whether one accepts them or not,

can bring about reflection and change, can make our sphere of influence visible. The end of life is not only unknown, it is taboo. It is not mentioned so that it won't come - there is a deathly silence. Narratives and rituals accompany death-related ideas about the end of life or about new beginnings. Reflecting different cultural and religious viewpoints, such narratives move between rebirth, heaven and hell. In relation to life, to good and bad deeds, the afterlife is stylized either as a place of release, or as a place of inconceivable horror and punishment. Just as a new beginning presupposes an end, nothing remains the same; there is always potential for change in all directions, even if it can't be seen or remains unsaid.

Sabine Winkler (2019)

Translation from the original German:

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\* Title of a Guns N' Roses song

## DEATH – and LIFE GOES ON

«It is surely not as beautiful in heaven as it is here!»

(2009 Schlingensiefel, d. 2010)

«I have nothing at all to do with death. If I am, then death is not. If death is, then I am not.»

The well-known aphorism of the Greek philosopher Epicurus, who represented a moderate hedonism, is more than two thousand years old, and despite its materialistic radicalism it points to a dilemma that exists still today: contending with death, knowing that it is something that cannot be grasped. But not being completely indifferent to it either.

«Death is a void that suddenly bursts into the middle of a being's life. Existence suddenly falls through the trapdoor of non-existence.»

(Vladimir Jankélévitch) It is difficult for us to reconcile ourselves with the finality with which this happens, the absolute par excellence. And words fail: if someone talks about death they are talking about something they know nothing about, and will always know nothing about. We cannot imagine death. It is an object of speculation that has no system of reference. (In the moment we comprehend it, the first word we say about it would also be our last.) Life has to do with «yes» or «no» and very often also «yes and no.» But death comes and says only YES; it does not negotiate. As La Rochefoucauld said, one can look at neither the sun nor death steadily.

«Death is great. We belong to him with laughing mouths. When we think ourselves in the midst of life, he dares to weep within us.» (Rilke)

Indeed, if the unheard-of occurs, that fissure in life, all we can do is become silent. When faced with the inexorable fact we must accept, there is a long hushed moment, a moment in

which we step out of our driven existence. It is also a *momento mori* – a reflection on one's own mortality. All the little deaths we may have already died – leave-taking, farewells, loving... are nothing in comparison to the «great» death. After disasters that affect large communities there is a collective minute of silence. – Wailing, moaning, stamping, dances, songs... the archaic forms of dealing with the pain of grief, which today seem strange to us, are particularly impressive since they glimmer with a rebellion against death (which did not exist in primeval times; it was black magic at work). In working off their grief, people work their way to exhaustion... It seems plausible that it is the condition of speechlessness and mourning that has led to rituals, since they help us put events into a different dimension, one that is outside time. The size of our «ancestral portrait galleries» is not even remotely comprehensible and we will have to become part of it... even if we CANNOT accept it.

«Strictly speaking, no one believes in their own death.» (Sigmund Freud) And this even has a certain artful logic. Every person considers themselves immortal; although they know they must die, they will never know that they have died...

This «meta-empirical tragedy» (V.J.) is given a comic twist by Woody Allen: «I'm not afraid of dying. I just don't want to be there when it happens.»

So strictly speaking, we know nothing. Our imaginations are full of ideas: Literary passages in which conversations are held with the dead behind the cemetery wall, speeches coming out of crypts. But these usually have to do with the world left behind, they are often harsh reckonings. Religious tales of hell and paradise or rebirth consider the afterlife or the return to the world to be the future, even to be eternity (which is as incomprehensible

as death, since we experience everything in life as temporary). They offer, as it were, an agreement with death that can comfort us. Our everyday language is full of tricks and images that suggest continuity in order to bridge the gap between this world and the hereafter. Yes, many of us need comfort and indulge in heavenly hopes! The image of the «evening or autumn» of life shows how little we want to admit that after being old, there is no new spring in life, but a breaking off – an event for which we are not really prepared. Other than farewells and clarifications regarding one's heirs – how should we get ourselves ready? It is better to learn to live.

We cannot imagine death, but we do have ways of looking at it. In the third person, for example, this is done in memorials or obituaries. A certain he or she has died. We make a note of such announcements rather impersonally, but the more interested in it we are, the more we can relate. My mother reads all the obituaries in her regional newspaper like a statistician, focusing especially on the age of the person who has died – with an immediate sense of satisfaction: She is still alive...

It is much more difficult to look at death in the second person, when facing a YOU, because YOU should never die! «The absence of a loved one for whom one grieves is as concrete as their presence once was.» (John Berger) All shared possibilities cease to be possible. We can no longer ask a question, a small cosmos has disappeared; where there was once abundance is now a void, a deafening emptiness... We continue to love – in our memory, for the immortality of love is perhaps the only way to relativize separation through death. And: What has been, cannot have NOT been. – In Japan, the dead seem more naturally connected to daily life than in Western Europe: There is often a household altar, with urns or at least photos with gifts, a few of the

favorite things of the deceased person, such as sake, teacups, tangerines, etc.

Death from the perspective of myself, in the first person: We hope we don't feel too lonely when the time comes, since it is a step that everyone must take alone... The fear of all fears, that indistinct ultimate fear is called death. This most distant fear is at the core of our existence. That is why it is not possible to remove the taboo regarding death... its repression is a consequence of our life energy. Perhaps the best example of a death-hater is Elias Canetti. Literally an enemy of death. Death, «a scandal» that he would «abolish» if it were possible. An almost holy wrath, combined with childlike defiance, raged in him throughout his life, expressed in the thousands of pages of his writing project «The book against death,» as if with words he could banish and destroy the hated «destroyer»... Anyone who is witty when writing about death deserves it...

«An outrage... a degradation of human life...»

The poet Mayröcker (b. 1924) also vehemently rejects the inevitability of death: «... I still have so much to do... when I think of how long other creatures live!»

Her colleague, the poet Ilse Aichinger (1921-2016), in contrast, was absolutely opposed to any desire for eternity. For her, death was a place to disappear; she would have rather never been born. On the occasion of her 75th birthday she said: «I have always felt it an impertinence that no one is asked whether they want to be born. I, for one, would certainly have refused.» (Although her complicated biography would make her radical pessimism more understandable, it can't be included here.)

Death is the «paradox of meaningful meaninglessness,» an «organon and obstaculum» (V.J.), a kind of tool and a means, like a dynamo and what it pushes against. It gets in

our way, even though we have so many plans! Death is the prerequisite for individual meaning in life, for its ardent affirmation. It pushes the infinite value of life into the limelight, a value that goes so often unnoticed during one's own lifetime... Death may seem mysterious to us, but this has to do with our not recognizing how it reveals the preciousness of life. The real mystery is rather our oft enigmatic existence, not death as a law of nature. The cultural philosopher Georg Simmel speaks of the «form-giving function of death.» It limits or shapes our life, not just when the end has arrived, but as the basis of everything we do. This means that the quality and structure of each lived moment would be different if our existence could extend beyond that ultimate boundary – into an infinite continuum (of boredom??). According to Simmel, our activities consist in a union of «conquering life and fleeing death.» When working, enjoying, resting, all of the things that are somehow important, we plunge into life and away from death. It is a twofold movement: as we consume our life, we move towards death, while at the same time, we consume our life in order to flee death. – The «goal of life» (in the sense of finality) is death. (Freud) «Life inherently requires death as its anti-thesis, as the 'other.'» (G.S.) These opposite poles may be merged if some of the values, ideas and work we created together continue to exist and are developed. Since it is true: life goes on, even if we someday no longer exist... except in final places of rest like «Halls of Memory» in the WWW...

So: TO LIFE!

And to: «DIE AND BECOME!» (Goethe)

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