

The background is a dark, monochromatic, and heavily textured surface, resembling cracked earth or aged leather. The cracks are irregular and form a complex, web-like pattern across the entire frame. The lighting is somewhat uneven, with slightly darker areas in the corners and brighter, more reflective spots where the cracks catch the light.

**APPROACHING
DEATH TODAY**

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INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

In the past millennia, the church was in charge of the question of death within Western society. Religion gave meaning to death and life. It kept people together and helped them to accept the harsh finitude of their life. In that society, death played a central role, and people shared a common understanding of what it meant. In the last three centuries, that relationship with death changed drastically, with the rationalisation and secularisation of the society. Gradually, death became a taboo subject and its reality was denied by the society (Ariès, 1974, Thomas, 1985, Gorer 1965).

Looking at how death is dealt with today, it might appear that it is still the case. The topic still generates discomfort and uneasiness, and is hardly discussed, unless death has appeared in one's life.

While many sociologists still consider death a taboo subject, others, such as Tony Walter, observe a revival of death (Exley, 2004). For Walter (1994), people become more open and expressive about it. The personalisation of contemporary funerals or the rise of interest on the subject are trends that seem to confirm his opinion.¹

What this shows is that the contemporary attitude towards death is complex and in mutation, making it particularly difficult to approach. For instance, the design of a funerary building is a considerable challenge for architects. It is a delicate and complex task to grasp what such a building should provide and express today.²

1. See the *Association for the Study of Death and Society*, the work and TEDx lectures of Allison Killing, and the increase of sociological studies on death, dying, and bereavement (Exley, 2004).
2. Should it be a place isolated from the hectic life of the modern city, in order for the bereaved to reflect in quietness? Or, on the contrary, should it be integrated in the urban fabric and fulfill the role of *Memento Mori*, that is, to remind people that they, too, one day will die? Should the architecture of death be symbolic? If yes, which symbols should be used, considering the inadequacy of traditional symbols?

Thus, a fresh look at death is needed. To do this, the following research question will be addressed: **What is the attitude of the contemporary western society towards death and how should this attitude be approached?**

An analysis, limited to recent trends, such as the new forms of funerals and palliative care, might lead to a too narrow approach, considering the many changes today's society faces in relation to death. This is why the research methodology has to tackle the question at a deeper level. In this respect, anthropology and philosophy will be used in chapter 1 to build a theory of death. This theory will allow an understanding of the relationship with death that human beings bring forth.³

The next step will be to define the contemporary western society, which this research is aimed at. To do so, sociological studies on modernity and postmodernity will be introduced in chapter 2.

In chapter 3, both previous chapters, 1 and 2, will be fused: the theory of death will be applied to the sociological study of the contemporary western society. This will result in the establishment of the contemporary western society's attitude towards death, and, consequently, in what the appropriate way of approaching that attitude is.

3. Anthropology, because it studies humankind within past and present societies, and philosophy, because it strives to provide an essential and universal definition of death.

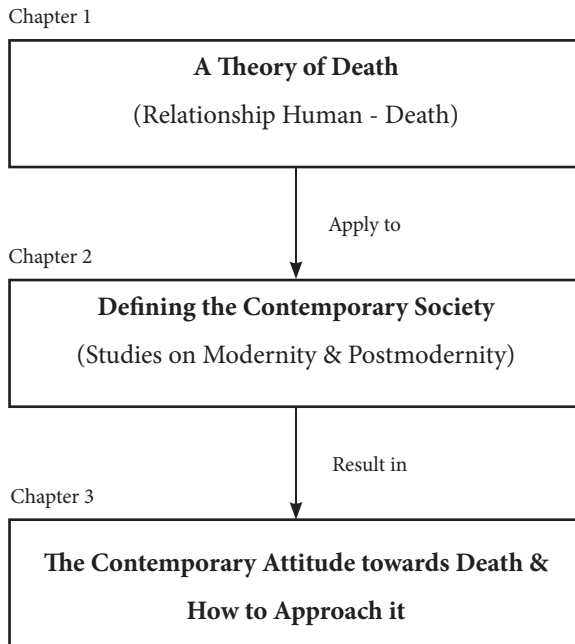


Figure 1 *Structure of the Thesis*

Chapter 1

A THEORY OF DEATH

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, a theory of the relationship between human beings and death will be presented. It will provide a strong theoretical framework, from which the contemporary society's attitude towards death will be determined.

Ancient Greek philosopher, Epicurus, argues that death is irrelevant and should not be feared since it only exists when the individual does not. On the other hand, German philosopher, Martin Heidegger, argues that the reality of death should be fully acknowledged. For him, death plays a fundamental role, in the sense that it can inspire the individual to live a more authentic life (Heidegger, 1953). While the first calls for a *Carpe Diem*⁴ attitude, the latter rather calls for a *Memento Mori*⁵ attitude. Both views make sense, but, at the same time, they show how contradictory and changing the relationship with death can be from an individual to another. It is the reason why this study will be oriented towards a more dialectical⁶ point of view, namely, the view of a French sociologist and philosopher, Edgar Morin.

In *L'Homme et la Mort* (1951), Morin develops a fascinating theory on the relationship between human beings and death. His central idea is that there is a strong connection between how an individual develops himself in relation to his world and his attitude towards death. For him, the idea of death corresponds with the idea of the

4. *Carpe diem* is a Latin aphorism, usually translated as "seize the day." In other words: enjoy the moment.

5. *Memento Mori*, in Latin, means: "remember that you have to die."

6. That juxtaposes opposed or contradictory ideas.

loss of individuality. His theory of death is notable due to it being based on many disciplines,⁷ making him the first French thanatologist.⁸ Since its publication, his book has never ceased to influence writings on death⁹ (Burguière, 2008).

7. Namely: prehistorical, historical, ethological, sociological, psychological, philosophical, and biological.

8. Thanatology is the interdisciplinary scientific study of death.

9. Philippe Ariès acknowledged Morin's theory when he wrote, in 1974, the most famous and complete synthesis of the historical evolution of the human attitude towards death: *Western attitudes toward death: from the Middle Ages to the present* (Burguière, 2008). It also formed the base for the last big French anthropological study of death: *L'anthropologie de la Mort* by Louis-Vincent Thomas (1975) (Burguière, 2008).

THREE ATTITUDES TOWARDS DEATH

Morin's theory of death is based on a conflicting relationship between the human individuality and the species. This relationship explains why the individual sometimes rejects death, sometimes accepts it, and why he, most of the time, does not even think about it.

The Species & the Individuality

Every species requires its individuals to die in order to evolve and survive from generation to generation. However, there is a clear difference between how the animal and human species relate to this process. Referring to ethology, the study of animal behaviour, Morin (1951) explains that animals, just like human beings, have an individuality. Specific behaviours and emotions can be observed within different individuals of the same species. Nonetheless, the behaviour that animals adopt when confronted with death is common to all the individuals of the species: they are instincts (Morin, 1951). This means that animals do recognise some forms of death, like "death-danger," "death-aggression," or "death-enemy," but they do not recognise death in its form of "death-loss-of-individuality" because they are simply not aware of their individuality (Morin, 1951).¹⁰ Human beings, however, know that they are unique beings, and this reality clashes terribly with the inevitability of their death.

10. Morin (1951), nonetheless, acknowledges that this claim is not absolute. It happens, for example, that some animals feel painful and violent emotions when another dies; but these are, according to him, complex cases that require different explanations. He (1951) refers, for example, to the extreme case when a faithful dog dies, following the event of death of its owner, on his tomb. For him, this example is the consequence of the 'individualisation' that domestic animals went through, being detached from their natural environment (Morin, 1951).

Hence, Morin claims that the idea of death corresponds to the idea of the loss of the individuality.

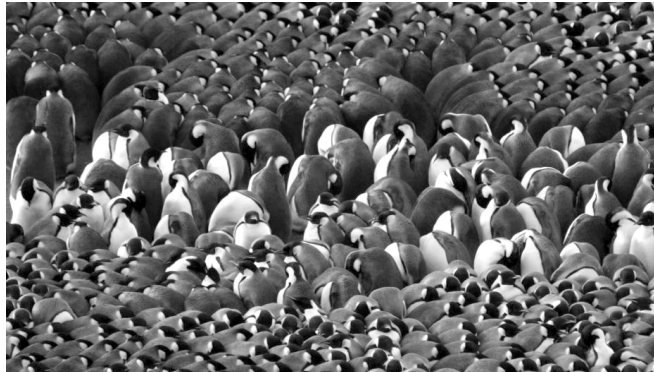


Figure 2 *A group of individuals of the human species*

Figure 3 *A group of individuals of the emperor penguins species*

The Trauma of Death

The awareness of death causes, as such, a trauma, whence “a hole, a pain, a disaster [...]” is felt¹¹. A trauma, in its psychiatric definition, is an experience that produces psychological injury or pain (Morin, 1951). The *trauma of death* can, according to Morin (1951), take

11. Morin, 1951, p22

different forms, such as an “emotional pain at funerals, the terror of the decomposition of the corpse, the obsession with death”¹², etc. All these traumatic forms emanate from one fundamental concern: the loss of the individuality (Morin, 1951). Accordingly, the more the individuality is affirmed, the more severe the trauma of death is. This is why, in archaic societies, where the group affirms itself above the individual, the trauma of death emanating from the fear of losing one’s own individuality is less pronounced (Morin, 1951). It explains why such societies are less affected by the finitude of life than more individualised societies.

The Blindness to Death

The awareness of one’s individuality - and consequently of its finitude - is not innate. It is something that is learned after birth. In fact, it is at the moment when the child becomes aware of his individuality that he feels concerned by the idea of death (Morin, 1951). Thus, in the first years of its existence, the human species, just like animal-species, is blind to its own death. This blindness to death fades as soon as the individual becomes aware of his own existence (Morin, 1951). Nonetheless, even after learning about the existence of death, the species’ *blindness to death* does not fully disappear. In fact, humans live for a big part of their life, blind to death, as if they or their beloved friends and family will never die. By participating in the course of life itself, the thought of death vanishes (Morin, 1951). As Morin (1951) beautifully puts it: “Death comes back only when the individual looks at it or looks at himself.”¹³ Human beings are always forced to rediscover their finitude (Morin, 1951).

12. Morin, 1951, p21

13. Morin, 1951, p53



Figure 4 “Death comes back only when the individual looks at it or looks at himself.”¹⁴ *Self-Portrait* by M.C. Escher, 1935.

To explain this, Morin (1951) refers to the studies of Freud. The awareness of death is a consequence of the *conscious* affirmation of the individuality over the species. As for the blindness to death, it is inscribed in the *unconscious* part of the brain (Morin, 1951). As Freud puts it, the latter encompasses the field of instincts that are innate characteristics of the human species (Morin, 1951). Based on that, Morin (1951) highlights that both, the human consciousness of death and the unconscious blindness to death, co-exist.

14. Morin, 1951, p53

A Conflicting relationship

Thus, a conflicting relationship occurs between the individuality - the conscious mind - and the species - the unconscious mind. On one hand, the unconsciousness, by participating to life, can dissolve the idea of death. In its extreme form, it can dominate the individuality of a person to the point that the thought of death never even occurs (Morin, 1951). This refers to the *blindness to death*. On the other hand, the obsessive awareness of one's uniqueness can engender a feeling of loneliness and make the experience of death extremely difficult to face, leading, in the worst case, to suicide or madness. This refers to the *trauma of death* (Morin, 1951).

The Acceptance of Death

Nevertheless, besides the *blindness to death* and the *trauma of death*, a third attitude has to be mentioned. In fact, human history is full of these remarkable examples, when something was more important than one's life, that is, more important than one's individuality. People died for love, ideas, friends, families, nations, etc. In war, for example, an individual is ready to fight and even sacrifice himself. The participation in a greater cause (whether it is defending his family or his country) helps him to go against his survival instincts that tell him to avoid battle in order to save his individuality, his species. The Japanese *seppuku* or *harakiri* is also worth mentioning. It is a form of ritual suicide performed by samurai warriors who committed serious offenses, or prefer to die with honour rather than fall in the hands of enemy (Fig 5). It is a disembowelment ceremony, where a samurai slices his abdomen open with a short blade. A friend or

servant would, subsequently, decapitate the samurai to release him of terrible pain.¹⁵



Figure 5 The ceremony of the seppuku or harakiri

In these examples, the individual consciously overcomes his *trauma of death* and sacrifices himself. Rather than affirming himself, he participates in an external greater cause (his family, his nation, his culture, his love, his pride, or his belief, etc.) to which his individuality belongs. This allows him to achieve what Morin (1951) calls the state of *acceptance of death*. Hence, the *trauma of death* can be overcome in the unlimited numbers of ways the individual can **participate** in life (Morin, 1951).

Summary

The human species, like all other species, is characterised by its *blindness to death*. This blindness to death discontinues as soon as the individual becomes aware of his own individuality. Realising that

15. <http://asianhistory.about.com/od/asianhistoryfaqs/f/seppukufa.htm>

his existence will end, he can only reject the reality of death: it comes as the *trauma of death*. However, through an infinite number of participations in life, the individual can overcome this trauma and reach a state of *acceptance of death*. Despite this, the *blindness to death* that characterises the species never fully vanishes. The individual lives most of the time unaware of death. Its reality comes back only when he looks at it or at himself.

As a result, Morin's theory of death has two poles: the *trauma of death* and the *acceptance of death*. Superposed to these poles, there is the *blindness to death*. In this dialectics, one's individuality is always in conflict, switching between *blindness to death*, *trauma of death* and *acceptance of death* (Morin, 1951). The attitude of the individual towards death depends, therefore, very much on the way he participates and affirms himself in life. This is why, in the next section, the notions of affirmation and participation are to be further elaborated on.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE INDIVIDUALITY

As it has been explained previously, the attitude towards death depends very much on the way the individual affirms himself and participates in life. In this section, Morin's description of how the individual develops his individuality will be presented and compared with other writings.

The Human Being, an Indeterminate Being

Referring to the studies of a Dutch anatomist, Louis Bolk, Morin (1951) explains that human beings are indeterminate beings.¹⁶ This particularity gives them the ability to participate in life in an infinite numbers of ways (Morin, 1951). It is that indeterminacy that pushes them to evolve and become what they want to be - whether it is a hunter, poet, tailor, or trader, etc. This freedom and possibility to always be able to develop himself give the human being an incomplete character. According to Morin (1951), this condition pushes the individual to develop himself in two paradoxical directions. At the same time that he needs to determine himself as a unique being, the individual needs to adapt to the world. In other words, at the same time that he needs to differentiate himself from the world, the individual needs to become a part of the world (Morin, 1951).

16. Human beings are a product of biological recession. Their principal anatomical characters are a result of a process of fetalisation. This means that, all their life, human beings keep their childish character. In other words, a human being conserves elements that are characteristic to a foetus, like his (proportionally) big head, for example.

Affirmation

In the process of self-determination, the individual **affirms** himself as a unique being with a unique individuality. According to Morin, he does so by transforming the world and making it *his* (Morin, 1951). This process can be observed in the most ordinary examples of putting a leash on a domestic animal or becoming the owner of a piece of land. However, that appropriation can also be mental or spiritual. The individual's simple act of deciding to do or learn something for his own sake, is an affirmation of his individuality as well. The process of affirmation depends, therefore, very much on the individual's worldview and the thoughts that motivate his actions. The more the individual invests in developing his uniqueness, the more important his own individuality becomes to him. Accordingly, the reality of death becomes increasingly difficult to face, leading to a more severe *trauma of death*.

Participation

On the other hand, the individual also needs to become a part of everything. To do so, he **participates** in the world rather than makes it *his*. Morin's theory is limited in that regard because it does not exactly define this process and considers only social participations between different individuals.

Professor Douglas J. Davies, a specialist in the history, theology and sociology of death, provides an interesting vision on that matter. He describes the human being as a 'centre of a network of identity' (Garces-Foley, 2006). The way he sees it, the individuality is also made of 'parts' of other individualities (Garces-Foley, 2006). In other

words, an individual is partly his mother, father, brothers, sisters, partner, friends, and more. As he puts it, grief can be seen as the reaction to the loss of one of the parts that form the individual's identity-network (Garces-Foley, 2006). This is beautifully expressed by the French writer, Gustave Flaubert, when he observed that: "a friend who dies, it is something of you that dies."¹⁷ Davies's notion of 'network of identity' helps to understand the act of participation, but it considers participation with other human individuals only. Yet, grief can also be experienced after the death of a cherished pet.¹⁸ Some cities even possess crematoria and cemeteries for domestic animals (fig. 6 & 7).

17. *Pensées de Gustave Flaubert*, 1915. Retrieved from https://fr.wikisource.org/wiki/Pens%C3%A9es_de_Gustave_Flaubert

18. <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2016/dec/22/the-grief-of-losing-a-pet-is-traumatic-and-universal-so-why-dont-we-talk-about-it>



Figure 6 *A Buddhist funeral for a beloved cat in Tokyo*

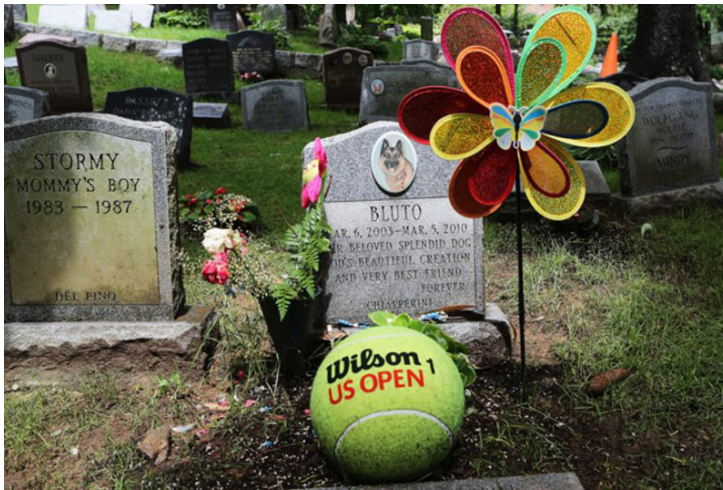


Figure 7 A touching graveyard for Bluto

Moreover, individuals can also feel attached to inanimate things. One can be overwhelmed by grief after losing or breaking a particular object that embodied strong memories or had a lot of meaning.¹⁹ What these examples show, is that the 'parts' of Davies's 'network of identity' can consist of more than just human individualities. Animals, objects, places, trees, or landscapes, just like human beings, can become part of one's identity. The human being, through participation, has the ability to connect with all the phenomena of his world. In that regard, Morin (1951) makes a fascinating link with the elementary human act of mimicking. What is mimicking, if not a way to adapt and become a part of the environment? Are the five animal's Kung Fu stands or the costumes and dances of Plain's Indians imitating animals not a result of the human need to connect with the world?

For Morin (1951), the individuals of archaic societies do not fear

19. See, for example: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/claire-bidwell-smith/objects-of-loss-overcoming-grief-in-a-material-world_b_3981679.html

death because their individuality is suppressed by the group. In his argument, he omits the fact that the archaic individual has a complete different understanding of his existence in the world than a modern western individual. It is not that the former cannot affirm his individuality. He just develops himself in a participatory way rather than affirms himself. “*I am the environment, I was born in the forest. I know it well,*” says Davi Kopenawa Yanomami, the spokesperson for the Yanomami Indians of Brazil.

So, by participating in the world, the individuality becomes a part of something bigger than itself: a feeling of belonging takes over. The personal individuality becomes only a part of one’s life, making the finitude of life less dramatic. Consequently, the individual can overcome his *trauma of death* and reach the state of *acceptance of death* more easily.²⁰

Summary

Affirmation and participation are in constant dialogue. The more the individual affirms himself rather than participates in the world, the more alienated he feels and the more significant his *trauma of death* is. The more he participates in the world rather than affirms himself, the more he becomes a part of the world. It is, thence, easier for him to reach the state of *acceptance of death*. To conclude, the human’s attitude towards death depends on the individual’s worldview, that is, the way he understands his place in the world and develops himself. It is almost ironic that this theory of death ended up in a philosophy of life. However, it explains how intellectuals such as Baruch Spinoza and Leonardo Da Vinci also came to such conclusion. The

20. In that respect, it is not a surprise that a palliative care physician, Ira Byock, for example, observes a human need to “connect to something larger than oneself that will endure into the open-ended future” when death is near. (Byock, 2002)

first, when he claimed that: “discussing death is a meditation not on dying but on living life,” and the latter, when he realised the following: “While I thought that I was learning how to live, I have been learning how to die.”



Figure 8 “Affirmation and participation are, therefore, in constant dialogue.” *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog* by Caspar David Friedrich (c. 1818).

CONCLUSION

A human being is the sum of the conflict between his species-part, his individuality, and the “bigger things,” in which he participates and which become a part of him. From this conflict, the individual’s attitude towards death switches constantly between the three states of *blindness to death*, *trauma of death* and *acceptance of death*.

The indeterminacy of human beings causes the individual to both, feel the need to affirm himself and participate in the world. The first leads to the *trauma of death*, while the other to the *acceptance of death*.

In each culture or society, the balance between these contradictory needs is different. Before the Age of the Enlightenment, the individuality of a western person had less importance. The latter devoted his life to his God rather than to his own interests. This relationship with a higher entity also generated a strong sense of community with the other individuals, who shared the same belief. This participatory worldview explains the relative ease with which religious individuals could face death. After the Age of Enlightenment, on the contrary, the development of the individual’s own identity took a central place. The need of affirmation dominated the participatory need, leading to a bigger difficulty to accept the reality of death.²¹

21. This will be further elaborated in chapter 3.



Figure 9 *The participatory worldview of the faithful*

Chapter 2

**DEFINING THE
CONTEMPORARY
WESTERN SOCIETY**

INTRODUCTION

A theory of human's relationship towards death has been defined. The objective now is to understand how the contemporary society relates to this theory. Do people today develop their individuality by affirming themselves, or rather through participation? To answer this question, the contemporary individual's understanding of his existence and place in the world has to be defined.

This chapter will describe the recent evolution of the western world from a modern to a postmodern one.²² This evolution had been studied from different perspectives. Some look at it from an economic or political point of view, while others observe it from a technological point of view, for example. This research will look at it from the perspective of the individual's worldview, that is, of his understanding of the world and his place in it. This is done in respect to Morin's theory, where the attitude towards death is intrinsic to the degree to which the individual affirms himself and participates in the world.

The Postmodern by Simon Malpass, published in 2005, will form the basis to define the contemporary society. This work gathers the key discussions about postmodernity and introduces the theorists who provided the most important and influential analyses of the contemporary world.

22. Modernity is taken as a point of departure since it is characterised by a big break with the past. As it will be shown, this had a lot of consequence on the postmodern attitude towards death. Furthermore, the transition between the traditional and modern world has already been well analysed.

LYOTARD'S NOTION OF NARRATIVES

Francois Lyotard's book, *The Postmodern Condition: A report on knowledge*, published in 1979 is, as Malpass describes it: "one of the most comprehensive and influential accounts on postmodernism."²³ Lyotard's concept of narratives shares a lot of similarities with the first chapter's theory of death. Just like Morin, Lyotard's theory is based on the way the individual understands his world and participates in it. His theory of the narratives presents an ideal point of view, from which the contemporary society can be analysed. An introduction to this theory is, hence, necessary.

Narratives, Metanarratives & Grand Narrative

Lyotard understands knowledge in the form of narratives. The narratives are all the ways, in which one understands his world: from scientific facts and statistics reports, to rumours and spiritual interpretations. Thus, narratives can be either objective, subjective, true, or false. Each form of narrative (science, history, or religion, for example) follows a set of rules that Lyotard calls the meta-narratives. According to him, these meta-narrative provide criteria, based on which someone can judge if an idea or statement is true, legitimate, or ethical.

Malpass (2005) provides a clear example: "So, for example, the

23. Malpass, 2005, p36

phrase 'My love is like a red, red rose' might be highly evocative within the discourse of poetry because of its suggestive and symbolic qualities, but would be likely to be considered illegitimate as a description of a particular type of flower in botany as it flaunts the rules of experimental verification and classification according to genus and species.²⁴ Finally, Lyotard introduces one last concept: the grand narrative. The grand narrative brings together all the narratives and metanarratives into one big story or direction that explains how a culture works, develops itself, and defines the place of the individual in that culture.

The question that will be answered is the following: Which form do the contemporary narratives, metanarratives, and grand narratives take? In other words: How does today's society understand its world and legitimates its actions? To answer this question, the evolution of the narratives, from the modern to the postmodern age, will be addressed.

MODERNITY

The Grand Narrative of Modernity

The grand narrative of modernity that emanated with the age of the Enlightenment in the 18th century presented “an idea of the development of knowledge as a progress towards universal enlightenment and freedom.”²⁵ Modernity has seen the development of the scientific and rational way of thinking and its application to all aspects of life. These new sciences shacked all the explanations of the world that religious mythologies provided (Malpass, 2005). Consequently, the modern individual found himself liberated from past political, moral, economic, and religious bonds that had become meaningless to him (Simmel, 1903). Modernity is, therefore, characterised by a break from the past and a focus on the future. The freedom that this movement generated gave the modern society an opportunity to develop itself equally and without constrictions (Simmel, 1903). As a result, “the question of what it is to be human had to be re-examined in the light of new understandings [...]”²⁶.

The French rationalist philosopher, René Descartes, had a significant influence on that question (Malpass, 2005). His famous statement: “*I think, therefore I am,*” condensates the rational worldview of the modern age. His philosophy places the human at the centre of the world, rather than some external entity as a god (Malpass, 2005).

25. Malpass, 2005, p38

26. Malpass, 2005, p52

Descartes explains that one has to forget all the opinions he has adopted till now and rethink everything from new (Malpass, 2005). By doing so, the modern individual becomes an entity that does not depend on any external factor. He is, for example, free from his cultural and religious background, as well as from past traditions. It means, the belief emanates there in one universal truth that could be obtained by the individual consciousness of his deep nature (Malpass, 2005). This attitude explains the harsh break with the past and the traditional worldviews that characterise modernity.

The Limits of Modernity

Needless to say, the modern grand narrative of progress, enlightenment, and freedom has allowed impressive improvements over a few centuries. The benefits were visible in almost every aspect of life (industrial, economic, educational, medical, technological, etc.) As mentioned previously, it also allowed the individual to emancipate himself from past external bonds that became meaningless to him. Nonetheless, this constant search for emancipation and progress lead to a world that is always transforming, always looking for something new, as intellectuals, such as Zygmunt Bauman and Marshall Berman, observed (Malpass, 2005). The grand narrative of modernity destroyed any possibility for the individual to feel a sense of stability or tradition (Malpass, 2005). It makes it impossible for him to belong to his environment and develop a bond with other people. Soon enough, he found himself trapped in the commodification of his life. The modern world became increasingly anonymous, uniform and meaningless; a sense of alienation arised from it. Pragmatic

calculations, efficiency and profit became the main criteria (Lyotard, 1979). In the 20th century, in the destruction of traditions and uniformity of cultures, society saw the dawn of a meaningless and dehumanised world that also eventually collided in two world wars.

POSTMODERNITY

These negative aspects of modernity called for a reaction, and it is this reaction that defines our current postmodern society. The rational and scientific understanding of the world has proven to be insufficient for a meaningful life. The modern grand narrative of the universal progress and enlightenment is rejected (Malpass, 2005). This marks the end of a society that evolves in one common direction. The lack of an overarching grand narrative leads today to questioning of every structure that legitimates knowledge, hence Lyotard's (1979) claim that postmodernity is defined by its "incredulity²⁷ towards metanarratives"²⁸.

Re-questioning the Metanarratives

To illustrate this scepticism towards the metanarratives, two examples will be presented. The first example is the rejection of the modern "Descartian" definition of the individual that has been described previously. The second example is based on the architectural critique of the modern style that has been dominating the field from the beginning of the 20th century.

In the 20th century, the previously described modern version of the individual is being challenged by intellectuals like Sigmund Freud, Frantz Fanon, and Hélène Cixous. They claim that the individual is also built by the culture he inhabits (Malpass, 2005). Each

27. Incredulity is the inability or unwillingness to believe (according to <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/incredulity>).

28. Lyotard, 1979, p xxiv (introduction)

of them demonstrate that “the modern subject is rather less stable and self-sufficient than humanism might assume.”²⁹ Freud does it by demonstrating the existence of the unconscious, Fanon - through his studies on colonialism and post-colonialism, and Cixous - with her feminist theories (Malpass, 2005). “What Freud’s, Fanon’s and Cixous’s critiques of the modern subject open up is the problem of positioning an ‘I think’ as an origin of identity. The challenges by these three thinkers demonstrate the forces (the unconscious, desire, racism, sexism, etc.) that construct identity as a tenuous and fragmentary structure that is inherently social and therefore subject to the political conflicts of its cultural location.”³⁰ Hereof, the postmodern individual has rejected the idea of an independent mind that builds himself objectively. He is an entity without centre, in constant change, depending on his context. He is built by the culture he inhabits and hardly believes in the existence of one universal truth. In the world of architecture, the rejection of modern ideals can be detected in key literature, such as ‘*Learning from Las Vegas*’, ‘*Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance*’, or ‘*Genius Loci: towards the phenomenology of architecture*’. The first book, published in 1972 by Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour, laid the path for the development of the movement of Postmodernism (as a philosophical and artistic movement). It rejects the modern ideas on how architecture should be built. It cleverly demonstrates that the rules adopted by modern architects, such as the design through intuition and rejection of ornaments, are contradictory and not suited for how human beings perceive the world. The second text, by Kenneth Frampton, criticises the uniformity of modern buildings and points out their failure of connecting with the

29. Malpass, 2005, p66

30. Malpass, 2005, p73

specific regional culture, traditions, landscape, and climate, in which these stand. Finally, the third book, published in 1979 by Christian Norberg-Schulz, is an architectural application of the phenomenological³¹ thoughts of the 20th century. These thoughts showed the failure of modern science to incorporate the subjective and emotional understanding of the world.³²

The Consequences

The lack of a grand narrative and the incredulity towards metanarratives have logically made it possible for all sorts of narratives to exist. Every individual makes up his own reality and understanding of the world. It is, therefore, difficult for him to believe in one universal truth. If he can shape his own vision of the cosmos, how can he refute the vision of another individual? There is no common worldview (grand narrative) to refer to, and consequently, every structure that legitimates one's and society's actions (metanarratives) has to be rethought in order to incorporate each and everyone's view (narratives). This has three consequences: the acceptance of all narratives, their conflicting co-existence, and the intensification of the commodification of life.

The Acceptance of all Narratives

The lack of a common grand narrative and stable metanarratives leads, therefore, to the acceptance of all kinds of narratives, including those rejected in the modern era. For example, the differences between persons, cultures, cities, that were rejected in the modern

31. Phenomenology is the study of how one experiences the phenomena of the world. It incorporates the subjective and emotional point of view.

32. These thoughts are at the foundation of the recent concerns to integrate psychological and sociological studies into the design process. See, for example, *The Manhattan Transcripts* by Bernard Tschumi's, the atmosphere architecture of Peter Zumthor, and, more recently, the architectural behaviorology of *Atelier Bow-Wow*.

era are valorised again³⁴. The sociologist, Michel Maffesoli, for example, observes a come-back of the 'local', in which cultural specificities are revalued: regional products, traditional craftsmanship and vintage shops are becoming popular again (Bussières, 2009). Another example is visible in the political scene. Voices that were not heard before are now listened to, namely minorities, such as immigrants, homosexuals and religious communities.³³ These phenomena also illustrate the opportunity that postmodernity offers: to construct a more meaningful life, where the individual, through participation, can belong to the world rather than being alienated from it.

Conflicting Narratives

These narratives, however, do not result from an overarching grand narrative. They often oppose and contradict each other. The post-modern world is, as such, a fragmented and conflicting one. As for the metanarratives, they are shaking under the weight of these opposing narratives. Consequently, everything is (re)questioned. Hence, the difficulty to find a common answer to questions that used to be clearly defined: Where is humanity going? What defines a culture? How to raise children? What makes the difference between a man and a woman?

This is why Lyotard rejects the possibility of building a new common grand narrative (Lyotard, 1979). This claim is, however, quite frightening, if one observes today's world. With the even more intense globalisation process that postmodernity is going through (especially with the growing influence of new media and hyper-mobility), the number of opposing narratives continues to increase. In the last

33. To a certain extent, of course. There are still communities that are being repressed.

decades, increasing social conflicts between communities can be observed throughout the whole Western world. The rise of nationalist right-wing parties all across Europe illustrates the failure of finding a way to live together.³⁴ It shows the need to find a 'common ground' nowadays. In this respect, Lyotard can be opposed by another influential postmodern theorist: the German philosopher and sociologist Jürgen Habermas. He, on the contrary, still believes in the possibility to arrive, through dialogue, at a consensus and a common grand narrative (Lyotard, 1979).

A lack of Community & an Intensification of the Commodification of Life

Despite the postmodern call for a more qualitative and meaningful life, economic and bureaucratic structures become increasingly dominant. As Lyotard (1979) observes, the past metanarratives that legitimated the actions of society have been entirely replaced by the criteria of performance and efficiency. The reason behind this paradox is that the lack of an overarching grand narrative, and the conflicting narratives that result from it, makes these economic and bureaucratic structures the only ones that can deal with such a fragmented world. This phenomenon had already been observed in the beginning of the 20th century by the sociologist, George Simmel. He further elaborated on the problem when he explained that those criteria of performance and efficiency were the only ones that could deal with the complexity and rapid changes of the modern metropolis (Simmel, 1903). As a result, in the even more fragmented and fast changing postmodern world, it is not a surprise that money and

34. <https://qz.com/885381/europes-far-right-parties-are-holding-their-first-ever-counter-summit-in-germany/>

anonymous structures are gaining ground.

Subsequently, while improvements can be noticed, the lack of community makes it very difficult for the postmodern society to end the commodification of life. This explains why local identities are still struggling for their existence, why the ecological problems the planet faces are increasing every day more, and why the inequality between the rich and the poor was never so high.

CONCLUSION

The modern world substituted the dominant religious grand narrative for the grand narrative of human progress and enlightenment. As a result, the scientific and rational method was applied to all aspects of life to the point that every subjective and qualitative element that could define an individual became suppressed (culture, history, traditions, etc.) The modern individual that liberated himself from past meaningless bonds found himself gradually alienated from the commodification of his life.

These negative aspects of modernity have given rise to postmodernity, which calls for a more meaningful, subjective and emotional understanding of life. It rejects the grand narrative of modernity without, however, replacing it with a new one. This has two main consequences. Firstly, it opens the door to every kind of narratives, including those suppressed in modernity. Secondly, it leads to the conflicting co-existence of all these narratives, since they do not result from one common understanding of the world. The postmodern society is, therefore, composed of individuals that do not share a common worldview or grand narrative, hence their incredulity towards metanarratives.³⁵ This lack of community intensifies the individuation of the society and accelerates the commodification of life, exactly against which the postmodern individual stands.

Thus, the postmodern world can be defined as a fragmented world

35. If no one agrees on the place of the individual in the world, how can rules be decided on how one should live his life? How can a universal truth be possible in a world with such conflicting world-views?

in dialogue rather than one evolving in a clear direction. In this dialogue, the postmodern fragmented society is slowly restructuring its worldview and the place of its individuals in it. Although the task is complex and delicate, the need for reconciliation grows everyday more.

Chapter 3

**THE CONTEMPORARY
ATTITUDE TOWARDS DEATH
& HOW TO APPROACH IT**

INTRODUCTION

In the first chapter, it has been demonstrated that the attitude towards death depends on the extent to which the individual affirms himself and participates in the world. In the second chapter, the way modern and postmodern societies understand their world has been defined. The next and final step consists of merging both chapters, that is, the theory of death and the theories on (post)modernity.

In the first part, the degree at which modern and postmodern individuals participate or affirm themselves in the world will be analysed. This will result in the establishment of the contemporary western society's attitude towards death. On these premises, the appropriate approach towards death will be determined in the second part.

THE MODERN ATTITUDE TOWARDS DEATH

As described in the chapter 2, the modern world was characterised by the application of the scientific method to every aspect of life. The modern grand narrative of progress and enlightenment has seen the rejection of many values that define one's identity (cultural, historical, traditional, etc). Moreover, the past religious institutions that used to take care of the question of death had been rejected by the grand narrative of modernity. How did these significant changes influence the attitude of the modern individual towards death?

36. As Walter (1994) identifies it, modernity is characterised by a "contradiction between, on one hand, an increasingly rational, medical, secular, and bureaucratic approach, which tends to depersonalise and hide death; and on the other hand, the personal and private nature of loss." (Walter, 1994, p5)

37. In the modern era, death was indeed forbidden (Aries, 1974) and confronted in silence (Walter, 1994).

The Modern Denial of Death

In a society obsessed with future and progress, death had but little place. From the perspective of the theory of death, it is clear that the modern individual was constantly affirming himself without being able to belong to a community, a culture or a natural environment. His participation meant abdicating to the economic and bureaucratic system rather than creating a meaningful bond with his world (Lyotard, 1979).³⁶ As a consequence, he gradually found himself alone and alienated from the commodification of his life, "stuck" with himself, with his death (Morin, 1951) . A significant *trauma of death* had to be faced alone and in silence (Walter 1994).³⁷

In this context, the modern world saw the deterioration of all the

institutions related to the question of death, the rejection of the bereaved, the old and the sick from the public life, the non-empathetic care of the patients, the construction of meaningless funerary architecture in the outskirts of the city³⁸, and the destruction of traditional symbols and rites (Morin, 1951, Thomas, 1985, Walter, 1994 & Heathcote, 1999).

Death had been evacuated from the daily life, since its finitude, its ugliness did not fit the grand narrative of modernity (fig. 10). This modern denial of death was accurately defined by notorious historians (Ariès, 1974 & Voyelle, 1983), anthropologists (Morin, 1951 & Thomas 1985), and sociologists (Gorer, 1965 & Walter, 1994). As it will be shown, this modern denial of death had considerable influence on how death is dealt with today.

38. On the city scale, cemeteries and crematoria were usually built in the outskirts of the city, isolated from the public life. Cemeteries gradually transformed to park-cemeteries, where death became merely visible on the natural landscape. In that regard, for example, the cemetery of Pere-Lachaise in Paris contrasts hugely with modern cemeteries.



Figure 10 *Les Saint-Innocents' square before (1550) and after (1850) the beginning of modernity. Death, just like religion, has been evacuated from the daily life.*

THE POSTMODERN ATTITUDE TOWARDS DEATH

In chapter 2, the current postmodern society was defined. The rejection of the modern grand narrative opened the doors to the past and to the subjective and emotional aspects of life. Nonetheless, the lack of an overarching grand narrative and the incredulity towards metanarratives lead to the acceptance of all kinds of narratives and their conflicting co-existence. An intensification of the commodification and individualisation of life could be ultimately observed. In this section, a general overview will be given in order to understand the extent, to which the postmodern individual can affirm himself and participate in such world. This will allow to establish the postmodern attitude towards death, and, as a result, of the appropriate way to approach it.

Towards an Acceptance of Death

The rejection of the modern grand narrative of progress and enlightenment emanates from the postmodern call for a more meaningful reading of life, that is, **for participation** in the world. This call takes nowadays many forms. The relationship with the natural environment is, for example, questioned. This can be seen in the recent trends of sustainability, biological and ecological thinking that are present in many sectors and aspects of postmodern life. The

international political developments on climate change also illustrate this readjustment to nature. This ecological development goes hand in hand with a narrative of one human kind that has to stand together for the sake of its survival.³⁹ Furthermore, the revalorisation of traditional products, craftsmanship and buildings reveals a need to belong again to a specific culture with its particular history, values, norms, ideals, etc. Finally, religion is more visible in the public realm, whereas, in modernity, it was completely confined to private life (Walter, 1994). This does not mean, however, that every aspect of the past rational modern life has been rejected. Society still gives significant importance to science and rational thinking; the difference being that it is not exclusive anymore.

The rejection of the modern grand narrative and the call for participation has logically lead to a reconsideration of the question of death. Unlike the modern individual, the postmodern individual is free to understand the world in a way that he belongs to it. As demonstrated in the theory of chapter 1, this would allow him to overcome the *trauma of death*. Consequently, today, death is easier to face. This change of worldview explains why the postmodern society becomes slowly aware of the negative impacts of the past modern denial of death.⁴⁰ In the last decades, there has been a growing interest in the question of death and many improvements have been observed on that matter⁴¹ (Thomas, 1988 & Walter, 1994). As a consequence, death is not experienced anymore in silence anymore, but rather through emotional expression and discourse (Walter, 1994). The dying's fears and hopes are shared, the bereaved's despair can be communicated to others, and hospices's nurses may now feel able to cry with patients and their relatives (Walter, 1994). Furthermore,

39. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0lPq_5iaGQ (1:16)

40. Freud's observation illustrates this change, when he identifies that "we are unable to maintain our former attitude towards death." Freud, 1918, p. 292

41. Improvements can, for example, be observed in hospices and hospitals. More research is done on how to provide mental and spiritual care to a person (or his relatives) during the last days of his life. The architecture of these institution is also improving in order for it to provide greater comfort.

an increase can be observed in organisations that strive to improve the way death is dealt with today, raise awareness on that subject and break the taboo. Some of them even attained worldwide reputation, such as the *Association for the Study of Death and Society* or the *Death Café movement*. The latter, for example, consists of inviting people in an informal setting to talk and meditate on death with a cup of coffee and a piece of cake (fig. 11).



Figure 11 A Death Café gathering in January 2016 at the Ziferblat cafe in London.

To conclude, the postmodern call for participation is transforming the contemporary relationship with death. Moving away from the past modern trauma and denial of death, this relationship evolves towards an *acceptance of death*.

An Exploratory and Personal Understanding of Death

Modernity saw the rejection of past religious institutions that used to take care of the question of death. Traditional meanings, rituals,

42. Christian funerals are, for example, changing in order to answer today's personal needs (Walter, 1994).
43. Anthropologist Louis-Vincent Thomas (1985), for example, regroups them into four types: the total nothingness (the belief in the total disintegration of the individuality), the indefinite life (the belief in the scientific medical progress that will one day stop aging and the biological death), the traces (the survival in the form of the genetic transmission of parents to children and in the form of memories or material as well as social works), and the rebirth or metamorphosis (the belief in all the concepts of reincarnation and resurrection).
44. A clergyman observed this and told it to Walter. Walter, 1994, p2
- and symbols that embodied the spiritual and emotional content of the question became for many people (including religious ones)⁴², obsolete in the processes of rationalisation and secularisation. This has a consequence that the postmodern individual finds himself confronted to death as well as to life with little instruction or explanation (Walter, 1994). The meaning of one's existence and finitude is generally not defined by an external authority anymore, but by the individual himself. Due to the lack of an overarching grand narrative and the acceptance all kind of narratives, this is often done by mixing up different narratives. Pieces of different cultures from all over the world are mixed together while modern medical technology, techniques, and narratives are still embraced (Thomas, 1985 & Walter, 1994). As a result of such circumstances, an increase of post-mortem beliefs can be observed (Thomas, 1985).⁴³
- The meaning of death is often constructed by the individual's personal experience and reflection on life, leading, consequently, to a plurality of ways of dealing with death (Walter, 1994). As a result today, a person in grief is able to mourn and express his or her emotions and thoughts as he or she pleases, and would hardly be blamed as doing it the wrong way.
- All this underlines the opportunity and freedom that postmodern individuals have to adapt, transform, and learn from each other. It demonstrates how exploratory and personal the attitude towards death has become. "There is no such thing as postmodern death. Just a million and one individual deaths."⁴⁴

A Lack of Community

As demonstrated in the second chapter, this freedom to build one's own narrative goes hand in hand with the co-existence of conflicting narratives. In this plurality of worldviews, participation in a meaningful activity becomes problematic when it gathers many different people. It is, therefore, logical, that today, participations take place mostly on a smaller and informal scale, between individuals sharing common narratives.⁴⁵ This can be observed in collective projects which try to improve the life quality of a community or neighbourhood in the contemporary city. These projects often result from a bottom-up strategy rather than a more traditional, top-down, strategy. They are generally smaller in scale and concern a certain locality with its specific individuals and narratives. The dominance of the market and the conflict of narratives make it very difficult to undertake such initiatives on a bigger scale.⁴⁶

This difficulty to gather different people is even more visible in the field of death. For example, the grieving process takes place in self-help and bereavement groups rather than at places and with people the individual ordinarily encounters. These organisations create meetings between members who suffered a similar type of bereavement, such as a loss by suicide or a loss of a child (Walter, 1994). While this kind of participation offers great help and comfort to the bereaved, it further isolates them from the rest of the daily life community (Walter, 1994). The plurality of worldviews is so intense nowadays that conflicts can even happen between individuals from the same family or community. In many immigrant families, for example, conflicts appear between the first generation and their

45. Sociologist Maffesoli observes an increasing number of non-exclusive groups or "micro-entities" that regroup individual sharing same affinities. These groups, stand out from bigger institutions or associations that are usually organised in an anonymous and generic way to allow the co-existence of the conflicting narratives (Bussières, 2009).

46. Nonetheless, recent trends such as sustainability, climate change-related laws, or the protection of heritage/culture in the political agenda show a participatory desire on a bigger scale. The internet also offers new opportunities to gather people with common narratives regardless of the physical borders (Manuel Castells).

children. The first needs to die and mourn according to traditions of their religion or culture, while the latter may have more faith in modern methods (Walter, 1994). Conflicts in white middle-class families also exist between grandparents and their children. Having grown in the modern world, the first usually die or mourn in silence. The children who grew up in the postmodern era have difficulty to deal with this detachment since they are more open about death (Walter, 1994). All these examples show how the postmodern attitude towards death isolates the individual when dealing with death.

Summary

The postmodern rejection of the modern grand narrative and call for participation lead to a reconsideration of the question of death. However, due to the past modern rejection of traditional ways of understanding and dealing with death, the postmodern individual often finds himself confronted with death without knowing what it means. This uncertainty, combined with both, the lack of an overarching grand narrative and acceptance of all narratives, pushes him to define the meaning of death in an exploratory and personal way. Participation taking place mostly on a smaller and more informal scale between individuals sharing common narratives, the individual finds himself isolated from a considerable part of the community when dealing with death.

Looking back at the theory of death, an attempt can be made in situating postmodernity between the two antipodes of *trauma of death* and *acceptance of death*. Postmodernity seems to position itself closer to the *trauma of death*, due to the previously mentioned problems,

but it is gradually moving towards the *acceptance of death*. In such context, how to approach death?

APPROACHING DEATH TODAY

The postmodern context seems to call for an approach that would allow the individual to participate in accordance with his personal worldview without isolating him from the rest of the community. Such approach would require both, the possibility for conflicting narratives to co-exist, and the creation of a common shared structure. These two requirements relate directly to the opposite notions of plurality and unity, which previously mentioned theorists Lyotard and Habermas had been arguing on.

Flexibility and Plurality

The co-existence of conflicting and contradicting narratives makes it very delicate to impose an overarching grand narrative that does not exclude any of them, hence the postmodern incredulity towards the metanarratives. Lyotard goes to even declare that this is an impossible task. To him, the only solution is to constantly question the established rules rather than imposing a static universal structure:

“The answer is: let us wage a war on totality; let us be witnesses to the unrepresentable; let us activate the differences and save the honour of the name.”⁴⁷

47. Lyotard, 1979, p82

This would allow the co-existence of contradictory realities.

This idea is hard to put into practice and usually takes the form of a flexible strategy. Such strategy gives enough place for different kind of narratives to co-exist and allows each individual to participate according to his or her worldview(s). In regard to death, this strategy is already taking place in medical and funerary fields.

In the medical field, the personal needs of the patient are given priority. In hospitals and hospices, doctors and nurses are trained to be able to deal with their patient's distinctive attitudes towards death (as described in the previous section). The patient decides how he wants to face a sickness. He can, for example, choose a medical treatment that fits his own beliefs rather than the one recommended by the doctors – something unimaginable in the modern era (Walter, 1994). In that regard, euthanasia is the most ultimate and controversial example of the contemporary concern for the individual's personal worldview and wishes.

The flexible strategy is also applied in funerals. There is today a panoply of ways to deal with the dead body: cremation by fire or water, religious, civic or natural burial, or even preservation at extreme low-temperature (usually at $-169\text{ }^{\circ}\text{C}$), called cryonics, in the hope for future science to find a way to resuscitate the dead. This abundance of choices is also visible at the remembrance stage, where the remains can be, for example, transformed into a tree or a piece of jewellery, or propelled and scattered into space. This panoply of methods only reveals the many worldviews that constitute the post-modern society. Moreover, funerals become increasingly flexible in order for these to respond to wishes of each group of bereaved.⁵⁴ Objects of different religions are, for example, at the disposition of families in order for them to conduct their traditional rites. At the

same time, the funerary business needs to be able to accommodate the increasing personalisation of contemporary ceremonies. These ceremonies are often organised in a way that they represent the identity of the deceased: memories of his life are shared, his favourite songs played, and, sometimes, the gathering takes place at a location that he particularly loved.⁴⁸ In such ceremonies, personal symbolic gestures replace formal rituals and codes, requiring maximum flexibility from the funeral organisations (fig. 12 & 13).



Figure 12 *A coffin in the form of a skateboard by company Crazy Coffins. As retrieved from their website: “An eleven year old boy, victim of a skateboarding accident, was buried at his family’s request in a replica of the board he played on every day.”*

48. Bob Marley’s funeral in 1981 can be recalled. The artist was buried with his red Gibson Les Paul guitar, a Bible opened at Psalm 23, and a stalk of marijuana placed there by his widow Rita.



Figure 13 *The Personalisation of Funerals and the Loss of formal codes and rites. A police officer who could not save a little boy from drowning dressed as the boy's favorite character to honor his memory.*

These examples show how the flexible approach to death provides place for each individual to participate as he or she feels like. However, flexibility is still limited in the sense that it only creates a feeling of community between individuals sharing the same worldview. Looking at the example of the contemporary funeral, it is hard to imagine that a meaningful bond can be developed between two groups of bereaved, even less, between them and strangers outside the crematorium or graveyard. Moreover, flexibility often requires the strategy, method, or even building to be generic enough to be able to fit all kinds of narratives.⁴⁹ This often results in anonymous structures that are unable to really embody the individual's values. In architecture, for example, this leads too often to an over-simplification of the architecture, where the symbolics and the aesthetics are gradually rejected, being too subjective to represent every narrative. This results mostly, or the sake of including everyone - or not excluding anyone, in extremely generic and anonymous solutions that do

49. What this means is that a ceremony, building, or ritual based on the catholic religion, for example, will be less effective and meaningful to other religious communities or non-religious communities (and vice-versa).

not mean anything to anyone (fig. 14).

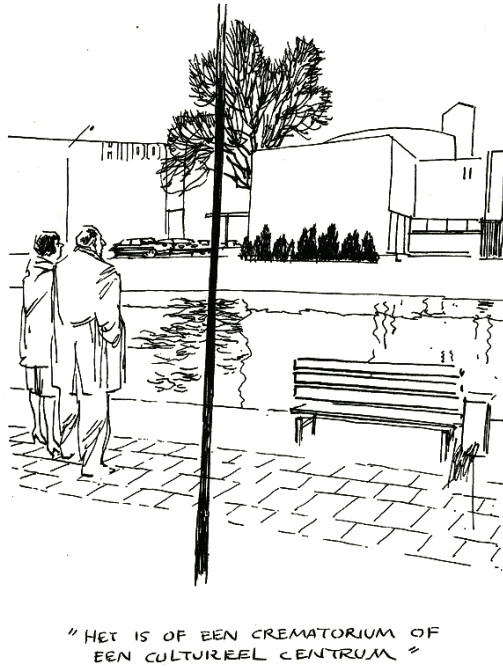


Figure 14 *The caption says: "Or this, is a crematorium or it is a cultural centre."*

Drawing by Peter van Straten

In conclusion, flexibility responds very well to the contemporary plurality of worldviews, and, as such, to the exploratory and personal postmodern relationship with death. However, it does little for the lack of community and the isolation the postmodern individual finds himself in when dealing with death.

Commonality and Unity

Psychology shows that to feel a sense of community, individuals need to adhere to common values and rules (McMillan & Chavis,

1986). In that regard, unlike Lyotard, some theorists such as Habermas still believe in the possibility to develop a bigger overarching narrative. In today's postmodern chaos of opinions, some traces of consensus can be found as mentioned in the previous section.⁵⁰ Can such consensus be found in relation to death?

Before modernity, death used to be an integral part of the western daily life. In the cemetery of the Saint-Innocents in France people would even attend casual walks among the bones (fig. 10). The funeral was a social event that gathered the whole town or neighbourhood. Clear codes and rituals regulated the ceremony, and generated a strong sense of community even between unrelated individuals (fig. 15).



Figure 15 *Traditional funerary ceremony in Amsterdam (above) and The Hague (under).*

50. Laws and structures enforcing sustainability and protection of historical heritage, for example.

Today, death's ability to connect people is still visible in some cultures. Mexicans, for example, have holidays to honour their dead. From the 31st October to the 2nd of November, families and friends gather to pray for their lost ones. They build altars called *offrendas*, and offer to the deceased their favourite foods and beverages. On the last day, an extraordinary festival called the *Día de Los Muertos* is organised, where spectacles and parades of colourful costumes of skeletons are taking over the streets (fig. 16).⁵¹



Figure 16 *The Day of the Dead in Mexico.*

51. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/oct/29/day-of-the-dead-parade-james-bond-mexico-city>

This shows death's great potential to unite people and provide a feeling of community. It is an opportunity to grab, especially in today's conflicting world, where death is still confined to the private realm

among individuals sharing common worldviews.

Can a grand narrative of death unite the conflicting narratives of the postmodern world? The plurality of post-mortem beliefs makes it impossible, for example, to find a common narrative based on the after-life, as it used to be before modernity. This is also why traditional codes, rituals, and symbols are vanishing today, since they do not suit everyone anymore. However, commonality can be found in the trauma of death itself. Human beings, their beliefs and worldviews are all connected through this aspect of death. Everyone knows that their existence on earth is not eternal, and this raises the most fundamental existential questions, even in the most rational minds. Moreover, the loss of a loved one always brings sadness and despair. In using the trauma of death as a common narrative, a little step can be made to encourage individuals to accept their finitude and face it *together*, as a society. The trauma of death can become a powerful catalyst to create a sense of community among people with different worldviews. This would help them to step out of their isolation and form a base, whence their own understanding of death can be built or reinforced.



Figure 17 *Facing death Together.*

The strategy of commonality responds to the isolation of the post-modern individual facing death and the anonymity of the flexible approach. Despite this, if wrongly applied, it can lead to the establishment of rules and structures that exclude some individuals and their worldview. To avoid that, the right commons have to be found.

Summary

The flexible approach is limited in the sense that it often leads to a generic structure hindering the shaping of a wide community. As for the approach of commonality, it is delicate, as it can easily lead to a structure that does not take every narrative into account. In today's postmodern context, both strategies are needed. Despite their limits, they complement each other. Indeed, the conflictual co-existence of individuals having different understandings of what death means requires a dialectical approach, in which unity and plurality

critically and continually look at each other. Such approach would acknowledge the diversity of our contemporary society by allowing each individual to deal with death as feels right to him or her. At the same time, it would generate a feeling of community and stimulate the dialogue between conflicting minds.

CONCLUSION

As demonstrated in the first chapter, the development of the individuality is based on a paradox between a need of both, affirmation and participation. In the modern era, the need of affirmation seems to have received exclusive attention, leading to a significant denial of death. In the contemporary postmodern society, this balance between affirmation and participation is changing. A call for meaningful participation lead to a reconsideration of the question of death. However, the absence of an overarching grand narrative and the conflict of narratives makes it difficult for the individual to answer that call and often isolates him from the daily life when dealing with death.

Thus, death, today, should be approached in a paradoxical way. On one hand, there should be enough flexibility to allow the co-existence of all the conflicting narratives. On the other hand, a common overarching grand narrative needs to be found in order to create a true sense of community and belonging.

FINAL CONCLUSION

FINAL CONCLUSION

Let us come back to the research question: **What is the attitude of the contemporary western society towards death and how should this attitude be approached?** To answer this question, a general theory of human attitude towards death had to be established. This was done in chapter 1 by reflecting on Edgar Morin's work. The next step was to define the contemporary western society that the research question refers to. This was done in chapter 2 by studying sociological texts on modernity and postmodernity. This detour showed the following.

Affirmation and Participation

Society's attitude towards death evolves in time. As Morin's work allowed to understand, the individual's relationship with death depends highly on his worldview (his place in the world) and the way he develops himself. The more his or her individuality is affirmed the more difficult it becomes to face death. The more he or she participates and becomes part of the world, (the individuality becoming part of a bigger whole and consequently less important to the individual's eyes), the easier it is to accept the reality of death. This perpetual struggle between affirmation and participation differs from one person to another, but also from one society to another. Societies, in which participation with the world is strong, have less

difficulty to come to terms with death. In more individualised societies, where the individual is obsessed with his own development, death becomes an extremely difficult reality to accept.

For example, in the traditional western world where religion played a central role, the individual found himself or herself as a part of a bigger order. Faith brought individuals together, generating a strong sense of community and the meanings of death and life were relatively understood in the same way from a person to another. Participation dominated affirmation. Afterwards, the modern age came and broke its bonds with religious and traditional values, substituting it by the grand narrative of progress and universal enlightenment. The individuality took a central place, and participation was substituted by affirmation. As a result, the modern society faced a high trauma of death to the point that it rejected, forbade and denied death.

Today's Attitude towards Death

The theory of human attitude towards death based on Morin's work (chapter 1) and the definition of the contemporary western society (chapter 2) allowed to answer the first part of the research question, that is: **What is the attitude of the contemporary western society towards death?** That question was answered in the first part of chapter 3. The following has been demonstrated.

In today's postmodern world, the society learned from the negative past modern developments. It rejected the modern grand narrative of universal enlightenment as well as the exclusive application of science in every aspect of life. In that sense, a call for meaningful participation characterises today's society explaining the recent

revival of the question of death and the many improvements the field has seen. However, due to the past modern rejection of religious narratives and traditions, a big part of the society finds itself confronted to death without knowing what it means and how to deal with it. This uncertainty, combined with the freedom that the postmodern era offers to the individual to construct himself as he pleases, pushes the latter to define the meaning of death in an exploratory and personal way. This is why today, there is no collective understanding of death, as the absence of shared funerary meanings, rituals, or symbols demonstrates it. As a result, the individual finds himself isolated from a considerable part of the society when dealing with death.

Approaching Death Today

This determination of the contemporary modern society's attitude towards death allowed to address the second part of the research question, that is: [...] **How should this attitude be approached?**

In the second and last part of chapter 3, it was demonstrated that to approach death in today's postmodern society, a paradoxical strategy is needed. This strategy should allow individuals to participate in accordance with their personal worldview, yet, without isolating them from the rest of the community.

To do so, the approach should be flexible in order for each individual to deal with death in a way that is personally meaningful to him or her. The flexible approach responds well to the exploratory and personal attitude towards death the contemporary society goes through. In other words, it responds well to the current plurality of worldviews. However, it often results in anonymous strategies, structures,

or buildings reinforcing the isolation the individual finds himself in when dealing with death.

A strategy responding to the scale of the society is also needed when addressing death. In today's conflicting but interconnected world, death is an opportunity. Being the only certainty in life that human beings have in common, death can become a powerful catalyst to generate a sense of community, as it has done in the past and as it still does in some parts of the planet, where it is an integral part of the daily life. By facing death together, as a human community that has to deal with the same existential problem, individuals can find courage and inspiration to find a way to live together. Thus, alongside the flexible approach, a strategy of commonality is needed in order for individuals to face death together as a community and stimulate dialogue and consensus among conflicting worldviews.

This social responsibility and opportunity is merely taken into account in today's strategies addressing death. These mostly follow the flexible approach by focusing exclusively on the individual's personal need of dealing with death in his or her own way.

Reflection

The study has shown that Morin's work is still relevant today. Written in the modern era, his ideas are still valid in the contemporary postmodern time. The question of death is intrinsically connected to how individuals and societies develop themselves and understand their place in the world.

As demonstrated in chapter 2, the contemporary western society is full of contradictions, making it impossible to deny the plurality of

worldviews, as it is also impossible to ignore the disastrous lack of community. In that sense, it was adequate that both, the theory of chapter 1 and the recommended approach of chapter 3 were based on a dialectic of antagonistic notions (respectively: affirmation VS participation, AND, flexibility VS commonality).

Can commons in death truly be found without individuals having to reject values that are fundamental to them? Paradoxically, can individuals deal with death in a personal and meaningful way without finding themselves isolated from the rest of the society? These questions are as important to the issue of death as they are to any other aspect of postmodern life. They derive from a bigger question of contemporary western society: Is it possible to reconcile the individual scale and the scale of the society?

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Skander Saâdi

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2017

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