

# THEMATIC ISSUE ON DEATH

# WE ARE ALL NECRONAUTS

## EDITORIAL

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Death. Bereavement. Loss. The End.

However, many things just start from death. There are plenty of professionals taking care of its aftermath, such as people working in funeral homes, mortuaries, and crematories. Not to mention gravediggers, pathological technologists, and disaster victim identifiers (see Campbell, 2022). Thus, death is a social event, a science, and even a big business for some entrepreneurs. Very often, human death also takes plenty of resources. The chemistry of embalming in many Western societies is based on toxic formaldehyde, coffins are mostly made of wood, cremating needs fossil fuels, and burials need space (Campbell, 2022; Doughty, 2017).

In general, death is both incomprehensible and very concrete.

Nevertheless, there are aims for the abolition of death through technoscientific advances. Philosopher Tere Vadén criticized natural sciences for remaining a prisoner of survivalism, although the biological quality of species and genes is that they strive at least as much for dying as surviving. Deterioration and death are natural (Vadén, 2011).

Avoiding death is more or less a modern Western world phenomenon. There are, and have been, various cultural approaches and beliefs, especially concerning rituals of death and burials. The life/death binary is not absolute everywhere. In a certain part of Indonesia, people live some time with their dead relatives, and in some Asian and Latin-American countries, people take food to the dead (Doughty, 2017). Historical research and archaeological excavations have shown us evidence of burial and sacred customs of the past (see ,i.e., Beckensall, 2022; Giles, 2020; Wessman, 2009). Social dimensions of death are also seen in cemetery architecture of the historical as well as modern ages.

Death studies and research in thanatology have been a discipline since the 1970s (Becker, 1997; Radomska, Mehrabi & Lykke, 2019). However, recently there has been a need to reconceptualize death. Queer Death Studies (QDS) is an emerging transdisciplinary field of research that focuses on necropolitics and asks: Who are ignored in dominant stories of death, loss, grief, and mourning? *Ecological grief* is the concept of taking notice of not only human bereavement but extinction also of other living organisms (see Radomska, Mehrabi & Lykke, 2020; Barnett, 2022).

Death is nowadays an aesthetic, ethical, social, ecological, and thus also very much political issue. Each religion has its

own rules and customs on how to deal with the deceased. A notion of sacred and piety might vary. However, many societies are quite profane, and it seems that recently interest in the materiality of death has increased. Death in the more-than-human-reality appears to become one focus too.

There is the whole biological issue proving that death is not the end: there is a lot happening in corpses during the process of decomposing, and it is not human business anymore, rather, it is a very post- or non-human affair. Fungi, insects, and chemical reactions consume dead bodies, and there is even the Graveyard Beetle (*kalmistokaarniainen*), *Rhizophagus parallelocolis*, who lives in buried wood such as coffins and presumably feeds on either fungi or other insects living on decaying chests (Kujala, 2021). Graveyards are historically meaningful places, but take up space, and decomposing coffins and bodies need ecological solutions. There is biotechnological research that aims to hasten the process using, for example, mycelium, i.e. a network of fungal threads, as material for coffins and urns or cultivating a body with mushrooms to convert corpses into useable biomethane gas (see Creative Capital, 2023; Spade, 2023; Westhoff & Hendrikx, 2023). After a proper composting process, we could become soil and nutrients for new life to grow.

Artists have dealt with death and dying, sometimes very bluntly, especially in connection with Christianity. Take, for example, Mathias Grünewald's crucifixion on the altar of Isenheim (1515) or several paintings of tortured martyrs. In contemporary art, death is often dealt with scientific components, and non-human deaths have got a role as well. Today artists also aim to disentangle life/death and growth/decay binaries. Many new nature-based solutions have been first introduced in art venues.

In this thematic issue, we have a compilation of articles, visual essays, and a commentary dealing with death from diverse viewpoints. In many texts, posthuman and more-than-human-aspect, that is, the relation to other species, has been emphasized. Nevertheless, it is impossible to avoid the perspective of humans, especially when dealing with art, philosophy, and education.

The first article, Marietta Radomska's *Ecologies of Death, Ecologies of Mourning: A Biophilosophy of Non/Living Arts*, gives us a notion of the theoretical ideas of Queer Death Studies. Death and loss have become urgent environmental concerns, and thus a posthuman angle is in the focus. Radomska analyses artworks centering upon non-human death and questioning conventional frames of human exceptionalism. The human perspective might be unavoidable, but

Radomska shows that in contemporary art, it is possible at least to defamiliarize traditionally human-centered notions of death. Radomska's art examples also include bioart works made in a laboratory. These works concretize a notion of non/living matter since they are often exhibited as "dead" or documentation only due to restrictions of displaying living organisms in exhibition spaces.

Non/living problematics is also dealt with in Juliette Clara Bertoldo's article *Reimagining Death in an All-Too-Human World: A Pedagogical Exploration of Pinar Yoldas' An Ecosystem of Excess*. Bertoldo examines Pinar Yoldas's work exhibiting the speculative marine ecosystem and imaginary life forms, and creatures evolved in human-induced plastic environment. Bertoldo's focus is especially on the educational potential of death. She introduces a pedagogy of ambivalence as a space that creates the conditions for holding the tension between the opposing affective states, educational value is thus somewhere between affirmative and negative. According to Bertoldo, Yoldas's work can teach about complicated relations with death creating a framework for ruminating about how distant and invisible death is before we experience it and that we live and die with others. We can also get an understanding that death might not be the final state of things.

The more-than-human theme and death as becoming something else continue in Tiina Pusa's contribution *The Spores of Life and Death*, where she asks how mushrooms challenge our understanding of death. Pusa scrutinizes the human perspective on fungal toxicity, diseases, and decay. She introduces the walking method with her dog as a means of connecting with mushrooms, for whom she also offers the possibility to create their self-portraits. At the same time, Pusa touches fungi-based death in art and popular culture and auteur problematic in art. The article ponders how we are hovering between anthropocentric spirituality and graspable materiality. As to mushrooms, they can bring death by their toxicity or maintain life being nutritious food.

The materiality of death is the most concrete in Eeva-Liisa Puhakka's visual essay *The Bouquet of Death and Decay*. She has exhibited smells of death as an installation of odors, narration, soundscape, and lights. The background of her work is a careful study of what is happening in a decomposing process stage by stage. Smells are difficult to describe in words and visuals, but multi-sensory methods might offer an embodied experience in artistic contexts. Puhakka's contribution is an attempt to invoke imagination through words and visuals.

Then we move from material to more symbolic approaches to death. Because we do not know much about death itself except from the physiological perspective, near-death experiences have always interested people. Sami Sjöberg's commentary *Corpses in Training: Blanchot and The International Necronautical Society's Experimental Expeditions beyond Life* introduces a philosophical dimension to death. In his book *Thomas the Obscure* Maurice Blanchot scrutinized the idea of death as space, not the end, but the whole life is a space of dying. The International Necronautical Society, an art movement following an avant-gardist strategy of deadpan seriousness and humoristic methods, developed Blanchot's ideas. By means of art, these death-travelers tried to attain near-death experiences. Because death is impossible to understand but still present and affecting one's thoughts and actions, INS thought that art and literature can be an exploration into otherwise unknown death.

Necronautical understanding of death as a sort of cultural artifact was materialistic in a sense its intention was not to channel messages from the other side. These messages are what Ulla Taipale deals with in her literature and myth-based posthumanist project on bees.

*The Other Side* is a site-specific artwork realized in four European locations, two of which were cemeteries. The work consists of audible literary excerpts about honeybees and their ability to communicate across parallel worlds. Taipale's installation and this text ask where bees go when they disappear. Today we are worried about decreasing number of pollinators and such phenomena as Colony Collapse Disorder, which has killed bee colonies around the world. Mourning and ecological grief are present here. Honeybees are production animals, humans and bees have lived together for ages. But bees are also mythological beings having a spiritual dimension, they also have been compared to angels as messengers between this and the other side.

The last contribution in the issue by Anna Walker and Jo Milne entangles absence and presence in symbolic ways. The essay introduces two video artworks, two perspectives on grief and lamentation, by the writers. These works create a bond between humans, other species, and the (meteorological) environment with a hint of feminism. In their works, visual slowness gives space for affects, tenderness, and care. Walker and Milne write about 'haptic visuality' which gives us, who remain, an experience of mortality.

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