

DEATH POSITIVITY, RITUAL AND GRIEF

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I aim to explore art within the context of death and loss, primarily focusing on Caitlin Doughty's work regarding the Death Positivity movement, which is centered around changing the narratives of our mortality. Using the philosophy within her works and the work of The Order of the Good Death I will examine the concepts and ideas in the context of art and culture. Despite death being a universal experience, there are a number of associated stigmas that art may be well placed to challenge. I will explore the topic under three key headings: Death Positivity, rituals, and grief.

Death Positivity

In just a century attitude towards death has changed to a culture of silence around mortality, mourning and its effects on us. In his book *Staring at the Sun; Overcoming the Terror of Death* Irvin D. Yalom writes:

"Adults who are racked with death anxiety are not odd birds who have contracted some exotic disease, but men and women whose family and culture have failed to knit the proper protective clothing for them to withstand the icy chill of mortality."

A way to combat these worries is to reframe the way we talk about and view death as a culture. We can encourage open and honest discussions and change the narrative around mortality by allowing depictions that confront and interact with death in art.

Death positivity is a term coined by Caitlin Doughty in a 2013 tweet as a counterpart to the Sex Positivity movement. The organisation founded by Doughty called The Order of the Good Death describes the death positivity movement as having eight tenets. I will focus on the first and second as they are the two most relevant to my project about art and death and the impact within culture. When stating these two major tenets, she writes:

"I believe that by hiding death and dying behind closed doors we do more harm than good to our society." and "I believe that the culture of silence around death should be broken through discussion, gatherings, art, innovation, and scholarship." (The Order of the Good Death, 2016)

The inspiration behind some of the tenets listed is Ernest Becker, an anthropologist who wrote *Denial of Death*, a book that explores our knowledge of mortality, and the human mechanisms we use to come to terms with it. Sam Keen, an American philosopher, author and professor organised Becker's philosophy into four strands (1973, p.10). They can be summarised as follows:

- 1) The world and Mother Nature is brutal and utterly terrifying.
- 2) We want to as individuals control anxiety and deny death.
- 3) We keep an unconscious terror of death on a societal level.
- 4) We have altruistic motives that we use to excuse abhorrence for perceived righteousness.

Becker emphasises that acknowledging and examining death is a way to work past the denial and terror surrounding mortality we have fallen into. The concept of facing death head on and inviting conversation can be found in the works of Maeve Berry and David Orr.



(Berry, 2009)

Maeve Berry's *Incandescence* is a series of Photographs taken of bodies within a cremation chamber. This project is an immensely intimate look at the processes surrounding death that are kept behind closed doors. It encourages a natural curiosity into those practices and connects with the first tenet of the death positivity movement. Her images create space to have a dialogue directly pertaining to death and the ways in which our bodies are worked with and laid to rest.



(Orr, 2017)

Perfect Vessels by David Orr is a series of photographs of human skulls made perfectly symmetrical. His work showcases the variety and differences in the human head and like Berry, creates a space to nurture the discussion and interest in the body both before and

after passing. By using skulls with marks and signs of how the individual first perished and incomplete skulls he shows the tangible evidence the experience of death can leave on a body. One important facet of our cultural death practices that this helps emphasise is the ways in which both the dying *and* the dead are kept “behind closed doors”. For this reason, we could think it important to confront the ways we see curiosity of death as taboo, and examine the ways in which our reactions to death are culturally embedded vs. universal (Kuehn, 2013).

Ritual

In the nineteenth century, acknowledging not only death but the memories of the deceased was an open practice, as their “etiquette put great social pressure on mourning, resulting in the practice of public mourning rather than private grieving.” (NMFH, 2016). Popular customs of mourning clothing, jewellery and rules surrounding the processes of grief meant that it was a public affair. Prior to the turn of the twentieth century, funerals took place in the home, allowing the dead to be observed. We saw the funeral homes become a major part of death culture and remove the responsibility of care for the dead from the family towards professionals.

The introduction of industries during the last decades of the industrial revolution, modernisation of culture and extension of life span all had a hand in changing the response and attitude towards death. It is in these circumstances that a culture prefers a private interaction with death, and creates an environment in which we are disconnected from those who have passed and those grieving.

In her book *From Here to Eternity* Doughty states that within “the Western funeral industry, [...] mourners must navigate purposeful obfuscations after every loss” (2017, p.13). Doughty is particularly critical of the predatory practices of some funeral homes that encourage excessive spending and distance between loved ones and the death care of those who have passed for financial gain. Doughty goes on to say that “due to the corporatization and commercialisation of death care we have fallen behind the rest of the world when it comes to proximity, intimacy and ritual around death.” (2017, p.15). Organising death care this way encourages a culture of silence surrounding a universal experience, and offers little in the way of community rituals to engage in healthy, collective grieving. What collective grief we still endorse societally, falls somewhat short of an effective practice.

There are culturally acceptable forms of public grieving and subsequent rituals. We partake in such activities when, for example, a public figure dies, or when someone’s passing affects a community rather than individuals. Holding vigils, offering candles and giving gifts to the figure that has passed are frequent forms of culturally sanctioned public grief. We often see an outpour of support and remembrance both through communities and media especially during memorial events and services. These are rituals we accept and find easier to partake in publicly as they are seen as public losses rather than personal deaths. Rituals can be a daily endeavor as we can use them to navigate life after bereavement (San Filippo, 2007). It could be argued that this shows that, where common loss is identified, we still feel empowered to mourn publicly. However, as the modes of social organisation have become more individualistic and atomised, we have a reduced sense of community - and thus, of communal loss.

Where public loss occurs, the cultural and industrial changes have led to public grieving for parasocial relationships when a celebrity passes, and a commercial engagement with death.¹ We can see this in our financially centred funeral industry,² as well as the rise in merchandising the death of celebrities.

As stated, the changes to our ways of living can be seen to have reduced the possibility for communal mourning - and when it is still socially permitted it tends to focus on high-profile or historic loss. This contrasts with the nineteenth century when there was pressure to mourn publicly. While this allowed for more community support, and shared remembrance, it in turn created a potential lack of agency to work through personal bereavement. It also created pressure to engage with the community experiencing the shared loss. Though the potential for support, and community, should not be disregarded, it is not necessarily better to mourn and grieve publicly compared to privately. It is through changes in culture and perception that we can empower a personal choice. It may be desirable to allow a space for community and cultural understanding while making allowances to experience any grief privately. Part of any effort to engender healthy and appropriate mourning ought to include artistic representations of death and associated phenomena.

Art can encourage cultural change, show community support and mourning, and allow for better understanding of potential actions towards rituals that benefit those involved. When we depict healthy conversations, confrontations and rituals with or about death we allow discursive space to consider the effects and how we move through them. Having these open dialogues can, in turn, help us process and move through these same experiences when we encounter them healthily and with support.



(Munch, 1893)

¹ Memorial items and merchandise, e.g. Princess Diana commemorative Plates

² As opposed to a death care centered industry.

In *Death in the Sickroom* by Edvard Munch, we can see a family mourning while being disconnected from each other. While they are all unified in their grief, we can see the different individual rituals between each family member: some figures face away from the family, mourning alone, whilst others congregate in small groups. This piece shows a way in which we can partake in mourning rituals as a community, supporting each other and creating an open space and dialogue while allowing for privacy and intimate individual grief.

Grief

As stated before, grief and the act of mourning was a public affair, but it was also physical. With the use of mourning jewelry, black clothing and a normalised practice of death photos, the process of grieving was to be seen, experienced and manifested through lived practices. We would consider it odd and morbid in this decade to take photos with the dead and to wear pieces of the deceased³ on our person. These public displays bring mortality to the forefront, forcing a confrontation and acknowledgement we are not all comfortable with. Cultural lens and audience effect our perception of grief and the behaviors we think we should exhibit (Wixom, 2012). We expect grief to be kept private, to happen unseen and unheard as we lack the language and cultural practices to talk about death and comfort those grieving. We lack the interaction with death in our formative years⁴ and so lack the desired education required to confront it healthily. This issue is compounded by an absence of accurate artistic representation which further inhibits our ability to have appropriate conversations about death.



(Van Gogh, 1890)

In *At Eternity's Gate* Van Gogh shows an expression of intense suffering. The slumped figure holds his head in his hands, experiencing and exhibiting emotions, and as viewers we witness this. This depiction of private grief evokes the universal emotional experiences and the ways in which we can mourn alone, but by viewing it we can have a conversation

³ E.g. Mourning jewellery containing hair from a lost loved one.

⁴ A lack of intergenerational living and longer lifespans means we don't encounter death as frequently or as early as previous decades.

about what it means to support grief of an individual, and how we may lack the language and understanding to do just that.

This paucity of education and understanding of death encourages a stifled approach to grieving. By creating art about the process of grief we can educate and open dialogues and allow for both active and passive consumption of related media. By establishing an aesthetic reality in which death, the processes surrounding it and the emotions involved are present and interacted with, we can change the culture encompassing death. By making grief more mainstream and widely consumable, more representations can become available to guide people on the forms that bereavement can take. There's no one way to grieve, and as stated, can take very individual forms and take varying lengths of time. Opening the dialogue can normalise the emotions we experience when we suffer a loss, helping us to move away from the notion that there are socially obligated responses to death. We can view death not only as a negative thing but a neutral, an end or beginning.

In mainstream art and media we see death treated in a distant way. Despite the abundance of material dealing passively with death, we see fewer pieces contending actively with grief. We see grief depicted in some Shows such as *After Life* and *Sorry For Your Loss* (2018) where the loss of a spouse is experienced. These shows allow death and grief to be contextualised in a relatable way and to give audiences a space to work through and view the ways in which grief manifests. Ricky Gervais, discussing the reaction from audiences to *After Life* in an interview, said: "it made me realise everyone is grieving... *After Life* let people talk about grief and it was good to start that conversation." (Bond, 2020) This move towards raw, relatable and direct confrontations with death in easily accessible and consumable media can encourage healthy conversation. This is the case especially between people who may be unsure of how they feel about mortality and those who have yet to encounter it. It could be argued that the desirable forms of media would emulate this intimacy with death as a subject, illuminating a topic we typically avoid and helping us to recontextualise our own grief. Creating a death positive media could allow us to consult the question and interrogate the concept of a "good death" and do so before we encounter death or loss ourselves. *The Order of the Good Death* (2018) states that:

"A 'good death' is personal. A person defines it, a family defines it, a culture defines it. My good death may look nothing like your good death... There is no failure... a huge part of that discussion is the structural inequality that makes it more difficult for certain groups to obtain the funeral or death they might desire. Not all deaths are created equal. Openly acknowledging this allows us to place our focus on this reality and work to change it."

The idea of a good death is connected to individual and informed choices that acknowledge structural inequality whilst maintaining standards of human dignity.

Recontextualising mortality, such that it is better aligned with the Death Positivity movement, can create a healthier dialogue around death, as well as better preparing us for encountering it. My exploration of death positivity has shown that we prefer to keep death unseen. The proponents of death positivity contend that only by confronting death in the appropriate way, can we come to understand our relationship with our own mortality. A crucial component of that relationship is the associated rituals. By investigating the changes in rituals within the UK over the last century, it is clear that these have been shaped by industrial and social changes - that as our society has changed, so too has our

relationship with death. Rituals can be understood as ways to process grief, be it personally or communally, and thus are an important subject for artistic representation aimed towards a better understanding of mortality. As our relationship with death has become more distant and less often confronted, there is a social need to empower people to make appropriate and healthy decisions when grieving. A consideration of key associated artworks has shown that art can play an important role in educating us about the modes of encountering grief, allowing and encouraging new dialogues to change the narrative around death. Overall, considering these factors, I would like to explore the following questions:

What role can art play in representing death, culturally, such as to educate people - enabling them to both live and die better, *or* how should death be represented artistically to fulfil this need?

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