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EDITOR'S NOTE

This English translation has not been published in printed form/Cette traduction anglaise n'a pas été publiée sous forme imprimée.

“Show me the manner in which a nation cares for
its dead and I will measure with mathematical
exactness the tender mercies of its people, their
respect for the laws of the land, and their loyalty
to high ideals.”

Gladstone

- 1 Day after day, the dead and death occupy a large part of international news, with the evocation of the tragedies that strike entire populations (natural disasters, famines, genocides, wars, and the work of mafiosi and armed gangs laying waste to entire territories), in the national news, with the deaths of celebrities from the world of the arts, and more particularly of politics. The “society” page (or even the “other news” page: inclusion in one section of the newspaper rather than another is in itself full of meaning) reports on emblematic deaths: suicides demonstrating the malaise of a given category of the population (employees at Renault’s site at Guyancourt or at France Telecom, and policemen and prisoners in France, etc); cases linked to the evolution of technology or mentalities, such as the debate on euthanasia, with a number of heavily mediatised cases (the death of Vincent Humbert in 2004, the death of Chantal Sébire in 2008, etc). Even the sports columns cannot escape the occasional mention of deaths, either accidental or as

the result of doping. Nevertheless, despite the omnipresence of death in the press and on television, it is not a subject frequently broached by media analysts, as if the taboo surrounding death reached as far as research circles. It is this gap (albeit relative, as the following report on current status will show, but significant nevertheless) that the present two-fold presentation aims to fill (the presentation in issue 20 will cover “Referring to death”), by taking a multidisciplinary look at contemporary re-presentations of death in the information media; the presentations will use articles on information and communication sciences, history, language sciences, and sociology. After a development of the pertinence of the notion of re-presentation, we shall return to the paradox of death being both omnipresent in and absent from the media, a fact already emphasised a number of decades ago, before going on to mention certain philosophical, psychoanalytical, historical and anthropological explanations of the phenomenon – on the understanding that issues 19 and 20 will investigate how the paradox has been maintained or measure its evolution. We shall then look at certain types of discourse on death in the media, before highlighting a number of areas in connection with the discursive and semiotic aspects, and presenting the contributions to this presentation, focused on the announcement of death.

What the notion of re-presentation involves

- 2 The notion of representation is often criticised in information and communication sciences because of the little heuristic interest there is in seeking a reflection of events in discourse (Krieg-Planque, 2006). Such criticism, although justified, by no means exhausts the debate. The link with which we refer to re-presentation stresses the fact that this notion should be envisaged as an active process, since initiating discourse is part of the construction of an event, rather than something passive – since representation is not simply considered as a more or less faithful image of the event. This concept of re-presentation stresses the idea that language is not the reflection of a pre-existent reality on which it has no effect. Physical phenomena exist outside language, but in the order of social realities, events do not occur regardless of the players and hence of language. As witness to this, linguistics (and discursive analysis in particular) should not seek to find in discourse the confirmation of realities or pre-existing knowledge. Indeed such a concept does not concern linguistics alone: every science which uses written or oral documents must reach beyond the avatars of reflection; the naïve idea that language is transparent with regard to its object and with regard to the intentions of the players who act in full knowledge of what they are or think (they are). Although the role of language in social relations, as in the construction of objects (whether discursive or scientific) is a widespread idea, it is often at the price of an underestimation of the specificities of language, as witnessed by the observations of Bernard Lahire (1996: 124):

“A type of sociology which is equally interested in the processes of the construction of structural states as in systems, which is equally concerned by knowledge of the modes of incorporating the social aspect as by the social arrangements that already exist [...] is a type of sociology which is necessarily sensitive to the language practices that form the fabric of the forms of social relations. Thought and mental and cognitive structures do not reach the brain by magic. Encouraged by the acquisitions of Vygotskian psychology, we may therefore underline the importance of the input of language practices through which relations with the world and with other people take shape; these can never be dissociated from the balance of power and relations with the powers that be.”

- 3 Bernard Lahire is indeed right to not separate language practices from the other social practices, and this is also a reason for considering that the social sciences should take into account the role played by language in the construction of both interpersonal, social and political relations and cultural and scientific objects. Nevertheless, while linguists are concerned merely with taking account of the social role of language, they cannot caution dissolving language in the social – or psychological, cognitive, economic, etc – aspect, not only because language cannot be reduced to the domination of external factors (of a social or psychological type), but also because of the underestimation of the fundamental opacity of language, as strongly highlighted by Jacqueline Authier-Revuz (1995). Yet it is also these non-coincidences – between words and things, between one person's words and those of his/her discourse partners or the interdiscourse – that lay the foundation for the pertinence of the notion of re-presentation as a mediated construction, and participate in the construction of thoughts, just as they influence the understanding of events and, by virtue of that, their course. Yet there is scarcely any mention of this type of preoccupation in Bernard Lahire (1996). In other words, language is neither the reflection of pre-existing actions nor an elaborated *lingua mentis* – the “mentalese” of cognitivists, as theorised by Jerry Fodor (1975). On the contrary, language constructs thoughts in the form of discourse, “presenting” them through initial formulations and “re-presenting” them through processes of resumption, reformulation, paraphrasing and adjustments of meaning that make it possible to envisage various facets of the discursive objects, from various points of view, seeking but without ever achieving a reduction in the non-coincidences. And there is more: the non-coincidences do not concern language alone; they are also to be found in politics, and in community living. Representations, which we know do not always agree, raise the question of seeking the best ways to manage conflicts and devising a *modus vivendi*. The socio-political dimension of representation is marked by the lexical aspect of the word “representative” (sales representatives present and sell the products manufactured by the company that employs them, and elected representatives represent their voters in the national representative body, for example). In the complex world in which we live, it is important, Bruno Latour tells us (2010: 171-172), to find the best ways of making all the variable social networks discuss matters and not reserve debate for the initiated alone (political or economic leaders, or scientists), or even for experts alone (which all too often serve only to legitimate decisions, on the pretext of necessity) by giving the greatest possible number of representatives and spokespersons the possibility of discussion. In short, in a truly cosmopolitan world,

“the entire cosmopolitical question then turns into the question of finding the means of constructing places where these spokespersons can gather and share their uncertainties on the quality of their *representations*. This venerable word must be taken in both senses – that of political philosophy (what is a *representative* government?) and that of the philosophy of sciences (what is an *exact* representation?) [...] Are the representatives legitimate and authorised (whether they are specialists or politicians)? Are the representations of things and the matters they debate sufficiently precise? And finally, are there any legitimate places where they can meet and even perhaps change their opinion about their utterances?” (*ibid.*)

- 4 This political dimension was broached in issue 13 of *Questions de Communication* (2008), starting out from the question of collective responsibility. It is not a central feature of all the articles in the two presentations, but it comes more or less to the fore in the evocation of conflicts, including in the re-presentations of death, in issue 20. It is worth

commenting that the input of the constructed character of re-presentations facilitates questioning the diktat of the evidence which accompanies the naïve conceptions of representation, in both cognitive and political terms, and in doing so it refers to new debates, preparing for new decisions and new actions, influencing the course of events. From this point of view, in linguistic terms and, more broadly, in semiotic terms, re-presentation, as a new construction, sets a scene that plays on the effects of what is real, for specific argumentative purposes, such that re-presentation is the trace of the enunciator's points of view, even if it takes on the appearance of a re-presentation that objectivises things. And this construction deserves analysis, including when there is an attempt to make the representations as accurate as possible. Moreover, the repetition of the re-presentation, in an identical form or with a few variations, signals that the re-presentation is more than a way of making sense of something that has been experienced; it is in fact its re-experiencing. This dimension is fundamentally related to the ritual function of the evocation of death and the dead person, to facilitate the process of grieving, as we shall see later.

Dead bodies everywhere – death nowhere?

- 5 Let us start by taking stock of the matter briefly. According to an expression coined by Louis-Vincent Thomas (2000: 104), death in the media is everywhere and nowhere, “obscene and absent from the scene”. Everywhere and nowhere – the phrase deserves more detail, as it is dead bodies that are everywhere, while death itself is nowhere (i.e. absent from the scene), and it is indeed the indulgent and voyeuristic images of dead bodies that are obscene, particularly in the fiction programmes frequently broadcast by the media. In the information media, however, while dead bodies (and hence “death”, by metonymy) are omnipresent, there are very few discourses on death or the dead, and only then in specific sectors of the media. The same is true of photos of people dying, if only because no cameraman was present at the time. Nevertheless, evolutions in society and technology (photos and films taken by private individuals using mobile phones) have altered the situation to some extent. That said, beyond the mere technical possibility, broadcasting images of people dying comes up against a number of complex ethical questions: apart from the fact that showing a person dying or a dead body is morally debatable, “real” death is likely to offend the sensitivity of viewers, unlike death in fiction programmes. Whatever the case, such images remain relatively rare (if only in comparison with their frequency in fiction programmes). We should not find this contradiction surprising, less as a consequence of insufficient philosophical reflection on the matter than because of the deep fear of experiencing one's own death that it is likely to arouse. The presence of death or the dead in the media depends on a certain number of factors; firstly the nature of the media: television, radio, the written press, and new on-line media. Periodicity also comes into play: media subject to daily or weekly periodicity rarely report on happy events (such as trains arriving on time), and their editorial constraints, focused on events – or indeed anything spectacular –, exert an effect on the selection and processing of information. On the other hand, as soon as periodicity exceeds the day or the week, the tyranny of topicality is attenuated, such that the position of re-presentations of the dead may be relativised in favour of a more reflective dimension to death or one of its various manifestations. This relativisation depends of course on the nature of the media, their target publics, and editorial policy choices. There

is therefore no uniform discourse on death in the media, which are themselves relatively uniform. This observation, made nearly twenty years ago by Marc Lits (1993), is probably more topical than ever today. In this work, Frédéric Antoine (1993: 50) emphasised the extreme disparity between the omnipresence of death and the dead on television and their rarity on the front page of newspapers, although he stressed the extreme disparities of treatment between public- and private-sector television channels, between “raw” death in news items relating violence, with their close-ups, and the “controlled” death of funerals, which has a “more reassuring character or at the very least is less ‘shocking’ for television viewers”. The person who is being wept over is in fact the person as he/she was in life, not the dead person, nor death.

- 6 Beyond its factual dimension, the research headed by Marc Lits (*ibid.*: 21) had the merit of casting light on the complexity of the motivations which contribute to achieving the mediated representation of death:

“Apart from the difficulty of accepting the idea of a global, generalising vision of the media, whereas they differ quite substantially in their handling of fear and violence, and apart also from a somewhat outdated vision of the political role of the media as social regulators in the service of the powers that be, it must be admitted that the media also play with our own desire for fear and violence. The systematic presentation of events whose common denominator is violence and death is not solely due to the necrophiliac obsessions of blood-thirsty journalists, nor is it due to a prophylactic concern on the part of newspaper editors for the wellbeing of the general public; there is no doubt that it responds to subconscious expectations on the part of the readership.”

- 7 This complexity makes it impossible to fall into the facile approach of either incantations unilaterally calling into question a voyeuristic, thrill-seeking public, or unscrupulous media only interested in boosting audience figures (*ibid.*: 26). There is a fundamental paradox here, and it would be helpful to ascertain the current tensions between an omnipresence of death and its “de-realising” re-presentation, to use the expression coined by Louis-Vincent Thomas (1991a: 27), in as much as focusing on accidental, violent deaths is in fact a convenient way of envisaging a type of death “which may be avoided and which remains very largely in a minority in statistical terms”. Does this analysis also hold true for the re-presentation of major human dramas and their cortège of bodies? Are the stagings of these collective dramas, in which chance and accident are of little importance, just as de-realising as the “raw” deaths of other news items? We may apparently reply in the affirmative, if we relate them to the individual experience of death. In this sense, the stagings of “anecdotal death” fall within the scope of Pascalian entertainment (Thomas, 1991a: 42-43; 1991b: 810-811), with its “reassuring chatter” (Thomas, 1991a: 27), “as if the televised discourse on death could only affirm itself on the screen, out of step with the reality of the experience”:

“The televised image of dead bodies, the medicine of post-modern times, takes on an anxiolytic function – the daily sacrifice of one or two human beings on the altar of the television news enabling all viewers, in the comfort of their own homes, to accept death as an inevitable general phenomenon, and at the same time refute their own death.” (Antoine, 1993: 64)

- 8 The purpose of this presentation is therefore, *inter alia*, to measure the evolutions that have occurred since these analyses were made, whereas profound changes have left their mark, both in the organisation of the social, cultural and affective life of our societies, and the *modi operandi* of the media. In the light of these changes, are there any comparable adjustments in the re-presentation of death and dead bodies? If so, in what

areas, in what ways, and with what direction and meaning? And also, what significance should we allow the possible lack of change?

The background to representations of death in the media

- 9 In this perspective, it would appear essential to return to some famous work that ought to be referred to in questioning media practices. Re-presentations of death in the media are in fact inseparable from the philosophical, anthropological and historical setting in which they exist.

Philosophical background

- 10 In *La Mort* ['death'] (1977), Vladimir Jankélévitch distinguishes three temporalities which shape an evolutive relationship with death. Firstly, there is "death this side of death", the death we meditate on and prepare, and which is not death; it is death in such an abstract form that we may think we are able to escape it, since no-one knows the place or date of his/her death. The elderly do not achieve such knowledge: even though the date approaches, it still remains uncertain (*mors certa, hora incerta*). In fact, it is only the prisoner facing a death sentence and the potential suicide who know when it is to be. Within this first experience of death this side of death, there are three successive scansions: the first considers it as an abstract eventuality (this is the state of *mortalis*), the second envisages a probable death that is approaching (*moriturus*), and the third is imminent death (*moribundus*). After "death this side of death" comes "death in the mortal instant", an irreversible, irrevocable phenomenon by which we die and immediately become absent to ourselves: "Thus the living experience their death in a unique instant, and immediately die: death can only be experienced by dying forthwith! We experience it by dying, and we are dying to experience it" (Jankélévitch, 1977: 351). It is by an abuse of language that the second type of relationship with death is an experience in terms of time, since its occurrence is the sign of our demise: "Death cannot be learned. There is nothing to learn. To begin with, it is a thing one does only once in one's life, and that first time is also the last, by definition" (*ibid.*: 34). "Death as a mediatised death" is the death that is apprehended in an eschatological form, making way for meditation on the afterlife, with all its anxieties and its hopes. But it takes us further away from the field of the intimate, physical experience of death, towards a more reflective apprehension. These three temporalities are related to the three separate modes of apprehending death. Thus there exists what Jankélévitch happily calls "death in the third person": this is "death in general, abstract and anonymous death, clean death, in as much as it is viewed impersonally and conceptually" (*ibid.*: 25). This death in the third person of course concerns other people, but it also concerns the subject who, to paraphrase Jacques Madaule, knows he/she is going to die, but does not believe it will happen. That is why this method of apprehension concerns both "death before death" and "death as a mediatised death". The second mode of apprehending death is "death in the second person", i.e. the death of a friend or relative, which is the way in which distant death comes to affect us in the sphere of otherness that is closest to us: "'You' represents the first 'Other Person', the immediately other 'other person' and the 'not-me' at its point of contact with the 'me', the closest limit difference can have" (*ibid.*: 29). Lastly, there is

“death in the first person”, always seen as a future event, a mystery that remains inaccessible for the subject, since when death occurs in the mortal instant, the person dies: “I am in fact always, and indeed by definition, before my own death; the periods during, and a fortiori after, that moment, are obstinately withheld from me” (*ibid.*: 32). This death in the first person is a mystery from which we cannot escape, and indeed human beings attempt to keep it at a distance, sensing that there is some “problem”: “*Mea res agitur!* My affairs are at issue” (*ibid.*: 26).

- 11 It is worth considering which temporalities and which mode of envisaging death are generally reported in the media. The information media devote a huge amount of space to death in the third person. Death in the second person is fast becoming more common: whereas previously it was limited to certain specific genres (such as death announcements and obituary notices), the use of the new technologies and evolution in customs (which enable anyone to occupy the role of a journalist, thereby turning the players in an event into the authors of information on that event) open up new perspectives: thus for example a young mother kept a blog of the life and death of her daughter Faith, suffering from anencephaly (and consequently destined for a rapid death)¹. As for death in the first person, it has little place in the information media, although even there the new media are bringing in substantial changes: thus for example the young English television celebrity Jade Goody, suffering from cancer, invited the cameras into her home for the final few months of her life in order to make enough money to leave to support her children². The cameras did not film her final days, but that will happen soon enough, if in fact it has not already been done, in a concealed, confidential manner. In the same way, an increasing number of suicides are, if not actually filmed (which happens, but is quickly censored), at least announced live on the Internet. Whatever the event, it is rather in the field of fiction that death occurs in the first and second persons (not excluding death in the third person), whereas in the information press the opposite choice is adopted. This being so, we need to move beyond this first observation, and it is one of the aims of these issues to check specifically how evocations of death (in the first, second or third person) handle the subject – from a distance or not, using pathos or not, using sensationalism or not – and to analyse how they include emotion and reflection, etc. In the same way, we need to see to what extent the various information media devote space to the different temporalities of the relationship with death, and in particular if it has been possible to observe any evolution, more specifically in the electronic media which are currently overturning media practices.

Psychoanalytical background

- 12 We shall not develop here work that is well known and readily accessible; we shall limit ourselves to focusing on the bridges between this work and the other scientific paradigms referred to in this section. Life and death impulses are closely interconnected, although in variable ways. Both Eros and Thanatos are the subject of generalised taboos, in one form or another. This is what is shown by the work that recounts long-term historical evolution. Indeed it appears that the taboo regarding death is stronger than the taboo regarding sexuality (see Didier, 1988: 127; Ariès, 1977: 574). For several decades past, our era – apparently, at least, although such appearance has meaning – has held a relatively liberated discourse on sex and sexuality, whereas it is as if death has been banned. Jean Baudrillard (1976: 279) puts this evolution into perspective when he says that:

“talking about death provokes laughter, albeit tense and obscene laughter. Talking about sex no longer causes the same reaction: sex is legal; it is death that is pornographic³. By ‘liberating’ sexuality, society has gradually replaced it by death, which has become a secret rite and a fundamental interdict. In an earlier – religious – phase, death was in the open and recognised, while sexuality was hidden away. The opposite is now true.”

- 13 This reversal mentioned by Jean Baudrillard invites us to take a closer look at what has happened in historical terms, even if there are also repercussions in psychoanalytical and political terms, through the profiling of a mono-dimensional Eros who enslaves individuals to a new form of merchandisation, that of desire, or at the very least to a merchandised desire (*ibid.*: 280). Thus, in developed societies since the mid-20th century, death has become the subject of real “exclusion” (Ariès, 1977: 573-574) regarding not only dead bodies but also the expression of the grief of bereavement, which is increasingly limited to the private sphere, as if death were contagious, as if mentioning it constituted relenting to a morbid impulse. Nor will readers be surprised that psychologists and psychoanalysts criticise these trends and issue warnings that it is actually the mechanism of excluding death which is morbid, both for individuals and for societies. Hence the attempts in recent decades to consider, in one form or another, the return of what has been repressed. This is particularly the case in the pioneering work carried out by Élisabeth Kübler-Ross (1969) in giving back their dignity to ill people and the dying, allowing suffering and death to have their place – that is the framework in which the work on euthanasia needs to be considered, the total opposite of work being carried out on eugenics. The medicalisation of death has by no means abolished the fear of death, and patients bristling with tubes and probes present a modern (and expensive) form of our anxieties that is just as terrifying as a medieval danse macabre.

Historical background

- 14 The scandal of death also runs through the historicised (and European or western centrist) representations of death. In *L’Homme devant la mort* [published in English as *The Hour of our Death*], Philippe Ariès (1977: 596-608) distinguished four historical periods which mark evolutions in the historicised relationship of humanity with death according to four fundamental parameters: self-awareness, the defence of society from untamed nature, belief in survival, and belief in the existence of evil:
- Prior to the 11th century, “death for all” was “tamed death”: death was public, accepted, and controlled. It corresponded to the Christian model in which the deceased are familiars, in which dying does not interrupt the continuity of being. In this respect, tamed death differs from the familiar death of ancient history, which feared death and set up necropolises outside its towns. It was not until the 5th century that the dead were allowed inside towns, in and around churches, in connection with the cult of martyrs and faith in the resurrection of the dead (*ibid.*: 55).
 - From the 11th to the end of the 17th century, “death of self”: death became personalised, life and the singularity of existence were more affirmed, burials became individual, with chapels for nobles, before becoming more democratised by the use of burial tombs (*ibid.*: 287). Dead bodies were increasingly hidden away – the coffin was quickly closed, covered with a pall, and even for important people, topped with a “representation”, the name given to a funerary effigy of the dead person in wood or wax (*ibid.*: 168-170). The practise of making a will began to spread, connected with the increase in the importance of the nuclear family.

- From the 19th to the 20th century, “death of you” corresponded to the Romantic period, during which the death of the beloved was experienced as a theatricalised tearing away, although it also included faith in being reunited after death (*ibid.*: 604-605).
- Since approximately the middle of the 20th century, with “inversed death” or “forbidden death”, death has become medicalised and professionalised, with the intervention of other people who are supposed to help achieve a gentle death.

15 These evolutions have not, however, followed a straight line of development. After the triumph of medieval Christian death, Michel Vovelle (1974) emphasises the emergence of a new type of sensitivity with the Renaissance, when plagues and the macabre became less important, and there was a three-fold contestation – religious (Protestantism did away with purgatory in the afterlife), humanist (concern for a good life on a day-to-day basis limits thinking about death), and popular (hell was mocked). Thus the period from 1580 to 1730, which corresponds to the Baroque period, features “gaining a stranglehold over death”. In the 19th century, the bourgeoisie “colonised death to its advantage”, while the priest was upstaged by the doctor, and family grief and bereavement blossomed in the graveyard. Every form of belief coexisted at that time – the certitude of eternal life, a total lack of belief, religious or philosophical thoughts of death, religious or political hope, etc (Vovelle, 1974; 1983). It must also be borne in mind that these evolutions have their own geography: thus “inversed death”, which developed strongly in the USA and England in the 20th century, met with varying degrees of resistance on the European continent; similarly, death was hidden away more radically in Catholic and Protestant Europe than in Orthodox Europe (see Ariès, 1977: 169-170; 587-588). In addition, although the periodisation of Philippe Ariès does not overlap the philosophical typologies of Vladimir Jankélévitch – despite being inspired by them – it does have the merit of recalling that the ground from which they emerged cannot escape from a long duration which, if it is taken into account, relativises the importance of the analyses that are excessively centred on a European experience and moreover, on a very recent experience of no more than a few centuries. As a result it is (or would be) wrong to fail to admit the significant trends of anthropology, namely the fact that death is always “prowling and repressed, although omnipresent in the media, sudden and often violent in wars, accidents, and disasters, or slow in the case of protracted illness, death or coma, or institutionalised and bureaucratic, or – increasingly – medicalised and merchandised” (Thomas, 1991b: 822-823; Hintermeyer, 2003), or increasingly individualised (Elias, 1982). Thus it transpires that the anthropological approach, which underpins the historical work, forms a fundamental backdrop for measuring the re-presentations of death in the information media, and that it must be taken into account, including in order to measure the precise significance of the historical evolutions of the re-presentations of death.

Anthropological background

16 While death is omnipresent in the media, the fact remains that, in our developed societies, with the lengthening of life expectancy and the shrinking of families to the nuclear family, the opportunities for personal contact with death are rare. It has been calculated, for example, that in the United States a person could live for 20 years without anyone in his/her entourage dying. The same cannot be said of Africa or India, of course. In short, the (relative) disappearance of death – which may be accompanied by its

“demystification” and its desacralisation – does not prevent it remaining a taboo or a scandal (Thomas, 1991b: 836).

- 17 It still needs to be said that the relationship to death just mentioned corresponds to the conceptions of western societies (on which we shall concentrate in this presentation with regard to the media aspect) and which is far from being shared by other cultures, as demonstrated more particularly in Louis-Vincent Thomas’s work on Africa. And in fact within those western societies the relationship with death is not uniform. Thus the work of Tony Walter (1994) points to a revival of mortuary practices in the English-speaking world that seems to question the analyses of Philippe Ariès and Louis-Vincent Thomas (more particularly), in as much as this *revival* may be based on the refusal to deny death. Indeed does the good death referred to by Tony Walter – a death that is chosen, prepared, and controlled, and experienced by the dying person with the people close to him/her (family or community) or with accompaniers (death professionals) in close contact with him/her, mean, as the author says, the end of the denial of death? We are entitled to wonder whether this claim to take control of the process right up to the end is not itself a supreme form of denial, by the illusory affirmation of total power on the part of the individual and the group around him/her. As to the fact that this *revival* marks a desire to break with the rituals of times past, once again it is not a self-evidence, since the private experience of such neo-modern death affects only a relatively small part of the population. We do not have enough distance to be able to say whether these practices replace rituals in general; it is true that rituals may evolve, but the need for rituals appears to be an anthropological constant in human societies. Indeed Tony Walter himself, in the conclusion of his work, wonders about the scope of these evolutions (see also Déchaux, 1996). The fact nevertheless remains that, in every society, representations of good and bad death coexist: whatever their differences, African societies (which tend to be animist) and Western (rather more Christian) societies converge on the idea that a good death on one which occurs as late in life as possible, respects one’s dignity, involves dying surrounded by one’s family and friends, in one’s own country, with one’s affairs in order (Thomas, 1991b: 823-827). and it is probably not unreasonable to consider the multiplication of treatments devoted to approaching death as a faint echo of the anxieties it arouses, feeding the persistence of the taboo, or the illusion that it is possible to escape its occurrence...

The discourse on death and the dead in the media

- 18 These days, the genres that deal directly with death in the media focus more on the announcement of death than on its evocation, which is scattered through other non-specific sections of the newspaper⁴.

From past genres to contemporary genres

- 19 Among the discursive genres (Adam, Herman, Lugin, 2000) in the media – except literary genres (see on this point Ernst, 1983; 1988) – that are reserved for death or people who have died, well before the obituary notice, came first the lamentation, then the eulogy, and the funeral oration. There are also epitaphs (Ariès, 1977: 214-227; Simonin, 1988; Urbain, 1989), and wills – a genre that in certain eras became a literary genre (see Ariès, 1977: 188-197; Favre, 1988). These genres are not to be found in the media, however,

except for reasons extrinsic to the death issue, for example the need to pad out columns on culture or other news items; in general, however, nowadays they fall within the private sphere. The reproduction may possibly involve highly specialised, professional or partisan media: this corresponds to a private sphere extended to a community. It is indeed highly unusual for such discourses to reach the major national media, except in specific areas and in highly codified situations, such as the speech delivered by a new member of the Académie Française on being installed, which contains a eulogy of the previous occupant of the seat henceforth occupied by the new member, which is published in *Le Monde* and in the literary supplement of *Le Figaro*. In short, these genres are seriously constrained by contextual data: the private sphere is deemed more important than earlier types of sociability, only a small number of people are likely to be involved in such use, the narrowness and confidentiality of circulation, etc.

The case of the obituary notice

- 20 In the contemporary period, the most abundant genre is that of the obituary. Its history is recent: in 1835, the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie Française* devoted an article to obituary notices for the first time, defining them as “certain short writings devoted to the memory of notable people who have recently passed away”. In 2007, the *Petit Robert* dictionary defined the obituary notice as a “biographical notice concerning a person who has recently died”. Comparison of these two definitions reflects the stability of this type of discourse over the past two centuries of existence. Etymologically, “obituary” refers to that fact that someone has died; actually, the obituary has inherited the centuries-old tradition of the eulogy, which consists of speaking in eulogious terms about a person who has died and which, depending on time and place, has manifested itself in the past as the *elogium* (in Ancient Rome), the funeral oration (in a religious context), or in the *manifesto mortuario* (the notices liberally posted up in the streets of Mediterranean countries when someone dies). Thus death has always been an occasion for an upsurge of utterance, intended to overcome grief, to maintain the memory of the deceased, or to gather together those who are left: in that, the obituary is one of the rites in modern-day bereavement in the western world and in the staging of the fundamental values of a society (Dominicy, Frédéric, 2001). Throughout the 19th century, newspapers published obituaries in the form of texts written by journalists which retraced the biography of relatively well-known persons who had died. However, it took some time for these texts to acquire a place of their own in the newspaper columns: they appeared irregularly, in variable places in the newspaper, ranging from the main news section to the section on “other news items”. The end of the 19th century saw the appearance of true obituary columns with a fixed location in the newspaper, in the form in which we know them today (Makarova, 2003). Since then, the obituaries column has stabilised and is now among the well-established practices of journalism. Nowadays, newspapers have a regular column for obituaries, generally on the “society” pages; even if the word “obituary” is not used, the title of the column is often explicit. Thus the obituaries in *Le Monde* and *Le Figaro* (the two main suppliers of obituaries in the French national press) are to be found under the respective headings of “Disappearances” and “Bereavement”. In this respect, it should be noted that the taboo surrounding death prevents the use of the word “obituary” in newspaper columns: even though the obituaries themselves refer explicitly to death, euphemisms are usually preferred for headings, rather than coarser terms. The wording of obituaries has become extremely codified: after a short paragraph

intended to announce the death (and sometimes the circumstances of its occurrence: date, place, cause, etc), the article usually oscillates between a record of the deceased person's life and a more or less effusive tribute. The length of the obituary is variable; it may be anywhere between a short notice to a two-page spread, depending on the celebrity of the person who has died (Revaz, 2000; Florea, 2010).

Death announcements

- 21 Unlike the differences between the variations affecting the obituary genre, the death announcements genre appears to be more firmly constrained by its dimensions and by the medium used. These announcements of deaths that have occurred are composed by people close to the deceased; their circulation, for which payment must be made, obeys relatively fixed routines, determined in part by the newspapers, which impose certain editorial standards, but also by custom, which requires certain practices, particularly regarding the wording used or the use of images in the announcements (Hammer, 2010). The genre nevertheless presents a number of specific features and significant sub-genres regarding the discourse re-presenting death and the dead (Ringlet, 1993: 73-74; Bertrand, 1995). The genre does not escape evolution in society, which it reflects and accompanies (Ringlet, 1992, 1993), as we shall see in this presentation.

Some of the issues involved in the discursive and multi-semiotic representation of death and the dead in the media

Essential questions

- 22 The issue of discourses on death and the dead cannot, however, be limited to the study of obituaries and death announcements, although this is of capital importance. It also concerns the discourses which, although not belonging specifically to a genre of discourse on death within the preceding meaning, are nevertheless at pains to consider the fact of death, and to include it in a much broader chain of events. In this sense, mediated discourses provide a means of investigating a certain number of essential questions, or, on occasions, point to the difficulty of dealing with them head-on. These include the debate on euthanasia, on the relationship between suicide and work, on any particular genocide – e.g. the Armenian genocide, the extermination of Jews and gypsies during the Nazi period (Thanassekos, 2007) –, on famines, or on any particular conflict – for example the Balkan conflicts with their ethnic cleansing (Krieg-Planque, 2003), Rwanda (Halen, Walter, 2008; Fleury, Walter, 2008) – or the work of art critics on works featuring death. At any event, they question the responsibility of journalism, by its choices and by its silences, and, beyond that, the responsibility of the social body and its intermediary bodies (Rabatel, Chauvin, 2006; Rabatel, Koren, 2008; Rabatel, 2008). These issues are most frequently broached by evoking the issues death raises.

Ineffability?

- 23 There is a “thesis” (if it is not actually a commonplace it is at the very least an unfortunate short-cut) according to which if death cannot be represented or spoken of, it

only owes its ineffability to the fact that death is a unknowable challenge that generates anxiety and taboos (Thomas, 2000: 105-106). Without claiming in any way to deny the reality of this, we note nevertheless that this concerns death in the first person more than any other form, except, of course, that they may be applied to one's own anxieties. It is in relation to this that Louis-Vincent Thomas (*ibid.*: 60, 221) mentions various forms of ineffability: thus he lists the lexical processes of euphemisation, tabooisation, silence, paraphrase and circumlocution. These may adopt either a symbolic register ("he passed away") or a vulgar register ("he kicked the bucket"), confirming "the evident role of slang expressions with a cathartic function" (Thomas, 1991b: 805). Lastly, he recalls that although there are three or four synonyms for the verb "to live" in French, there are more than thirty for the verb "to die", not counting paraphrases (Thomas, 1991b: 838). In terms of discursive cover-ups⁵ that may be based on ellipsis or on "dilution through rhetoric" (*ibid.*: 221-222), it is customary to accord great importance to narratives, as does Vladimir Jankélévitch, since, as this side of death and the afterlife cannot be included in the discourse, there is scarcely anything left apart from "the narrative of this side of death, which is biography, and the romance of the afterlife, which is a fantasy tale" (*ibid.*). This type of cover-up also includes apophatic inversions which attempt to speak of death by referring to that which it is not – on the supposition that death is contrary or contradictory to life. Yet reference to ineffability constitutes oversimplification and opacifies the issue if we do not state to which set of phenomena we refer. There is indeed a mental, psychological and cultu(r)al phenomenon which reveals the difficulty of saying, or things which may not be said. For the linguist, however, what can be said is said, and what is said is always significant. Of course, it is not the same thing to speak directly or indirectly, in any given register; the way of making references and their organisation in the phrase and in the discourse are significant. In linguistic terms, then, ineffability has no pertinence. The same also applies for pictorial re-presentations of death and dead bodies: although they sometimes circumvent the raw representation of death, they do not show it any less, but use strategies that need to be described.

The role of narrative in representations of death

- 24 What is more, interpreting narrative as having the sole function of covering up by default or by excess constitutes an oversimplification, as does permitting the idea that narrative is the sole or preferred form of evoking death. These two points need to be made. It is true that narrative is part of the construction of the identity of social groups. It is also true that the media have taken over from, but not totally supplanted, myths, tales, legends, and literary texts. The pervasiveness of re-presentations of death/the dead (in the written press and on television) speaks of the world and institutes our vision of what is real by telling us its story. This is all so strong that, by an abusive generalisation, we sometimes go so far as to extend the outlines of narrative identity, which is very real in its own sphere, whereas identity is necessarily constructed through narratives, renamed "major narratives" for the occasion. In this respect, the fashion for *storytelling* (Salmon, 2007) in the media seems to correspond to a simplification (and not only in the media, but also in theory), since narrative cannot in any way constitute the beginning and end of the construction of identity. It must therefore be recalled that identity goes beyond the issue of narrative identity (Ricoeur, 1983; Charaudeau, 1997). As Jean-Marc Ferry emphasises (1991: 112), alongside the founding role of narration, which is the prime mode for the construction of identity, other registers are also involved. Thus interpretation intervenes

“as soon as narrative is understood in a perspective of edification”, when thinking extends beyond the contingent framework of the action in order to explain what it is. The author continues with an explanation of a third stage, argumentation, which he defines as an effort to think through the specific phenomena and their explanation using different forms of logic, directed towards reactions for action that are valid for everyone, not only for those who have been the originators or witnesses of such an event which has been retold and then interpreted. That is why the argumentation is itself apprehended on the basis of the necessities of a fourth movement which completes the dynamic of the construction of identities that Jean-Marc Ferry calls “reconstruction”, aimed at justifying the argumentation by taking other good reasons into account, situating and contextualising them in order to avoid any intolerant ideological drift, although without any tinge of relativism. It is indeed all these levels taken together which interact in the emotional and rational construction of identities, centred of action, itself charged with emotion and reason. The dynamic of the categories drawn up by Jean-Marc Ferry is valuable in considering the multiplicity of the angles the information media adopt in announcing and evoking death, and – above all – the entanglement of the language-related and cognitive phenomena surrounding these re-presentations which not only are able to play on the emotions and empathy, but also strive to consider rationally the issues involved in death and its re-presentations. Thus the obituary columns, the articles devoted to some genocide or other, or to a given problem in society not only recount dramatic events, but also place them in perspective, analyse them, and sometimes even attempt to envisage possible solutions; certainly not death as an unavoidable process, but death as a scandal demonstrating tragedy that it might be thought possible or desirable to prevent. We can see that in the light of the preceding analyses, the evocation of death and the dead in narratives is more complex than stated by Vladimir Jankélévitch and Louis-Vincent Thomas and that, in fact, the narrative needs to be articulated with other modes of representation, with argument and interpretation playing their role in the philosophical and anthropological apprehension of death and the dead.

Announcing death

- 25 The texts included in the 19th and 20th issues of *Questions de Communication* will deal with the question of the re-presentation of death by describing, in issue 19, the way death is re-presented in the information media (*Announcing death*), and by presenting, in issue 20, the issues involved in re-presenting death in the information media (*Referring to death*). The two presentations together, of course, although in different proportions, deal with the forms of re-presentation and the issues they raise. In most cases, “announcing death” means announcing an individual death rather than collective or mass deaths. It is also a celebration of the dead person – and, as we shall see, a celebration of the person he/she was in life, a life that continues through shared values. In other words, announcing death is one of the rituals of death, and it is from this starting-point of the notion of ritual that we shall attempt to consider its discursive and (tele)visual re-presentation. On the other hand, referring to death using involves treating death as a sign of *something*, accusatory death, interrogatory death, in short, death *for a reason*, death *as a preventive*. The evocative dimension becomes analytical and praxis-oriented, referring to political dramas and social crises for which solutions need to be sought in order to reduce the number of deaths. It is true that this dimension is also found in announcing death, but evocation in

the latter case is more emotionally loaded, in as much as the announcement is often made by speakers with a degree of proximity to the deceased person and there are constraints of a generic nature.

- 26 This presentation seeks to determine how a dead person (or death, or even perhaps the living person) is uttered and displayed in the information media. Its subdivision takes account of the types of media, in order to check whether death is uttered in the same way on television as in the written press, if the new on-line media have given rise to new, more personal, more immediate, ways of speaking about death. Above all, the aim of this issue is to question these modes of re-presentation in order to see if they constitute a means of continuing if not the forms of the rituals then at least their immemorial functions, by which words, like gestures – not forgetting that in this case words are discursive gestures – reflect the commitment on the part of those who accompany the dead person, in order to put words to the emotions being felt, to allow separation from the dead person, and to allow grieving to take its course. In short, it is a matter of seeing what forms the living use both to pay tribute to a person who has died and at the same time to facilitate the return to the land of the living, since life must go on.
- 27 The presentation is broken down into three sub-sections: the first is devoted to an analysis of obituary columns and announcements of deaths in the written press over the last decade. The second is concerned with new commemorative rituals on the Internet. The third deals with the evolution in the televised funeral in France since its origins. Marie-Laure Florea shows that in obituaries the re-presentation of death is staged in such a way that it marks the division between the living and the deceased at the same time that the dead person is re-presented, in the sense that he/she is brought back into the present through the discourse. In this way, obituary columns fulfil a ritual function inasmuch as evoking the deceased allows not only the process of bereavement to take its course, but also arouses community spirit focusing on the values that the dead person embodied more particularly, and which prove to be essential to the permanence of society or of more restricted communities. Françoise Hammer highlights the strategies for circumventing the taboo of death in the announcements of deaths published in the regional press. Beyond the primary pragmatic function of announcing the death and the date of the funeral, it also demonstrates four discursive strategies – distancing, convocation, invocation, and appropriation of death.
- 28 The two subsequent articles analyse new writing practices, which are new modes of sociability that focus on announcements and eulogies on the Internet. Adeline Wrona takes a look at the “jesuismort.com” [“I_am_dead”] Internet site, which reworks the forms of the *post mortem* eulogy by hybridising models inherited with the potentialities specific to writings on a screen. Discourse concerning the dead determines communicational gestures (provided by the site) that give meaning to the tribute and constitute so many new forms of participation in a funerary ritual examined from the viewpoint of its temporal scheme, its economic model, and its modes of sociability. Sophie Pène studies three phenomena connected with the functioning of the Facebook social network: announcements, discussions concerning the continuation of a page belonging to someone who has died, and commemoration of deaths connected with a dramatic event (disaster, crime, illness, etc): memorials demonstrate the affective and symbolic issues at work in these places of digital socialisation, and at the same time question their future.
- 29 Benoît Lafon analyses the long-term ceremonial dimension of televised funerals, from the beginnings of television in France. The collective experience of live coverage of funerals

has varied in the way the dead are projected and the living are involved, by causing an evolution in the representations towards civilian tributes and renewed figureheads. These evolutions, in relation to characters who are not in the close circle of family and friends, reflect new methods of neutralising death, based on intersubjectivity, replacing traditional behaviour. In doing so, televised funerals are an indication of the perpetuation in constantly renewed forms of “formalisations” and “reformalisations” (Elias, 1982) of a relationship with death, through the intermediary of the production of figureheads.

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NOTES

1. The blog in question, which dates back to 2009, can be found at the following address: babyfaithhope.blogspot.com.
2. See www.paperblog.fr/1737050/jade-goody-est-morte-du-cancer. See also the announced death of Farrah Fawcett on paperblog.
3. J. Baudrillard refers to the famous article by G. Gorer (1955).

4. This text (together with the articles in the presentation) was written before publication of the work by Harrusch (2010). We shall return to this in the presentation in issue 20 of Questions de Communication.

5. The cover-ups that exist on the personal level may include the disposition of bodies, sometimes using highly sophisticated techniques (cf. embalming in the United States). The living no longer dare to express their pain to any extent; wearing a black armband has fallen out of fashion, as has mourning clothing. And yet, as some people recognise, this was a tangible sign of distress that could provoke discussion, and provide gentle help in dealing with bereavement (Châtelet, 2004).

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