

Some Thoughts on Liminal States as Irritations of Knowledge

So long as I live, I am a mortal man, but when I die, ceasing to be a man, I cease also to be mortal, I am no longer capable of dying, and the death which announces itself horrifies me because I see it for what it is: no longer death, but the impossibility of death.
Maurice Blanchot¹

In the following, I attempt to develop some thoughts on liminal states as irritations of knowledge. My starting point is the definition that Victor Turner gave to the word »liminal«: »This term, literally 'being-on-a-threshold', means a state of process which is betwixt-and-between the normal, day-to-day cultural and social states and processes of getting and spending, preserving law and order, and registering structural status.«² This context is related to one, if not *the* most fundamental dichotomy of human existence, namely the relationship between life and death. I will try to show that this popular juxtaposition actually misses the heart of the matter and that there are numerous case studies, cultural references and aesthetic reflections that productively question the supposed two-sidedness of life and death.

Disappearance

Ironically, the namesake for the Airport in Lyon, France, was an aviator who lost his life in a plane crash. In 1944, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, today much more famous as the author—among other writings—of the novella *The Little Prince*, disappeared from both the radar and the sky. He vanished somewhere near Marseille, never to be seen again. Was he *dead* when he was suddenly gone?

As the proverb goes, nothing is known for sure; therefore, until the year 2000, one could theoretically have come up with the idea that Saint-Exupéry might still be alive somewhere—in a hiding place, maybe, where

1 Quoted in: Guyer, Sara: »The Pardon of the Disaster«, *SubStance* 35 (2006), No. 1, pp. 85–105, 94.

2 Turner, Victor: »Frame, Flow and Reflection: Ritual and Drama as Public Liminality«, *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 6 (1979), No. 4, pp. 465–499, 465.

he gradually became an old man. By then he would have been a good hundred years. Though unlikely, it would not have been entirely impossible. But was it *probable*?

In 2000, his machine was found beneath the surface of the Mediterranean Sea. In it lay his mortal remains, as little as was still left of them. Saint-Exupéry had indeed died in 1944, shot down by a German Messerschmidt to whom the author's military plane was both a threat and an appropriate target.³ Yet, Saint-Exupéry was not *evidentially dead* in the following more than five decades. Since his corpse was outside of anyone's visibility, his death was outside of anybody's knowledge. A person that vanishes⁴ is, of course, not automatically considered dead—although he or she is *factually dead* to family and friends: there are no more encounters, no more communications, no more reassurances. For the time being, these cases are, at the very least, cases of *social death*.⁵ Detached from the need to have physical evidence, social deaths at the very least involve someone falling out of the framework of possibilities of interaction; be it through mere disappearance or, this is more often the case, through targeted mechanisms of exclusion. The socially dead person thus becomes silent through action, through fate—or through a power that deliberately makes him or her remain silent, if not invisible.

Socially dead is someone who no longer acts as a person or is no longer recognized as one, i.e. someone who is forced into living conditions without interpersonal connectivity (or who possibly puts him- or herself there intentionally). Social death thus concerns, for example, lepers, slaves, serious criminals, disgraced rulers, etc., who are no longer recognized as members of society. Some of them fall victim to *damnatio memoriae*, the strategic suppression of all evidence of their actual existence—a practice

3 The Luftwaffe pilot that allegedly killed Saint-Exupéry during his recon flight was Horst Rippert, who later became sports reporter at the Olympic games for ZDF, one of Germany's biggest TV stations, and who deeply regretted shooting down the plane. See Cassier, Philip/Kellerhoff, Sven Felix: »Ich habe den Piloten nicht erkennen können«, *Berliner Morgenpost*, 18 March 2008, https://www.morgenpost.de/printarchiv/kultur/article_e102642027/Ich-habe-den-Piloten-nicht-erkennen-koennen.html [accessed 21 April 2024].

4 Kiepal, Laura Christina/Carrington, Peter J./Dawson, Myrna: »Missing Persons and Social Exclusion«, *Canadian Journal of Sociology* (37) 2012, No. 2, pp. 137–168; Greenwood, Elizabeth: *Playing Dead. A Journey through the World of Death Fraud*, New York 2016; Huttunen, Laura/Perl, Gerhild (eds.): *An Anthropology of Disappearance. Politics, Intimacies and Alternative Ways of Knowing*, New York/Oxford 2023.

5 Králová, Jana/Walter, Tony (eds.): *Social Death. Questioning the Life-Death Boundary*, Abingdon/New York 2018.

carried out mainly in antiquity.⁶ Slavoj Žižek reports on a more recent example in his blog.⁷ As a young man, he witnessed how tennis player Martina Navratilova, who had fled to the West, was world-famous on the one hand, but was hushed up in her native Czechoslovakia on the other. Even in the sports coverage of major tennis events, her name was suppressed rather than mentioned. Czechoslovakian newspapers therefore reported on the participants in the semifinals of a tournament by mentioning only three of the four names. Navratilova was alive and kicking on the tennis court, but in the minds of political officials, she should have been as dead as possible.

Even in the light of such ›expansions‹ of forms of death, in Saint-Exupéry's peculiar case, his ›state of deathness‹ was even more doubtful, for as author of *The Little Prince*, he lived on within his works. He was, and he still is, addressable as the person as whom he was regarded during his lifetime—as Antoine de Saint-Exupéry. When someone talks of the significance or splendor or clichéness of *The Little Prince*, its author's name supposedly is mentioned often. The book is constantly being reprinted all over the world, thus guaranteeing Saint-Exupéry as a reference. And by still being referenced, Saint-Exupéry is still present. He has escaped death insofar as his social death in 1944 has been transformed into a social ›living on‹ in the years that followed. Having achieved some sort of ›cultural immortality‹ (from today's Western well-educated perspective on literature, that is), Saint-Exupéry has never been dead and maybe never will be. But there can be little doubt that his *body* has died more than 80 years ago.

The German missing person's act (*Verschollenheitsgesetz*) was established in 1939. There are similar laws in many other countries. (France, Saint-Exupéry's home country, has a law on the »disparition d'un adulte«, which was verified in June of 2023.) These laws list legal ways to die. It is a death by declaration—a method by which a body is not necessary, be it dead or in any other condition. In fact, this bureaucratic strategy of imposing death upon a person ultimately proofs that the end of life, just as its

6 Varner, Eric: *Mutilation and Transformation. Damnatio Memoriae and Roman Imperial Portraiture*, Leiden 2004; Östenberg, Ida: »Damnatio Memoriae Inscribed: The Materiality of Cultural Repression«, in: Andrej Petrovic/Ivana Petrovic/Edmund Thomas (eds.), *The Materiality of Text. Placement, Perception, and Presence of Inscribed Texts in Classical Antiquity*, Leiden 2018, pp. 324–347.

7 Žižek, Slavoj: »Navalny was Naïve, but not a Fool«, *Goads and Prods*, 19 February 2024, <https://slavoj.substack.com/p/navalny-was-naive-but-not-a-fool> [accessed 21 April 2024].

continuity, can indeed be separated both from physical matters and from the status of the person at stake. If relatives apply, people that have been missing without a trace for 10 years or more can be declared dead. A small fee and a rubber stamp are all that is needed—and someone who might still be living, might still be missed and loved, becomes a former someone. Uncertainty about the status of the person gives way to an officially pronounced, almost ›ordered‹ certainty. If the missing person is over 80 years of age, then 5 years of non-appearance are already sufficient to declare him or her dead; and under special circumstances (e.g. deliberately jumping into the deep ocean at night), even six months can be enough.

The latter constellation is exactly what applies to German pop singer and TV personality Daniel Küblböck, who fell/jumped over the railing of a luxury liner at around 4 a.m. during a cruise off the coast of Newfoundland in September 2018. A body was never found. Küblböck was pronounced dead in February 2021. The official documents even state a fictitious point in time for his death: 8h55 in the morning, five hours after dipping into the water.⁸ Following on that matter-of-fact bureaucratic approach, the assumed separation of body and state of existence implies that people can legally be dead while being alive physically. This is, of course, a thought well established in old caper movies or in documentaries on war criminals: The protagonist's true vanishing point is society's ability to forget he's still existing. After all, the dead aren't prosecuted. Going in hiding, then, and taking on a false identity is an act akin to a resurrection: Life has ended, but this life's end has served a purpose. It grants a different life to a person with a different name, but with the same body.⁹ It should

8 Stern: »Gericht erklärt Daniel Küblböck offiziell für tot«, *Stern.de*, 25 March 2021, <https://www.stern.de/lifestyle/leute/gericht-erklaert-daniel-kueblboeck-offiziell-fuer-tot-30450052.html> [accessed 21 April 2024]

9 A recent example that made global news is the case of Satoshi Kirishima, a Japanese man on the run since 1975, when he was prosecuted for participation in the bombing of a Mitsubishi Industries building that killed eight people. He confessed to police on his deathbed (Japan Times: »DNA Tests Show Dead Man Likely 1970s Bombing Fugitive in Japan«, *Japan Times*, 2 February 2024; <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2024/02/02/japan/crime-legal/bombing-fugitive-dna/> [accessed 21 April 2024]). Kirishima was never officially declared dead since he disappeared intentionally; it was regarded likely that he had either left the country and/or changed his identity. The latter was the case. After having been a different person to the outside world, Kirishima finally succumbed to merge his current life and his original identity shortly before his demise from cancer. His tombstone will now carry the name given to him upon his birth, thereby negating crucial aspects of the past almost fifty years. His confession reestablished the traditional order of things: In Kirishima's case, the ›right‹ corpse lies in the right coffin.

come as no surprise that there are people who accuse Küblböck (and others) of secretly going into hiding and faking their deaths.

According to the *Verschollenheitsgesetz*, literally getting lost »in the air« is a circumstance so peculiar that it requires only a three-month waiting period before the missing person can legally be declared dead. This leads back to the disappearance of people in lofty heights. As Saint-Exupéry was an avid pilot, it is not a far stretch to connect his fate to an equally puzzling airborne mystery: the case of Malaysian Airlines 370. MH 370 was a plane that went missing during a flight to Beijing in March 2014. The passengers and crew aboard virtually »vanished into thin air«, whereas in reality, their bodies most likely have done nothing like that. On some remote location, probably, as in Saint-Exupéry's case, beneath the sea, a few remains of their bodies may still exist. It is not the body that *vanishes*, it's the person; the body *disappears*, which means that for at least a few decades, chances are that parts of it will resurface.

The distinction between person and body has always been the vexing point at the borderland between life and non-life. If an elderly person, seemingly exhausted, takes a nap on a sofa, observers from afar might not be able to distinguish whether this person is alive and sleeping or dead and therefore outside the state of »being human«. There might be clear signs (breathing, small movements) for the continuing of life in this particular body, but they may be unnoticeable. Moreover, and more importantly, observers might not be able to grasp an actual transformation from life to non-life. If said person suffers a heart attack and dies in the very minute when the observers have left the room for a moment,¹⁰ would these observers be able to realize what has happened at first glance once they return? To them, it might seem as if nothing of significance has changed: The person on the sofa is still the same. The position of the body might even be unchanged. However, the short moment of transition that is commonly called death altered the scene entirely, for with the occurrence of the heart attack and the subsequent death, the person no longer is a person. This is at least what is commonly attributed to dead

10 Medical records show that time frame of dying—the amount of time needed until all nerve cells in the brain cease to work following the actual moment of death—oscillates between 13 and 266 seconds (Dreier, Jens: »Die letzte Entladungswelle vor dem Tod ist ein Riesenereignis«, in: Stiftung Humboldt Forum (eds.), *Un_endlich. Leben mit dem Tod*, Leipzig 2023, pp. 102–109, 104). Therefore, in the scenario presented, leaving the room for a mere five minutes would be more than enough to miss the moment of death entirely.

bodies: they used to be persons when they were *animated*—and they are no more than (physical) bodies when their ›soulfulness‹ has disappeared. In German language, a differentiation can be made in this regard between *Leib* and *Körper*, but it escapes translation. Let's assume the elderly person had indeed died when his/her observers took a break. This person, represented by her body (because identity in face-to-face-situations is attributed towards bodies), was alone in the room for a short amount of time. When the observers came back, that body was still there, but in the meantime, the room had become deserted. The person is gone – the body remains.

While the process of dying is usually considered as if it were heading towards the crossing of the boundary line between clearly defined states —namely: life and non-life—, intermediate states and shades of gray can actually be found in many respects. The natural scheme of physiology that Canadian sociologist Erving Goffman spoke of in the 1970s—a part of the natural framework that is »deterministic, will-less, nonmoral«, according to him,¹¹ is no longer so easy to talk about today, since the perspective has shifted and room (and attention) has been given to liminal states.

The passengers and crew of MH 370, just one of many examples,¹² have reached an intermediate state between *being there* and *nonexistence*. Some of their relatives still store hope and are willing to embrace all sort of miraculous circumstances without further inquiry if their loved ones were to emerge alive out of this strange tale of sudden disappearance. To these hopeful people, the inaccessibility of the dead body, which must be assumed here, is a driving force of confidence. They may perhaps even underpin their hope with the—actually entirely different—case studies in which abducted people were released after many years of captivity. These cases seem to ›prove‹ that even after many years of absence, and after the irrefutable arrival of social death, a resurrection is possible. Unlike Saint-Exupéry, whose fame kept him alive as a name (or rather, as an address, as stated above) while his physical condition was uncertain, the passengers of the airplane are not well-known enough to be remembered on the long term. And that is precisely why they, more than the French writer, are in the paradoxical position of being able to ›resurrect‹. For to

11 Goffman, Erving: *Frame Analysis. An Essay on the Organization of Experience*, New York 1974, p. 188.

12 For more, see Benkel, Thorsten: »Fragwürdig eindeutig: Eine Exkursion in die Schattenzone des Wissens«, in: Thorsten Benkel/Matthias Meitzler (eds.), *Zwischen Leben und Tod. Sozialwissenschaftliche Grenzgänge*, Wiesbaden 2019, pp. 1–29.

achieve this stadium, you have to have been dead enough without being *too dead*.

Reappearance

With regard to determining the beginning and the end of life, borderline states are by no means rare exceptions. The cultural history of determining criteria for the end of life, to focus on this particular discourse, speaks volumes about the ambiguities involved. It underlines the driving need for clarification that has not only haunted various academic disciplines for centuries, but has also affected the comprehending minds of committed citizens.

It is effortlessly possible to cite examples which show that it is not *unambiguous*, but rather *transition* that shapes the images of dying and death. These transitional phenomena are not academic constructions, but are interwoven into social negotiations, and they take place on the lifeworld level. Particularly vivid are forms of expression in the popular cultural frame of reference that recapitulate actual (e.g. medical) borderline states in a pointed form. They also serve to illustrate their potentials and dangers and are therefore, especially in a concentrated form of presentation, preferable to presuppositional legal and medical specializations. In addition to the episodes mentioned above, these include, among many others, the following.

- (a) The millennia-old idea that *spirit beings* continue to have a para-social presence after death has been shipped off in all kinds of cultural disguises. This is, on the one hand, fairy tale content; yet on the other, it is also an expression of sincerely felt observations. These observations are for the most part considered frightening and terrifying, but at the same time, they are what some have just been longing for. That spirits do appear is a long-disproved rumor, but also the content of diverse religious belief systems; it is never quite tangible—but also never quite distant. As I have tried to show elsewhere,¹³ this phenomenon can be productively examined by engaging with Jacques Derrida's post-structural

¹³ Benkel, Thorsten: »Leben in Klammern: Über sozialontologische Grenzbereiche«, in: Manuel Stetter (ed.), *After Life. Die soziale Präsenz der Toten*, Bielefeld 2025 (forthcoming).

turalist perspective, if one does not want to take the ethnographic route through the sub-sensory world of ghost hunters.¹⁴

- (b) The *cryonic procedure* promises a further life of the body by having it frozen in at below -300 degrees Fahrenheit (around -200 degrees Celsius). Future generations will then have the chance to defrost said body and revive it, and afterwards possibly even heal ailments that it might have had at the time of being cryonized. (The implication is that this will also stop the aging process.) The commercial companies that offer cryonics as a sort of time-consuming sleep also offer cheaper freezing methods and monitored storage of just the head. This has nothing to do with death in the conventional sense, those providers usually claim; and yet, the cryonization procedure, where it is legal at all, is usually set in motion once a traditional (medical) determination of death has been fulfilled.¹⁵ Here, too, the notion of resurrection is apparent, for cryonics promise to turn anyone into a Jesus-like figure—into a person that was once bid farewell, but that reappears on the social stage with the help of powers that almost seem supernatural. Even if all of that were true, which is highly doubtful,¹⁶ the resurrection and continued existence would not necessarily lead to a life in paradise, however, but into a foreign social world and a high pressure to adapt quickly.
- (c) The (originally religious) concept of the *zombie*. While spirits—as the term suggests—carry a transcendental component and are therefore considered subtle and ethereal (making them all the more frightening in the imagination of those who believe to encounter them), zombies, on the contrary, are the pure ›afterlife‹ of primitive flesh. According to film history and popular culture in general, they are powered by an irrepressible lust for living people’s flesh, which can easily be read as a moral metaphor for too much sexual greed. Interestingly,

14 Eaton, Marc A. »Give us a Sign of your Presence«: Paranormal Investigation as a Spiritual Practice», *Sociology of Religion* 76 (2015), No. 4, pp. 389–412; Ruickbie, Leo: »The Haunters and the Hunters: Popular Ghost Hunting and the Pursuit of Paranormal Experience«, in: Darryl Caterine/John W. Morehead (eds.), *The Paranormal and Popular Culture. A Postmodern Religious Landscape*, Abingdon/New York 2019, pp. 92–104.

15 Cohen, Jeremy: »Frozen Bodies and Future Imaginaries: Assisted Dying, Cryonics, and a Good Death«, *Religions* 11 (2020), No. 11, Art. 584.

16 Hart, Amalyah: »Can Human Bodies Really be Cryogenically Frozen?«, *Cosmos Magazine*, 12 May 2020, <https://cosmosmagazine.com/news/can-human-bodies-really-be-cryogenically-frozen/> [accessed 21 April 2024].

whether zombies are humans or not has even been clarified in Germany by the constitutional court, the *Bundesverfassungsgericht*, in 1992 in a verdict concerning the movie *The Evil Dead*. They are not, the court says.¹⁷ This distinction lends a revealing ontological status to the factually non-living in two respects—zombies do not exist *>in real life<* and are *>undead<* within the corresponding horror narratives. It places them (probably involuntarily) in discursive proximity to debates about the living status of patients in comas or vegetative states. In a completely different way, these patients are often also thrown back to the basic vegetative functions of the body, but from an ethical perspective, they are unquestionably considered living beings.

(d) The phenomenon of so-called *near-death experiences*. This refers to the more or less exemplary experiences of supposedly deceased people who just managed to escape death through medical rescue intervention, but were able to look into its face beforehand. While the scientific explanation tends to assume that neurological effects under the extreme stress of an accident or other tense situations trigger the apparent death,¹⁸ quite a few of those who have had the experience affirm that it is a *>real<* death—or at least something that feels like it.¹⁹ According to this narrative, however, an intermediate state must have been entered, for neither has life ended completely, nor has non-life been fully realized. This is also suggested by the terminology which speaks of a *>near<* death. Within this context, there are reports from antiquity²⁰ that imply that an intermediate zone between life and non-life is part of the cultural-historical heritage of modernity.

(e) The idea of *transmortality*. This refers to the question on the validity of organ donations in the light of the uncertainty of *>objective<* features for certain death.²¹ Were the body parts that are transferred during an

17 Möller, Kai: »Die Verhältnismäßigkeit des Gewaltdarstellungsverbots«, *Kritische Vierteljahrsschrift für Gesetzgebung und Rechtswissenschaft* 88 (2005), No. 3, pp. 244–254.

18 Fischer, John Martin: »Near-Death Experiences: The Stories they Tell«, *Journal of Ethics* 22 (2018), No. 1, pp. 97–122.

19 Knoblauch, Hubert/Schmied, Ina/Schnettler, Bernt: »Different Kinds of Near-Death Experience: A Report on a Survey of Near-Death Experiences in Germany«, *Journal of Near-Death Studies* 20 (2001), No. 1, pp. 15–29.

20 Slujs, Marinus van der: »Three Ancient Reports of Near-Death Experiences: Bremmer Revisited«, *Journal of Near-Death Studies* 27 (2009), No. 4, pp. 223–253.

21 Pfaller, Larissa/Hansen, Solveig L./Adloff, Frank/Schicktanz, Silke: »Saying no to Organ Donation: An Empirical Typology of Reluctance and Rejection«, *Sociology of Health and Illness* 40 (2018), No. 8, pp. 1327–1346.

organ transplant operation *dead* and were they subsequently *resuscitated*—or were they still ›a little bit alive‹ and therefore easy to migrate from one body into another? This is an uncomfortable question since it suggests a transitional stage between life and non-life, which has not yet been sufficiently outlined in medicine. It may also describe an extension of the death phase. Either way, such declarations can at best function as an analytical tool; the corresponding debates do not generate any added value for empirical problems in the medical field.²²

(f) Among various similar cases from all over the world in which *a dead womb contained a living fetus*, the 1992 incident from Erlangen stands out. Under unexplained circumstances, a young woman drove her car into a tree. She was declared brain dead three days after the crash. However, the fetus in her womb continued to show vital signs and was therefore cared for at the hospital for weeks—which was achieved by keeping the dead mother’s body alive artificially with the help of medical equipment. The case caused an outcry that went beyond German borders as it touched on fundamental ethical issues:²³ Who would have the legitimacy to decide which course of action was appropriate? And what does this say about the reliability of the brain death criterion? The case can also be linked to many previous and current debates in the field of medical ethics.²⁴ To this day, the case circulates under the title ›Baby of Erlangen‹, although the fetus never had the opportunity to exist as a baby. It died 38 days after the accident, in the 21st week of pregnancy. For these 38 days, the mother’s body encompassed both life and death.

22 Nor, incidentally, does the use of language in medical practice to speak of ›revival attempts‹ when dealing with people whose serious injuries take them to the brink of death; saving them at the last moment is not an act of raising the dead.

23 Anstötz, Christoph: »Should a Brain-Dead Pregnant Woman Carry her Child to Full Term? The Case of the ›Erlanger Baby‹«, *Bioethics* 7 (1993), No. 4, pp. 340–350.

24 See for example: Dzeng, Elizabeth: »Navigating the Liminal State Between Life and Death: Clinician Moral Distress and Uncertainty Regarding New Life Sustaining Technologies«, *American Journal of Bioethics* 17 (2017), No. 2, 22–25; Heywood, Rachel: »Live or Let Die? Fine Margins between Life and Death in a Brain-Dead Pregnancy«, *Medical Law Review* 25 (2017), No. 4, pp. 628–653; Willig, Carla/Wirth, Luisa: »Liminality as a Dimension of the Experience of Living with Terminal Cancer«, *Palliative and Supportive Care* 17 (2019), No. 3, pp. 333–337; Feldman, Deborah M./Borgida, Adam F./Rodis, John F./Campbell, Winston A.: »Irreversible Maternal Brain Injury during Pregnancy«, *Obstetrical and Gynecological Survey* 55 (2000), No. 11, pp. 708–714.

(g) Post-mortem survival enabled through the powers of *artificial intelligence and digitalization*. While the dead body usually is stored out of plain sight and rots away, there are many entrepreneurs now testing the possibilities of overcoming dead corporeality by resurrecting it on the monitor. Through the use of AI and deepfake technology, it should be possible in the near future to allow the deceased to live on as avatars based on data provided during their lifetime. Limited to the conditions of existence as a computer simulation, the dead can hypothetically live on forever, answer questions, give advice, reassure, and certainly also frighten. The opportunities and dangers emerging from this prospect are currently the subject of extensive debates.²⁵ Its relevance is reflected in its prominence as a popular cultural theme. In various films, one of them being *Another End* (directed by Piero Messina in 2024), corresponding science fiction and, moreover, social fiction considerations are imagined, with drama usually taking its place alongside consolation.

(h) Lastly, to sum up this short panorama, there is a sketch hailing from the first season (1969) of the British TV show *Monty Python*. A visitor to a pet shop complains to the sales clerk that the parrot he had bought there hours before had on closer inspection turned out to be dead. It had in fact been nailed to its perch, but was clearly no longer alive. The dealer disagrees: the animal is by no means dead, but rather fast asleep. It ends with the angry buyer, in an absurd rage, repeatedly banging the stiff parrot's body on the sales desk to demonstrate that Polly Parrot can indeed no longer wake up. The joke is that there are fixed states that seemingly cannot be faked—although that is exactly

25 Osler, Lucy/Krueger, Joel: »Communing with the Dead Online. Chatbots and Continuing Bonds«, *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 29 (2022), No. 9/10, pp. 222–252; Belén, Jiménez-Alonso/Brescó de Luna, Ignacio: »Griefbots: A New Way of Communicating with the Dead?«, *Integrative Psychological and Behavioral Science* 57 (2023), No. 2, pp. 466–481; Benkel, Thorsten: »Dynamiken der Delokalisierung: Körper, Tod und Digitalität«, in: Dorothee Arnold-Krüger/Sven Schwabe (eds.), *Sterbebilder. Vorstellungen und Konzepte im Wandel*, Stuttgart 2023, pp. 87–107; Morse, Tal: »Digital Necromancy: Users' Perceptions of Digital Afterlife and Posthumous Communication Technologies«, *Information, Communication and Society* 27 (2023), No. 2, pp. 240–256; Recuber, Timothy: *The Digital Departed. How we Face Death, Commemorate Life, and Chase Virtual Immortality*, New York 2023; Meitzler, Matthias/Heesen, Jessica/Hennig, Martin/Ammicht Quinn, Regina: »Digital Afterlife and the Future of Collective Memory«, in: Sarah Gensburger/Frédéric Clavert (eds.), *Is Artificial Intelligence the Future of Collective Memory?*, Leiden 2024 (forthcoming).

what the shop owner attempted here. Today, the punch line would probably have to be different, at least when it is presented to people who are in the thanatological sector and who know that there is not simply dying and being dead, but also something that Werner Schneider calls »doing dying«²⁶.

As can be seen, my examples mix fictional and not-so-outlandish episodes to demonstrate that the borderline states that I am concerned with can be found on many cultural levels. Many of these intermediate states have their origins in the fact that the prevailing definitions in the judicial or medical field cannot actually be as objective as they often claim to be. As mere attributions, they do not define existing factual conditions. Rather, they describe the consensus of the (mostly) academic, (mostly) Western world, through which uncertain situations are given a supposedly unambiguous definition or solution.

After a long period of differentiation, the Harvard criterion of brain death (defined in 1968) seems to have established a largely reliable instrument to distinguish between the states of living and non-living.²⁷ However, this criterion is a kind of red herring for the largely unproblematic everyday life of physicians, since it is only valid as long as there are no serious counter-arguments. Upon closer inspection, this seemingly stable partition was invalid from the beginning, as a comparative cultural view could easily reveal. In non-Western cultures, the transitions between life and non-life are more fluid, less strongly bound to the body, and are therefore sometimes even reversible.²⁸ And even in the West, there has never been a ›balance‹ between the supposed antipoles of life and non-life

26 Schneider, Werner: »Risky Dying. How to Address End of Life Issues as Scientists in Reflexive Modernity?«, manuscript (used with permission of the author), s. l. 2015.

27 Truog, Robert D./Pope, Thaddeus Mason/Jones, David S.: »The 50-Year Legacy of the Harvard Report on Brain Death«, *Journal of the American Medical Association* 320 (2018), No. 4, pp. 335–336.

28 Probably the most famous example is an indigenous group in Indonesia, the Toraja, who live on the island of Sulawesi. The Toraja have the tradition (which survived their Christianization by Dutch missionaries) of unburying the dead bodies of their loved ones in certain periods of time in order to reintegrate them into their families for a few days. Although the soil's specific chemistry preserves the corpses to a certain degree, the signs of decay on these bodies cannot be overseen; and yet, there is no fear of contact on the side of the relatives (Hollan, Douglas: »To the Afterworld and Back: Mourning and Dreams of the Dead among the Toraja«, *Ethos* 23 (1995), No. 4, pp. 424–436). This ceremonial procedure has made Sulawesi a popular destination for tourists with a taste for the macabre.

that would have corresponded to an ›ideal-typical, unrelated purity. In other words, the very presentation and cultivation of these two existential core states has always been a tool to cover those situations that could not correspond to dualism.

Despite all of that, it must be noted that the understanding of physical ›final states‹ in general is still widely regarded as a well-grounded perspective. Yet at the same time, it is continuously changing. This transformation of knowledge is gradually leading to alternative insights into the merely provisional validity of a dead, or rather of a ›no-longer-alive‹ body and/or human being. This is at least true for circles of experts who are interested in corresponding shifts and breakdowns.

What presents itself as a problem to the layperson is ›everyday life‹ for the expert group: All insights are only temporarily valid and will be overtaken by later/deeper/better findings. It is remarkable in itself that the scales of »elementary forms« such as life and death, speaking with Emile Durkheim's classic book of 1912,²⁹ can be subject to this changeability—but they obviously are. What is decisive in this context is not only the process of change within science, which at first seems to be more evolutionary than revolutionary, but rather the more or less subsequent understandings of death in the general population.

The intrusion of uncertainty into the seemingly crystal-clear medical systematics causes uneasiness—more so, perhaps, than curiosity. And this uncertainty of physical border states obviously motivates many people in search of reliable alternatives guidelines to redraw the verges of life as well as of death on the basis of ideological concepts. Traditional ideas are thus being replaced by neo-hegemonies. As a result, increasing struggles over the right interpretation (in German: the *Deutungsmacht*) take place—struggles which are, of course, not new, for they have always been part of the discourse history of the liminal body.

Science and art

Without clarification on death, life cannot be understood either. This is, trivially, conditioned by the fact that the central »mode of existence«,

29 Durkheim, Emile: *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, New York 2001.

to allude to Bruno Latour,³⁰ begins through what we conceive as birth. We thereby (most of us, at least) become socially addressable beings.³¹ Therefore, the starting point not only of life, but also of this text, is the longevity of the name, a name such as Saint-Exupéry. The very attribution of this identity to a (mortal) body creates a fundamental independence of both variables: the body can disappear or be destroyed. The personal identity can be affected by this—but under certain circumstance, *it does not have to be*.

Often misunderstood as the end of life, death is actually the short-term transition that separates life from its actual counterpart, non-life. Death therefore only *seems* to end a life-long process and progress. In poetic fashion, death is often said to »close the cycle. However, this idea is solely plausible if not only all religious concepts of the afterlife, but also all ideas of social reference to the deceased were invalid. And this is impossible to claim empirically. Even the mere thought of the deceased and the associated mental regression to situations lived through together (a sort of *transcendence*, as Thomas Luckmann claims³²) already contradicts the idea of life as a simplistic cyclical model.

Moreover, the cited examples and the implied hints of uncertainty, of intermediate stages, of liminality and so on are anything but a »conclusion. Cyclical concepts become contentious due to the incompleteness of the mode of existence in question, which is by no means a disadvantage—quite the contrary. As is known from many case studies, irritations of knowledge are likely to become generators of *new* knowledge. And whatever new knowledge is generated in the process can be irritated in turn.

30 Latour, Bruno: *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence. An Anthropology of the Moderns*, Cambridge 2018.

31 It has become established as a cultural convention in many regions of the world that (para)social relationships are also developed towards foetuses—and therefore to a life that does not yet (legally) exist, but is socially anticipated (Völkle, Laura/Wettmann, Nico: »The Process of Pregnancy: Paradoxical Temporalities of Prenatal Entities«, *Human Studies* 44 (2021), No. 4, pp. 595–614). On the other hand, times and spaces can be identified in which certain population groups were actively denied the quality of »society« with the consequence of cultural acceptance for the killing of newborns or the infirm, for example. Consequently, the label of liminal existence was imposed on these groups as well, declaring them not only as socially dead, but also as immediate candidates for the active destruction of their life by others (Shalinsky, Audrey/Glascock, Anthony: »Killing Infants and the Aged in Nonindustrial Societies: Removing the Liminal«, *Social Science Journal* 25 (1988), No. 3, pp. 277–287).

32 Luckmann, Thomas: *The Invisible Religion*, New York 1967.

Since the early 1960s at the latest,³³ it has been clear that it is actually not the gradual build-up of knowledge in the sense of an evolution of knowledge that brings progress exclusively. Progress also comes irregularly, unpredictably and often with an open end, with the revolutionary leaps that science is capable of and to where science is being driven precisely by its engagement with intermediate states.

Cultural facets that shed light on the border demarcation problem described in this text can be found in many reports from many different regions of the world.³⁴ The confrontation with them does not always take place against the background of irritated knowledge. Instead of being discussed within scientific discourse, in the past, they were often addressed in an aestheticized way. To make up one's mind on whether the end is really the end or a new beginning, or whether there has been something at all that could have ended in the first place etc. is also of importance in religious circles (although some of these questions, while broadening the mental horizon, certainly border on blasphemy). Ideas concerning the *unfinishability* of life and/or of the *conquerability* of death—ideas that may initially have been regarded as threatening to dominant beliefs and then, later, were viewed differently in terms of their value, for example as >romantic³⁵—have undoubtedly changed their character once the natural sciences successfully began their triumphal march as the primary source of knowledge and explanation of the world. At the same time, however, there has been no long-term acceptance of a resounding positivism, nor are there any objective explanations for the phenomena described here that would be valid worldwide. It is therefore possible to devalue the sci-

33 Kuhn, Thomas: *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Chicago 1962.

34 See Geest, Sjaak van der: »Between Death and Funeral: Mortuaries and the Exploitation of Liminality in Kwahu, Ghana«, *Africa* 76 (2006), No. 4, pp. 485–501; Berger, Peter/Kroesen, Justin (eds.): *Ultimate Ambiguities. Investigating Death and Liminality*, New York/Oxford 2015; MacArtney, John I./Broom, Alex/Kirby, Emma/Good, Phillip/ Wootton, Julia: »The Liminal and the Parallax: Living and Dying at the End of Life«, *Qualitative Health Research* 27 (2017), No. 5, pp. 623–633; Zulato, Edoardo/Montali, Lorenzo/Bauer, Martin W.: »Understanding a Liminal Condition: Comparing Emerging Representations of the ‚Vegetative State‘«, *European Journal of Social Psychology* 51 (2021), No. 6, pp. 936–950; Tripathi, Khyati: »Exploring the ‚Liminal‘ and ‚Sacred‘: Associated with Death in Hinduism through the Hindu Brahminic Death Rituals«, *Open Theology* 8 (2022), No. 1, pp. 503–519, and many others.

35 Praz, Mario: *The Romantic Agony*, New York 1956.

entific perspective itself as a kind of religious conviction.³⁶ And inevitably, at least in some cases, a fundamental openness is required regarding the question of when death has arrived and when it has not (the same applies to life). While it is debatable whether these very special contexts are of interest for everyday routine, it is undeniable that death is thus—after all—itself a lively topic if observed closely enough.

As mentioned above, exciting examples of the re-emergence of liminal states can also and especially be found in art. They were painted several times by Edgar Allan Poe, the icon of gothic horror literature in the nineteenth century. When I stood in front of Poe's grave in Baltimore, it didn't look as if the stone monument was going to shift any time soon to make way for a resurrection of the famous man buried here. But that would be unnecessary; after all, Poe the author was never as dead and buried as some of his most prominent figures—and never as dead as his own body.

In the short story *The Premature Burial* (written exactly 100 years before Saint-Exupéry disappeared), a rich man fears nothing more than apparent death. Consequently, he has a pompous tomb built for himself, which has numerous technical devices through which he would be able to convince the outside world of his (factual, not just spiritual) continued life in the event of his apparent death. It comes as it must: of course, he »dies«. He suffers a suspended animation, awakens after his funeral, and one by one, all mechanisms that should save him from his prison fail. Finally, it turns out that everything is a misunderstanding, a delusion caused by mental confusion.³⁷ It was this mental confusion that, within the story, enabled the experience of a strange state between obvious vitality and the impossibility to prove it. Poe emphasizes that his stories, though fictional, are animated by his need to always remain »within the limits of

36 Cortés, Manuel E./Río, Juan Pablo del/Vigil, Pilar: »The Harmonious Relationship Between Faith and Science from the Perspective of Some Great Saints«, *Linacre Quarterly* 82 (2015), No. 1, pp. 3–7.

37 Whereas Roger Corman's film version from 1962, the year Kuhn's famous book came out, is set in the British Victorian era and rather assumes a mean staging by the unfaithful wife. The following slogan was emblazoned on the advertising poster, intertwining the audience with the fate of the protagonist (cf. Alexander, Chris: *Corman/Poe*, London 2023, p. 140): »It's going to happen! You are there in sudden darkness when the heart beat starts... Will *you* be the first to crack?«

the accountable«, i.e. »of the real«,³⁸ in this case in order to say something about real life by talking about false death.

Read in the light of liminality, the plot of *The Premature Burial* is about the fear that there could be an ›unfinished situation‹. It is all about a condition that one seemingly could encounter as experience, while no one can grasp or explain or define beforehand what this means for the spectrum of the traditional life/death-dualism. One could argue that the fear of death in Poe is a fear of dying *the wrong way*. In this respect, his story in a sense is ›prolife‹ without simultaneously being ›contra death‹; for there is, it is implied, a good death, which is death without intermediate states. The problem is not dying, but being caught between two stools, so to speak.

In other stories by Poe, however, it is conveyed that death itself is a problem and that one can overcome the crucial dualism through willpower. This is the essence of his own favorite tale, *Ligeia* of 1838.³⁹ Here, Poe quotes an unknown poem (most likely authored by himself) as a motto, which states: »And the will therein lieth, which dieth not. [...] Man doth not yield him to the angels, nor unto death utterly, save only through the weakness of his feeble will.«⁴⁰ *Ligeia* is about a man living on the river Rhine who loses his lover Ligeia due to illness. She was a woman of great beauty, wisdom and passion, the reader learns, and obviously an avid reader of the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer. Following this tragic loss, the man re-marries in England, but his second wife, Lady Rowena, becomes sick and threatens to die as well. This, however, saddens the husband little as he still mourns for Ligeia. Rowena is as good as dead, then suddenly recovers, falls back in a state of deadness, then seems to recover yet again. Finally, she emerges from her deathbed, fully alive, but with her physique changed. She has somehow transformed into Ligeia, who has come back to life through her sheer will. This does not fill the man with joy, but with deep shock.

38 Poe, Edgar Allan: »Philosophy of Composition«, in: id., *Literary Criticism*, Lincoln 1965, pp. 20–32, 31.

39 *Ligeia* was also made into a movie by Corman. It was created in 1964, with Corman's usual artistic liberties compared to the original, under the title *The Tomb of Ligeia*. Poe explores the connection between deathbed, intimate longing and transgression, which is central to *Ligeia*, also lyrically, for example in his poem »Annabel Lee«, which incidentally was published two days after his death, becoming a sort-of literary requiem to its author.

40 Poe, Edgar Allan: *The Complete Tales and Poems*, Toronto 1938, pp. 655-656.

In Poe's day, the prospect of states being ambiguous was worrisome. Even if death is conquered and the beloved is back, a sin has been committed against nature, decency, and order. And those who expressly intend to act this way act all the more frighteningly. In some respects, not much has changed since then—except that some of the made-up stories of yesteryear are the »medical exceptions« of today. And the closer you look at them, the less exceptional they seem. Even today, one can hope for the overcoming of death, ask for a delay, or may be frightened that not everything goes »according to plan. Thus, one can still be afraid for the fact that *unambiguity* does no longer exist—which would, if it did, without doubt make everything much, much easier.

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