

VIRTUAL DEATH AND HUMAN SELF-UNDERSTANDING

Christian Illies

Otto-Friedrich-Universität Bamberg

christian.illies@uni-bamberg.de

Abstract: Modernity up to the late 20th century generally suppressed or denied death, it is often observed; death has become a modern taboo. However, the paper argues that we are moving beyond this denial of death. Death in some particular guises (“Virtual Death”) has found its way back into public discourse and popular culture. This paper explores possible reasons; both the previous denial as much as the current return in a different form can be explained on the basis of death’s role in the formation of notions of the self. While pre-modern humans could accept their contingency and thus mortality, modern self-understanding as a maker is at odds with death as with any ineluctable limit set to its creative power. That explains also, why we can accept Virtual Death more easily; this “death” is man’s own creation and no longer a limit to human mastership of this world. At least it appears to be.

Key Words: suppression of death, taboo, Virtual Death, modern self-understanding, homo faber, constructivism.

We are what we are because of death. This is true for all of us as biological individuals. As Goethe remarks about nature: “Life is [Nature’s] most beautiful invention, and Death a deft move whereby the proliferation of life is assured”.¹ Natural selection, the mechanism of evolution, relies upon death: only those individuals whose features enable them to be more successful than their competitors in the struggle for existence are, by virtue of the *death* of those competitors, left to produce the next generation. But we also owe our self-conception as human beings to death. There is an intimate relationship between our awareness of death and the way we understand ourselves. Changing conceptions of death are related to changing self-conceptions.

The most recent developments of this delicate relationship are the subject of this paper. I will start with some general observations as to why death plays such an important role in the formation of notions of the self (1). Then, I shall examine the popular denial, or ‘suppression’, of death in modernity up to the late 20th century. This development can be seen as reflecting changes in the notion of the self during the last few centuries (2). I shall argue, however, that in the 21st century, we are moving beyond this denial of death. Death in some

¹ “Leben ist ihre schönste Erfindung und der Tod ist ihr Kunstgriff, viel Leben zu haben”. J. W. von Goethe, “Die Natur: Fragment”, in *Werke. Hamburger Ausgabe*, Vol. 13, München 1982, p. 46. Goethe’s authorship of this text is, however, questionable.

particular guises (I will call it ‘Virtual Death’) has found its way back into public discourse and popular culture, and its new presence is related to a major shift in our self-understanding (3).

1. *Our debts to death*

1.1. *Biological evolution and death*

Death is an irreducible feature of the history of evolution as we understand it.

Firstly, natural selection is dependent upon death. Individuals less suited to their environments must die without progeny, or with fewer progeny than better suited individuals, so that species evolve over time. By this mechanism, the deaths of countless numbers of less successful organisms have paved the way for the evolution of the species we see today, including *Homo sapiens*.

Secondly, amongst the specific selective pressures which have led to the evolution of complex animals (including humans) are some which are immediately connected to the mortality of higher organisms. The philosopher of science, Hans Jonas, argues that there exists a relation between the role death plays for an organism and that organism’s dependence on or independence from its environment. Following L. von Bertalanffy’s *General System Theory*,² Jonas conceives of organisms as homeostatic open systems, and points out that their primary characteristic is the dynamic interaction between this self-sustaining system and its environment.³ The organism depends both on this interaction and also on its separation from the environment. The separation occurs in different degrees. Animals are, because of the manner in which they gather their food, much more detached from their environment than are plants. They can, for example, walk around, can perceive things which are far away etc. – in brief, they have more ‘freedom’ than plants. But that is also, Jonas argues, why we find with heterotrophic organisms a more delicate balance between the homeostatic open system and its environment. Animals are threatened by death in a more prominent and permanent way than plants. Their way of life, as contrasted with that of plants, has led to new and entirely different needs - an increasingly complex physiological organisation, and more elaborate mechanisms for escaping death have evolved.⁴

Thirdly, the *awareness* of mortality has played a role in evolution, over and above the role played by the fact of death itself. Organisms exposed to a hostile world develop a fear-response to life-threatening situations of all kinds (such

² L. von Bertalanffy, *General System Theory*, New York, 1968.

³ Hans Jonas, “Is God a Mathematician?”, *Measure* 2 (1951).

⁴ Even greater evolutionary pressure arises with the presence of carnivorous animals, since to hunt as well as to escape from being hunted demands even more sophisticated ways of interacting with the world.

as encounters with snakes) which partly guides their actions. *Ceteris paribus*, to be more afraid of threats means to be more realistic about them – hence this attitude has strong survival value.⁵ This fear of death has reached its fullest expression in humans: if some animal species like chimpanzees may have some kind of awareness of death only we are *consciously* aware of our mortality. And this awareness has become the basis for a reflection on and more intimate connection between *who we are* and our mortality.

1.2 *Death and human self-understanding*

There is strong evidence that a connection exists (and always has existed) between human self-understanding and the awareness and understanding of death. Since the dawn of humanity, the encounter with death seems to have played a crucial role in the process of cultural development and thus of human self-formation. Among even the earliest relics of hominids, we find, next to shaped stones and fire pits, traces of ceremonial burials.⁶ Many of the greatest products of human ingenuity centre around death: the Late Stone Age tombs as much as the great pyramids of Egypt. We find death at the heart of most religious cults, and the earliest texts, such as the *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, the book of *Genesis*, the *Bhagavadgita*, or Homer's *Odyssey*, discuss human mortality at great length. Indeed, it would be difficult to find any important cultural expression of human self-reflection which does *not* focus on this theme in one way or another. The documents of the past tell us a lot: hopes for a life to come are the obvious message of the pyramids, yet many fears went with this - fear, for example, of demons or gods of the underworld. In many ways, death was present and visible to these societies, but I wish to concentrate on one particular aspect: In what way has the awareness of death had an impact on human self-understanding? I will argue that, from the earliest documents to our own time, we can detect four ways in which the understanding of the self has been shaped, or at least influenced, by the awareness of death.

There is, first, the notion that the subject is an individual, an 'I', and that this is the most determining factor in the subject's entire life; secondly, that the self is dependent and frail; thirdly, that the subject lives and acts in (non-reversible) time; and fourthly, that the self is valuable. Let us look at each of these in turn.

⁵ This is true only, of course, within limits: if such fear is overwhelming, it may paralyze the animal to such an extent that its normal functions, such as food-gathering, are impaired.

⁶ Neanderthal Man, for example, placed food and various flowers in the graves of the deceased, as is evidenced by the pollen to be found there (Friedemann Schenk, *Die Frühzeit des Menschen*, München: Beck, 1998, S. 113; see also Ivar Lissner, *So lebten die Völker der Urzeit*, Freiburg/Olten: Walter, 1958, p. 167. *Pace* E. Rutte, *Bayerns Neandertaler*, München: Ehrenwirth 1992, p. 37).

- (i) The awareness of mortality has often been described as that which puts people in an imaginative stance of extreme self-awareness, wherein they can look at themselves as if from a distance. The experience of a dead person evokes the imagination of one's own death. It makes me look at myself as if 'I' were outside myself, and thus it creates a self-awareness and moves me to locate 'myself' in the wider framework of the world as a whole. Gilgamesh, for example, the great hero of the epic which bears his name, expresses this 'I'-awareness when he is shaken by the death of his friend Enkidu. He cries out:

How, O how could I stay silent, how, O how could I keep quiet?
My friend whom I love has turned to clay:
Enkidu my friend whom I love has turned to clay.
Am I not like him? Must I lie down too,
Never to rise, ever again?⁷

Witnessing Enkidu's death leads Gilgamesh to recognise that his friend, as much as he himself, is a unique 'I' who is mortal. Martin Luther expresses this same experience some 3500 years later: "We are all mortal and no one can die for anyone else".⁸ However, by distancing himself as an observer from himself as being observed (by himself), Gilgamesh can also recognise that this mortal 'I' is something that he has possession of just as his friend did: "Am I not like him?".⁹ Thus the experience of death refers him powerfully to himself, to his unique 'I', and, at the same time, shows the deep likeness between him and another human being.

- (ii) Let us look at a further important perception fostered by the awareness of death, namely, the perception of ourselves as dependent and fragile. In the *Bhagavadgita* we read: "Death is a certainty for everyone who is born".¹⁰ Similarly, Gilgamesh has to be taught by an innkeeper: "When the Gods created Mankind/ They appointed death for Mankind".¹¹ Death shows us our

⁷ *Myths from Mesopotamia*, translated and introduced by S. Dalley, Oxford University Press 1991, p. 104.

⁸ "Acht Sermonen D. Martin Luthers, von ihm gepredigt zu Wittenberg in der Fastenzeit 9.-16. März 1522" in: *Ausgewählte Schriften*, vol. 1, Frankfurt, 1982, p. 271.

⁹ In this paper, I make no distinction between the notion of an 'I' and a self, since such a distinction is not critical to the issues I wish to raise. In other contexts, it seems useful to differentiate the 'I' (that which constitutes the subjective perspective or self-awareness in all thinking and experiencing: Kant's "synthetic unity of apperception") from the 'self' (that which is a possible object of self-observation as a being in time with certain features, experiences etc.). For this distinction see Vittorio Hösle, "Crisis of Identity", in *Objective Idealism, Ethics and Politics* (Notre Dame 1998, p. 83-100, especially p. 87). G.H. Mead has reminded us that there is an important third dimension – the 'Me', i.e. the way others see me, or I see myself *as seen* by others.

¹⁰ *Die Bhagavadgita* (S. Radhakrishnan ed., Wiesbaden: Löwit, p. 124). The sentence continues, "and to be born is certain for those who are dead" (*ibid.*), a statement in keeping with the underlying metaphysics of Buddhism.

¹¹ *Myths*, p.150.

limitations by being the one thing that lies outside our control –death comes like a thief, as we read in an Egyptian papyrus.¹² Indeed, it marks the end of our control over *anything*. Death teaches us the lesson of finitude and dependence.

- (iii) Death emphasises that we are beings with a unique relationship to *time*. We live not only in the present (like other animals), but remember a past, and are directed to a future – the future being the only area where our life, or what is left of it, is going to take place. And this path from present to future is irreversible. Death is the strongest expression of this fact. The gates of Paradise are closed, as *Genesis* tells us, once Adam and Eve have become mortal: they cannot return. And, to note a more modern position, in *Being and Time* Martin Heidegger argues that life is essentially directed towards death.¹³ This might also explain why the notion of being a responsible agent is often closely connected to the awareness of death: since time is irreversible, nothing that we have done can be undone. Søren Kierkegaard therefore calls death the “teacher of sincerity”.¹⁴ And Elie Wiesel writes in his short novel *Dawn*: “Death is a being without arms or legs or mouth or head; it is all eyes”,¹⁵ and, some pages later: “In their frozen world the dead have nothing to do but judge. They condemn not with words or gestures but with their very existence”.¹⁶
- (iv) The experience of death, most often in the form of the death of a person close to us,¹⁷ becomes the starting point of reflection about that person’s or our own value. The death of “my friend whom I love” reveals to me his significance and his irreplaceability. Sigmund Freud assumes that it was therefore next to the corpse of a loved one that not only the idea of an afterlife was born, “but also the first ethical commandments. The very first and most important rule of the awakening conscience reads: *Thou shalt not kill!*”¹⁸ In a similar spirit, Virginia Woolf in her autobiographical writings remarks on the death of her sister: “So I came to think of life as something of extreme reality. And this, of course, increased my feeling of my own

¹² From the papyrus Boulaq IV, in *Die Weisheitsbücher der Ägypter*, (H. Brunner ed., Zürich: Artemis 1991, p. 202).

¹³ *Sein und Zeit*, Tübingen: Niemeyer 1986, p. 242ff. (§ 48).

¹⁴ *Erbauliche Reden 1844/1845 (Gesammelte Werke vol.13/14)*, Gütersloh 1952, p. 178.

¹⁵ New York 1970, p. 35.

¹⁶ p. 92.

¹⁷ This is an important point, made for example by Heidegger in *Being and Time*, and further developed by G. Marcel. Marcel argues that consciousness of our own mortality derives from our experience of the death of our loved ones (*Gegenwart und Unsterblichkeit*, Frankfurt a. M. 1961, p. 287).

¹⁸ “Zeitgemäßes über Krieg und Tod” in *Studienausgabe Band IX*, Frankfurt: Fischer 1982, pp. 33-60, here p. 55.

importance”.¹⁹ ‘Importance’ is, however, an ambiguous term. Human mortality can also make us consider the extreme *un-importance* of the individual. We will soon be forgotten once we are dead, as the psalmist laments:

The days of Man are but as grass: for he flourisheth as a flower of the field.
For as soon as the wind goes over it, it is gone: and the place thereof shall know
it no more.²⁰

These four aspects of the self and its relation to death are, of course, stated here in very general terms. Is this ‘I’ of self-examination our real essence? Is our dependent, mortal nature a blessing or a burden? Do human beings have a value? The answers given to these questions depend on the wider religious or philosophical framework within which they are posed. But it seems to have been inevitable that these four issues be raised in some form or the other in the face of death – which entitles us to see them as profoundly integral to our human nature. Whether or not they are anthropological constants is hard to tell; yet it is noteworthy that these aspects of the self have certain counterparts in our biological structure as higher organisms. They raise our biological features to a higher level without leaving them entirely behind:

- (i) The notion of an individual self and ‘I’ mirrors the fact that each of us is a biologically *unique* entity.
- (ii) Our consciousness of being fragile and dependent creatures is reflected in the fact that we are homeostatic open systems in a delicate and threatened relationship to our environment.
- (iii) To know that we are beings in time seems to resonate with the internalisation of temporality in organisms, i.e., their ageing.
- (iv) It is only the idea of being valuable which does not have any direct counterpart in biological evolution; the natural world does not evaluate its products. “Never use the words higher or lower”, Charles Darwin rightly remarks on natural development.²¹ Only in a metaphorical way might we say that natural selection ‘evaluates’ organisms according to their fitness or that some organism is functionally valuable (useful) for another organism. But with regard to any proper evaluations, evolution is silent.

Still, the question remains to be asked as to what kind of relationship the awareness of death might have with our self-understanding. Surely, it is not a cause-and-effect relationship or a strict dependency of some ideas on death-awareness. Many have investigated the nature of the self without reference

¹⁹ “A Sketch of the Past”, in *Moments of Being. Unpublished Autobiographical Writings*, ed. by J. Schalkind, Sussex 1976, pp. 64-137, here p. 118.

²⁰ Psalm 103; 15-16.

²¹ An annotation of C. Darwin in his copy of Robert Chambers’ *Vestiges of Creation*.

to death. (Descartes, for example, shows that one can come to a strong conception of the self without relying on this awareness.) It seems rather to be a loose hermeneutic relationship. The death of one's mother or someone close to us, by being the extreme and uncircumventable end of her life, is not an every-day experience. It is extreme; and it therefore demands our response and major changes in our life – whatever role the deceased has played. Thus, death breaks the normal routine of life more profoundly than most other events. The bereaved have to locate themselves anew. This makes them look at their existence from an unusual perspective – and it also makes them see the other person's life from a certain distance. The contemplation of a dead person starkly reveals the contrast between what is lasting and what is passing: sitting near the deathbed and looking at the dead we understand what it means to be *alive*.

But the picture, as it stands, is incomplete. To be aware of death requires, of course, the presence of some prior notion of the self. If humans were entirely ignorant of their selves (or of others) before experiencing death, then someone *else's* death could not make anyone consider anything about *himself*. Thus, the awareness of death illuminates and strengthens the idea of the self (of my own self and of the selves of others) but cannot create it. It is rather a *mutual* light that the awareness of death and one's self-understanding shine on each other.

This last point allows us to turn to the suppression of death in modern culture. I shall argue that we can better understand the modern denial of death if we consider this development as a consequence of the modern conception of the self.

2. “*The Pornography of Death*” – the common denial of death and the reasons behind this denial

In his historical study *L'homme devant la mort*,²² P. P. Ariès gives a detailed account of the various attitudes toward death held throughout history. Early cultural self-expressions, such as *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, show that people were once quite frank about the issue. Death was openly addressed. Various rituals and public ways of dealing with death were established. But most of these attitudes to death have gone. Ariès shows that a major change began in the 16th century, and came to a peak in the second half of the 20th century. Death was increasingly regarded as a “wild” fact, different and alien to everything else we know. This has culminated in a world in which the thought of death is taboo, as Geoffrey Gorer argues in his seminal article *The Pornography of Death*.²³ Although our biological knowledge shows us that death is a normal part of our life as much as of any organism, death is no longer *regarded* as a normal

²² Paris 1978.

²³ *Encounter* 1955.

phenomenon. Death has become an embarrassment, something people try to hide away. As B. G. Glaser and A. L. Strauss put it in 1965, ultimately the only “acceptable style of facing death” is to pretend that one does not die.²⁴ The psychoanalyst couple Margarete and Alexander Mitscherlich wrote famously about the “Inability to Mourn” (1967) in Germany. Accordingly, the last historical part of Ariès’ work is entitled *Death Denied*. Still, some fear of death has always been and remains characteristic of humans.²⁵ It is not this fear which is new, but the powerful tendency in 20th century culture to suppress the thought of death. All of this is well known and does not need further elaboration. It is more interesting to examine how this change has been accompanied by a changing human self-understanding. I shall argue that this suppression of death was not a historical contingency and that there are structural reasons for this peculiarly modern response. My thesis is that the concept of the self which arose in the last few centuries cannot be harmonised with the ideas connected to awareness of death (which pre-date this concept), or at least much less successfully than can more ancient concepts of the self. I see this incompatibility at the root of the recent suppression of death as more significant than the decline of religion or diminishing belief in an afterlife.

One of the most striking features of the modern notion of the self is the understanding of Man as *Homo faber*, that is, the being who creates his own fate and his own world. There are many sources of this new view: one of them is the new metaphysics of the cosmos as a law-governed, determined realm of natural causes rather than a place of meaningful order or divine guidance. There is no longer Alfred Tennyson’s expectation to “see my Pilot face to Face/ when I have cross’t the bar” (*Crossing the Bar*, 1889). This ‘disenchantment’, to use Max Weber’s famous expression, has not only changed our spiritual life; it made Man see himself as the true master and pilot of this world.

First, this has brought a practical change. By understanding and working with the laws of nature, it has been possible to develop a far-reaching technology by which the realm of nature can be transformed. There arose a world of man-made artefacts, replacing what had hitherto been supplied by the natural world: built structures replacing caves, crafted tools replacing rocks and other found objects, polymers replacing natural fibres.

But, secondly, there has also been a change in philosophical stance. Our profound understanding of the mechanisms underlying the world has been accompanied by a change in the conception of truth. The notion of truth as something independent of, but sought by, rational agents, has eventually been

²⁴ *Awareness of Dying*, Chicago 1965.

²⁵ S. Freud argues that fear of death results from the internalized fear of punishment at the age of four or five (cf. “Hemmung, Symptom und Angst (1926)”, in *Studienausgabe Band VI*, Frankfurt: Fischer 1982, p. 227 - 308), it is therefore derived (cf. Freud, *Zeitgemäßes*, fn. 16, p. 57). For Freud it seems therefore inevitably linked to humans, stone-age people know it as well as we (ibid.).

replaced by a quite different one: statements about cause and effect are only considered to be *true* if we can *replicate* the phenomenon they refer to, that is, if we can bring the effect about in an experiment. The so-called Verification and Falsification Principles (of Logical Positivism) shift emphasis to us as human agents, since our *actions* determine whether or not we can call some hypothesis “true”.²⁶ Increasingly this has led to the conviction that all true knowledge is a kind of technical knowledge and, as Francis Bacon argues, a form of power, while all other apparent knowledge (like: I know that my mother loved me) is merely opinion. Bacon claims that the point of knowledge is not to understand the world as it is but to change it for the better: “that knowledge may not be, as a courtesan, for pleasure and vanity only, or as a bond-woman, to acquire and gain for her master’s use; but as a spouse, for generation, fruit, and comfort”.²⁷ We are masters of nature and of truth - this seems to be the most striking feature of the understanding of the self which has arisen in the last few centuries. And it is a feature which is very much at odds with some of the ideas suggested by our awareness of death. After all, death marks the ultimate limit of our new mastership. Our creative power cannot, at least ultimately, control death. It marks a limit and disturbs the self-understanding of someone who himself sets and shifts limits. To overcome death has therefore been seen as *the* challenge to modern Man. We have only to think of Mary Shelly’s *Frankenstein*. It is very telling that she calls the ambitious scientist in the story the ‘New Prometheus’ - but it is also revealing that his ultimate failure is narrated in a horror story. The modern self finds it difficult to with a troublesome and absolute death which questions his self-image so critically. Albert Camus, although he focuses on Man’s capacity to set himself goals rather than to manipulate the world, sums up the response of modernity when he calls death the “absurdity” of life, because it is “contrary” to “man’s will”.²⁸

There are further aspects of the modern self which clash with the awareness of death. Let us look, for example, at the increasing compartmentalisation of the different aspects of our life. It is often reported that the diverse roles we play, the individual: work and private life, morality and love and sex, all seem to have become distinct and disconnected aspects of our lives. Kierkegaard was one of the first to describe this non-unified understanding of one’s “self” ingeniously (and rather prophetically) in what he called the “aesthetic way of life”. We find it pushed to the extreme in the Derrida-esque deconstruction of the self which accounts for the subject as a multidimensional entity without a centre or

²⁶ See Karl Löwith, “Vicos Grundsatz: verum et factum convertuntur. Seine theologische Prämisse und deren säkulare Konsequenzen”, in *Sämtliche Schriften Band 9*, Stuttgart 1986, S. 195-227.

²⁷ *The Advancement of Learning*, London: J.M. Dent & Sons 1973, p. 35.

²⁸ *The Myth of Sisyphus*, London: Hamilton 1955, p. 54.

hierarchical order,²⁹ or, where Derek Parfit writes that we do not have a single self, but “a series of successive selves”.³⁰ I do not wish to discuss the massive internal problems of any such radically deconstructed notion of the self. For our purpose it is enough to see that modernity nurtures a fragmented self-image – and to realise that this, again, is at odds with the story which death seems to tell. To be aware of death and thus to anticipate our own mortality causes us to look objectively, as it were from a distance, at our entire life. From this perspective, one’s life presents itself as a whole within a given period of time; the mortal self is the unifying element embracing all “selves” or aspects of our life. What they have in common is that all of them end at our death – and thus these diverse aspects of the self are unified after all.

There is also something about the idea of a value to human life, or to the individual human being, which is alien to the modern notion of the self; and, moreover, alien to the entire picture of the world’s deeper architecture as painted by modernity. The dominant modern picture is one which contains nothing objectively good or bad: no norms or obligations independent of subjective wishes, desires, or traditions. The physical sciences gave rise to this view: they are themselves neutral with regard to morality, and it came to appear that all secure knowledge was knowledge of scientific fact. Moral norms were considered at best a matter of emotion or intuition, and thinkers such as Friedrich Nietzsche and Sigmund Freud have taught us that we should therefore not think too highly of them. Our understanding of what is good is regarded as a mere expression of individual self-interest, and neither the result of rational reflection nor founded on objective criteria. Again, I do not wish to discuss whether this is the last word in moral philosophy (or even consistent); all that is important for the moment is that this philosophical stance is the dominant one adopted by modernity. This stance leaves no possibility of the integration of any strict death-prohibition (the “You shall not kill!” suggested by the awareness of death). It is simply impossible to make any sense of an objective moral demand (at least of a demand outside our will or control) once we have accepted moral subjectivism. In short, it seems that the awareness of death was so at odds with several aspects of the modern interpretation of the self and its world, that one of the two had to yield.

And for a long time, it has been death which has been kind enough to do so and retreat.

²⁹ See for example E.E. Sampson, “The deconstruction of the self”, in J. Shoter and K.J. Gergen (eds.), *Texts of Identity*, London 1989, 1-19, here p. 13.

³⁰ “Lewis, Perry, and what matters”, in A. Oksenberg Rorty (ed.), *The Identities of Persons*, Berkeley 1976, p. 91-107, here p. 106.

3. *The new omnipresence of 'Virtual Death'*

When Philipp Ariès' *Death Denied* was published in 1977, denial seemed to be the final development of modernity. Death had been "evacuated efficiently and completely"³¹ – or at least it had been rendered invisible.

However, this is no longer the case. There is a new presence of death in an increasingly important part of our culture. I refer to the death we encounter on television, in the cinema, in magazines, in contemporary novels, and, overwhelmingly in the World Wide Web and in computer games. We find precisely the opposite of the suppression or denial of death. Consider films such as *Natural Born Killers* (Oliver Stone, 1994), *Pulp Fiction* (Quentin Tarantino, 1994), or *Terminator I-III* (James Cameron, 1984, 1991, Jonathan Mostow 2003) where corpses accumulate at an alarming rate, or of the novel and film *American Psycho* by Bret Easton Ellis. We can think about *The Hunger Games* (Gary Ross 2012), or *1917* (Sam Mendes 2019). Someone took the trouble to count the deaths in the *Game of Thrones* (Production: David Benioff, D.B. Weiss 2011-2019): There are 150,966 up to 2019.

Statistics in Germany show that the average fourteen-year-old child has seen some fifteen thousand deaths on film. This 1996 figure³² refers only to German youngsters, but the statistics are similar for children in the United States and in other countries where television has widespread popularity. Note that these figures were even before the deluge of pictures from the internet had overrun every children's room. The presence of digital death has increased dramatically. This does not, of course, only include the "fake" deaths of actors or virtual people, but also of real people, in news programmes and in documentary film. It is a general trend in all areas: The world of popular music includes the phenomenon 'Gothic Rock', where grinning skulls, the colour black, and other imagery of death abounds. Recent years have seen an overwhelming number of computer and video games where the goal of the player is simply to kill as many enemies as he can lest he himself be killed. The new generation of multi-player role-playing games, like *Shadowbane* and *The Sims*, includes more and more 'realistic' and public opportunities for 'killing' other people. Thereby the distance between the game and reality, between the observer and the observed, becomes smaller and smaller – at least visually. A new generation of computer games allows one to enter them *as oneself*, in one's own image. Three digital cameras take a picture, transform these images into a 3-D file, and one can then upload one's own likeness into any of these new game-worlds. Shooter games like the *Battlefield* series were played by more than 50 million players worldwide (2012), the *League of Legends* (2009) were played by 100 million players every month.

³¹ P. Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death*, New York 1982, p. 596.

³² See "Elektronischer Erzieher", *Focus* 14.10.1996.

Yet, one might rightly question whether this strong presence of death can be compared to *real* death, to the end of the life of a biological organism. Is it not, after all, a quite different phenomenon which we experience in these virtual worlds? To a certain extent, it is. And it is worth looking at the difference more closely at the unique characteristics of 'Virtual Death', as we might call it.

- (i) Virtual Death does not involve the death of real people. This 'death' is instead part of a Hollywood world - it is *virtual* and thus *distant*. These are actors pretending to die - or merely animated figures. The player kills artificial computer-entities, and even the participant of computer games herself will often die this virtual death when she loses the game - while continuing to live as a biological being. It might be that in order to compensate for this loss of reality, Virtual Death is often much more drastic, brutal, and loud than any death people might actually experience: think, for example, of the film *The Silence of the Lambs* (Jonathan Demme, 1991). The fact that we are also confronted with the sight of people who are really dead in the news, or that we read currently about coronavirus fatalities every day in the newspapers, does not change this impression. Through closeness to the ever-present virtual death in film or other media, the difference vanishes for the audience - or is even consciously made invisible by many films themselves, as in *Schindler's List* (Steven Spielberg, 1993).
- (ii) Virtual Death is *impersonal* since there is mostly no real person close to me who dies, only actors playing their roles. And even when we read about real persons or see them on pictures, we are hardly ever acquainted with them - they remain abstract figures or images on the screen.
- (iii) Virtual Death is, at least to a certain degree, *timeless*. It is not an event which ends the temporal continuity a life, and obliterates that life. It can also be repeated; we can watch the same film endlessly and restart the same computer-game again and again.

It is obvious, that we are no longer a culture which straightforwardly renders death taboo. Quite the opposite, in the form of Virtual Death, is has become a very visible element of our culture, and a rather prominent one. It seems that most experiences are currently gathered online, a development that has been accelerated by the recent Covid-lockdowns. The new media have become the most important and dominant arenas of present cultural self-expression. If we are interested in the *changing* rather than in the *constant* manifestations of culture, it is here that we must look.

After this exercise in the phenomenology of modernity, we should turn our attention to the analysis of the effects of such phenomena. Let us begin with the question of our understanding of the self. If, as I have argued above, the suppression of death followed the transformation of the modern notion of the self, then we should ask why death, in the guise of Virtual Death, has made such

a revival. In what follows I will argue that this revival should not surprise us: Virtual Death is exactly the kind of death that the modern self can accept without difficulty. This needs some explanation. Most importantly, Virtual Death fits our self-image as *Homo faber*. Because it is a virtual, man-made phenomenon and is connected with the virtual, man-made life of beings in these new media, and of us living and interacting, mostly in them, Virtual Death remains within our creative power. Because Virtual Death, unlike real death (which reveals our dependency), is dependent on us. We construct it. Of course, people have always been able to kill each other, and thus been ‘masters’ of death from the earliest times - but those who kill can bring about only what would have happened anyway (though from different causes). Things are different with Virtual Death: we create the antecedent virtual life, without which there could not be this death – the whole virtual history, its beginning and its end, is in our power. In that sense we truly create (virtual) death - even if, paradoxically, we do so by creating (virtual) life. This is not only true of film-makers, but through interaction with computer games it is also increasingly the experience of the ordinary person. We start the game, bring the computer entities to life, and interact with them in ways that are similar to the electronic ones that we use increasingly to interact with real people. In this sense, each of us ‘creates’ these new forms of life and death. They depend on us and thus do not remind us that we are dependent creatures. Furthermore, Virtual Death is sufficiently impersonal not to place us imaginatively at a distance from ourselves. The modern experience of death thus becomes disconnected from any life or self that we know or care about. And since it is mostly not the death of a person close to us, it does not evoke seeing our own lives as an integral whole as we do when we look at the pale skin of a corpse on the deathbed. Virtual Death is disenchanting; it is simply a digital event like any other, in an artificial world that we have created. The same holds true of our relationship to time and of our self-understanding as responsible agents, especially in the somehow timeless world of the internet. We can create (and ‘consume’) Virtual Death at any time, and it does not which annihilate real life. Thus, we have made it possible to deprive death of one of its most striking features, it is no longer a point of no return. We can press “new game”. The modern self then, in face of Virtual Death, can happily ask, “Where is thy sting?”. Accordingly, there is no strong notion of human responsibility attached to Virtual Death, no objective imperative “Thou shalt not (virtually) kill”. In a virtual world, single events or actions do not matter; they are never absolutely decisive. And if nothing really matters, respect for other people becomes shallow.

That might explain why Virtual is no longer seen as taboo. By being the kind of death that we can control, it is exactly the kind of death for which the modern self has eagerly been waiting. Virtual Death *is* the present form the

suppression of death takes. The last stumbling block, this odd, anachronistic obstacle, has been removed from the path to being the masters of this world.

One might object that this is making too much of Virtual Death; that it is not really capable of replacing non-virtual death in this way. People still experience pain, people die with agonising suffering and we mourn the loss of the beloved. Death remains with us, and events like the current pandemic powerfully remind us of it. Virtual Death is, however, more than a mere parphenomenon: it is directly connected to the old question of how we deal with *real* death. Modern technology and in particular the virtual world are the paradigms of self-understanding and have a strong influence on our most fundamental beliefs. After all, there is a strong tendency to use the images and categories of the new media to structure our own day-to-day experiences. The communication theorist Neil Postman, amongst others, has analysed this process quite deftly.³³ But as early as the end of the 19th century, Oscar Wilde had seen life of imitating art and the Austrian writer Joseph Roth gave a poignant narrative analysis of these dangerous influences of mass media on the soul (*Der Antichrist*, 1934).

The experience of the virtual world and the real world are in an intensive exchange. It is, for example, a well-known sociological fact that the world of Hollywood has shaped our expectations of romantic love. Similarly, Virtual Death might shape the way people experience non-virtual death. (The Colorado Columbine High School killers Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, who practised for their mass-murdering with the computer game *Doom 2: Hell on Earth* are surely extreme cases,³⁴ but a diminished understanding of the consequences of real killing might also be found in the new indifference and casualness which we all exhibit toward death.

Of course, we must approach any such attitudes with extreme caution. Certainly, from the moral point of view - at least from a more traditional one, based upon the idea of human dignity - there is great danger in this new casualness. The way modern Man perceives death will probably influence the way he acts. But we should not forget that Virtual Death is a consequence of the new understanding of the self; an understanding which is at the very heart of modernity, as I have argued above. Hence, even if we are critical of that understanding, there are two good arguments against any attempt to promote a return to the pre-modern notion of the self.

- (i) *Theoretical*. Although its concomitant urge to suppress death as a reality of life, or to create Virtual Death, reveals that the modern notion is (literally) unrealistic - suppression is a means of escape from reality, as Freud

³³ See for example his *Technolpoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (New York: Knopf, 1991).

³⁴ The event happened on April 20th 1999. See <http://www.disastercenter.com/killers.html>.

reminds us – this is not a good argument to disqualify it *tout court*. It is a response to the experience of being able to build a technological world with its own logic, that cannot be ignored. It is questionable whether we can simply replace the image of man as *Homo faber* by a pre-modern image. Moreover, it appears self-contradictory: To replace the modern image of Man as the absolute creator by any other image seems to presuppose exactly the absolute power of a maker (here: of images) that the pre-modern understanding did not accept.

- (ii) *Practical*. The modern conception of the self has achieved much. By concentrating, for example, on our power as *Homo faber*, we have brought about a highly developed science and strong economy which together might be capable of feeding our entire human population. By seeing the world, including, of course, the social world, as something we *make* rather than something *given*, we have learned that nothing is simply to be taken for granted just because it is presented to us by tradition. Only then, can we hope to criticise and improve the conditions of life and the efficiency or justice of institutions. In brief, by seeing himself as responsible for his own fate, modern Man has developed powerful tools for improving the world he lives in. Certainly, he has not always been successful in applying them, as the current ecological crisis, for example, reveals. But we will not be able to solve this, or any, global crisis without continuing to use all our creative power as *Homo faber*.

However, we must bear in mind that the *possible* positive effects of our modern understanding of the self will only be realised if we retain a strong and action-guiding idea of ourselves as mortal organisms and, at the same time, acknowledge the value of human life. After all, knowledge, as much as power, are in themselves morally neutral but can easily be abused if they are not guided by respect for humankind and all individuals. This might show us the way in which to proceed. Therefore, an ideal self-understanding must synthesize the traditional insight that humans have a dignity, i.e. that there is something intrinsically valuable in Man (a value he cannot create but simply has to acknowledge) with the new insight that we do have enormous creative power. The achievements in the world have been possible because the modern self-conception encourages humans to be the makers and masters of their fate. The achievement of such a synthesis falls to philosophy, theology, art, and other human disciplines of our 21st century.