

MORTALITY

DEATH AND THE IMAGINATION



PRESENT-TENSE

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CLIVE PARKINSON

In the face of our own mortality, what relevance do the contemporary arts have: moreover, what might artists and art tell us about our own attitudes to life and death in a society where we are told wellbeing is dependent on happiness and that like any other commodity, health can be purchased. Through an exploration of artists encountering their own mortality and by unpicking secular notions of the numinous, this essay will set the scene for a new dialogue in arts and health, one that attempts to understand how art might inform our attitudes to mortality.

In an interview with Melvyn Bragg in 1994, the terminally ill playwright Dennis Potter (1935 -1994) described the process of creating new works, knowing that they would be his final pieces of writing and as such, his memento mori. Speaking with lucidity and eloquence, Potter set out the plots of two near-parallel works, *Karaoke* and *Cold Lazarus* (1996), whilst drinking champagne and morphine, and chain-smoking.

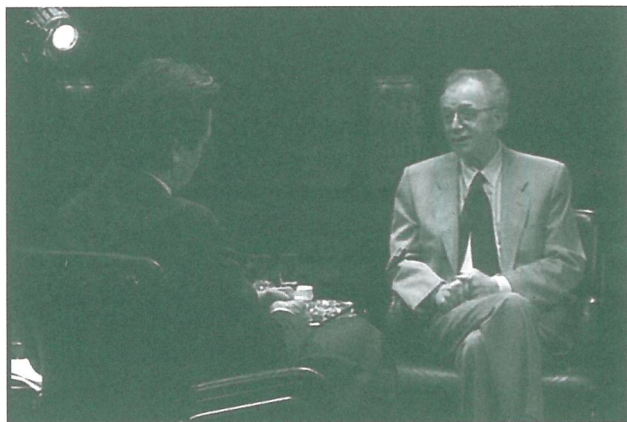
It was a bravura performance, a swan-song peppered with acerbic attacks on the media and delivered with compelling charm: an interview which Bragg inevitably anticipated with ‘...an overwhelming sense of apprehension.’¹ A key moment occurred as Potter attempted to explain his acute awareness of being in the present moment: something he suggested, that you can only really experience when you are facing your own mortality.

We're the one animal that knows that we're going to die, and yet we carry on paying our mortgages, doing our jobs, moving about, behaving as though there's eternity in a sense. And we forget or tend to forget that life can only be defined in the present tense... that nowness becomes so vivid to me that,

in a perverse sort of way, I'm almost serene. You know, I can celebrate life. Below my window ...the blossom is out in full now. It's a plum tree, it looks like apple blossom, but it's white, and looking at it, instead of saying, 'Oh, that's nice blossom', looking at it through the window when I'm writing, I see it is the whitest, frothiest, blossomest blossom that there ever could be...The fact is that if you see the present tense, boy, do you see it! And boy, can you celebrate it.²

Poignant and succinct, and with a 'luminous power,'³ Potter captured something that incessantly flits across the minds of the worried-well, but that can't really be understood until it confronts us: we are mortal. No clinical intervention can alter the fact, we have a finite life, but Potter offers us an opportunity to explore something intriguing and seemingly

DENNIS POTTER COURTESY OF ITV



implausible: in the face of impending death, some kind of wellbeing might be attainable and expanding on Potter's own example, culture and the arts may offer us a way of exploring this.

In the face of our own mortality, what relevance do the contemporary arts have? Any investigation that explores that liminal space between the arts, health and wellbeing runs the inevitable risk of being labeled instrumental and at worst, social engineering. The community of arts and health of which I am a part, is awash with faux psychology and miracle cures, typified by sensational headlines such as, 'Can Creativity Cure the Sick?'⁴ which the BBC ran to accompany a recent article extolling the impact of the arts on children with leukemia. This misleading evangelical stance typifies some of the polarities in this field of enquiry, where attempts to understand the potency of the arts, are reduced to a meaningless 21st century, pseudoscientific cultural phrenology.

BEYOND UTILITARIANISM

The 'lifestyle' and 'self-help' shelves of high-street bookshops, are groaning under the weight of positive psychology best-sellers like Rhonda Byrne's *The Power*,⁵ in which every conceivable problem can be solved: 'perfect health, incredible relationships, a career you love, a life filled with happiness, and the money you need to be, do, and have everything you want, all come from *The Power*' arguably the ultimate consumer dream.

The claims of culture and the arts to cure the sick are misleading and ultimately self-destructive. This is not to say that the arts have not got a place in medicine and public health: on the contrary, the

evidence base is growing and a new generation of clinicians and public health strategists understand the place of the humanities in the health and well-being agenda. Hospitals the world over, are benefiting from a 'make-over' and participation in the arts is contributing to active wellbeing. But here is the crux: our glass and steel hospitals, with all their considered public and participatory arts projects are still infected with systemic target culture that has allowed neglect and abuse to incubate alongside an ever-evolving spectrum of antibiotic-resistant bacteria.

As creators, as audiences and as participants, the arts offer ways of understanding our individual and collective experiences of the conditions of our existence and perhaps ways in which we might question our lives and make changes. In his apparent serenity approaching his own death and through the creation of his work, Dennis Potter offers us a useful way of understanding art beyond utilitarianism. *Karaoke* and *Cold Lazarus* are two, four-part plays filmed as a single production by the same team, but co-produced by BBC and Channel 4 at Potter's request. In *Karaoke*, dying, alcoholic screenwriter Daniel Feeld, in moments of aesthetic psychosis, begins to think people in real life are starting to imitate characters in the play he has written. *Cold Lazarus* is a direct sequel to *Karaoke*, but is set 350 years in a dystopian future, and explores memories contained in Feeld's cryogenically frozen head. Whilst a considerable output of Potter's television dramas were autobiographical, the circumstances of these final plays offer the playwright an opportunity to create more than nostalgic tableaux, and to assert what traces of himself, he would leave behind.

In interview, Potter rails variously against organised religion based on fear and control, and the pernicious power of the media with its commercial

strangle hold on the arts, but it is through his drama that we get near to experience something of Potter's own self realisation. As the abrasive and often unsympathetic character Daniel Feeld approaches his own death, he achieves some kind of resolution through a moment of Potter's own darkly self-referential bravura. Selecting option number 27 on a karaoke machine, in some dank London nightclub, Feeld croons the sublime 'Pennies from Heaven',



more than echoing Potter's most commercially successful drama of the same name, and preceding the darkest moment of *Karaoke*, a calculated murder.

This act of singing and our witnessing the reverie of this dying man, in full knowledge of the murder he will go on to commit, engenders a confused mix of anxious bliss and offers those of us that are deeply immersed within the moment, something similar to what theologian Rudolf Otto (1869 -1937) described as *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*.⁶ Otto describes this as an overwhelming sense of

excited fear, when we are exposed or drawn to some manifestation of the divine, here on earth. In this sense, it may be interesting to delve a little deeper into this idea of the terror, attraction and fascination that deep immersion in the arts potentially offers.

In his essay, 'On the Knocking at the Gates in *Macbeth*' (1823), Thomas De Quincey (1785 - 1859) introduces the idea of abandoning intellect and rational thought when confronted by absolute artistry. Exploring his own 'great perplexity' at the moment in *Macbeth* when there is a knocking on the gates of the castle, where moments earlier in the play, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth have murdered King Duncan.

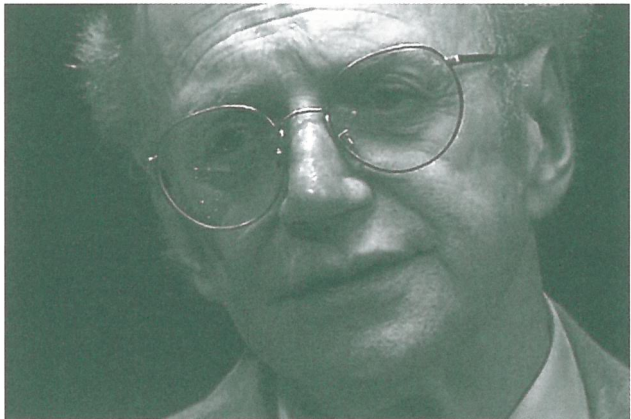
Those asking for entry to the castle go on to discover the murder scene and during these pregnant moments, De Quincey described the effect on him as a 'peculiar awfulness and a depth of solemnity; yet, however obstinately I endeavored with my understanding to comprehend this, for many years I never could see - why - it should produce such an effect.'⁷ He urges the reader,

...never to pay any attention to his understanding when it stands in opposition to any other faculty of his mind. The mere understanding, however useful and indispensable, is the meanest faculty in the human mind, and the most to be distrusted; and yet the great majority of people trust to nothing else; which may do for ordinary life, but not for philosophical purposes.⁸

Italian philosopher Benedetto Croce⁹ (1866 - 1952) echoes this, claiming that all we know, can be reduced to logical and imaginative knowledge with imaginative thought preceding all other thought, and this to Croce, places the arts above science or metaphysics.

De Quincey's focus in this essay builds on his own physical and emotional response to the play and of the artistry of such a murder - something beyond a simple sympathy for the victim and suspension of disbelief - and closer to the depth of artistic intensity, of 'some great storm of passion, - jealousy, ambition, vengeance, hatred - which will create a hell within him; and into this hell we are to look.'¹⁰

By conjoining contemporaneous murders in Victorian London, and imbuing them in poetic form, De Quincey undertook what could be considered an early psychoanalytical postmortem of his own *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* to art in both aesthetic and non-religious terms: terms which he would develop further in, *On Murder Considered as one of the Fine Arts* (1827)¹¹. This is not too far away from Potter's own murderous device and its impact on the viewer/witness, as Feild croons a potent love song so deeply rooted in the playwright's own life. It does not however, account for Potter's heightened sense of the here and now and his appreciation of



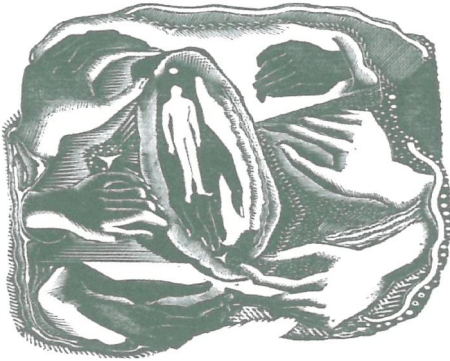
that frothy white plum-blossom. Perhaps mysterium tremendum et fascinans with its paralysing fear-associations, is not the best way of describing this near serenity. Considering Potter's cynicism towards organised religion, and his description of God as 'just a rumor,' and religion as 'the wound not the bandage,'¹² a subversion of religious language for a secular age, may provide a neat sequitur through Christopher Hitchens' (1949 - 2011) use of the numinous,¹³ liberating it from its religious roots, moving beyond fear and towards feelings of awe and wonder.

THE NUMINOUS

Hitchens advocated a separation of the numinous from the sole preserve of religion, believing that the overwhelming feelings we sometimes experience in the presence of a beautiful landscape, of a star-peppered sky, or being moved by human endeavours or artistic achievement, should be freely interpreted without the need of a divine or supernatural basis. This appreciation of something profound, elevated or reduced, to the intimate, is not too hard to imagine. When Aldous Huxley (1894 - 1963) experimented with the hallucinogenic mescaline, which he vividly described in *The Doors of Perception* (1954),¹⁴ he concluded that the transformative effect of the drug was helpful to free the intellectual mind from words and symbols and experience the intrinsic value of perception. This is perhaps reflected in club-culture's marriage of ecstasy (MDMA) and music that taps into patterns that build incrementally only to fall into a euphoria inducing 'drop', something similar to what has been experienced by participants and audiences of all musical genres.

Astronauts, so moved by the experience of see-

ing earth from space frequently describe their experience in terms of the numinous, typified by Dr. Edgar Mitchell, captain of Apollo 14 in 1966 who described what has come to be known as the 'overview effect.' Following his nine hour moon-walk and describing his experience of observing the entirety of the earth from space, Mitchell tried to make sense of his experience, commenting that, 'I could find nothing in the science literature about



it and nothing in the religious literature...you see things as you see them with your eyes, but you experience them, emotionally and viscerally as with ecstasy and total unity.¹⁵

Hitchens argued that the numinous experience offers the opposite of the supernatural and in fact should be the focus of humanity, enabling solidarity with each other and the natural world and a deeper relationship with the arts. Polarising the faith versus science argument in extremis and even when facing his own death, Hitchens acerbically attacked those who tried to hector him into a deathbed conversion. It could be argued that his extreme hostility

to religion and his own faith in science and reason, represent the blind removal of one theology with another, replacing a 'false god' with the true god of science. Does this avoid meaningfully tackling human consciousness and our intrinsic need for social interaction and the desire to learn, create and grow in relation to our own and others pasts and imagined futures? Developing this idea that the arts might offer something of a numinous experience, I would suggest that we have compelling evidence to show that appreciation of, and participation in the arts, contribute to the very factors that underpin well-being, but a key to this hovers somewhere in that fraught space between what can be evidenced, and what is subjective and unknowable.

If we allow ourselves to imagine an illiterate 15th century pilgrim's arrival at a great cathedral like Notre Dame, its 'divine' artistry and sheer scale would undoubtedly have induced *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, after all, this was a period in our evolution where religion had largely maintained control of the arts, through stained-glass, song, parable and painting. In this way, established doctrines could be pedalled to the masses for a heady prescription of control and solace. So too, in the shadow of the Black Death, we can imagine the deathbed of the fearful and pious in the face of their infinite destiny: heaven or hell.

The church conveniently provided an instructional Latin text¹⁶ on how to die well. What became the *Ars Moriendi*¹⁷ (The Art of Dying) offered advice on the protocols and procedures of a good Christian death. Whilst reiterating that death isn't to be feared, (as the dying person undoubtedly would be lying in a state of fear and probable discomfort) the *Ars Moriendi* would remind you how to avoid the five temptations in your final moments; of lack of faith, despair, impatience, spiritual pride and ava-

rice. The guidance offered advice to those around the deathbed including appropriate behaviour and prayer and of course, consoling you through Christ's example and redemptive powers.

Was this guide effective in offering solace to the dying and their families? Like the earlier writings loosely described as the Tibetan and Egyptian Books of the Dead, it is unclear from contemporaneous accounts what pacification was offered, but it can be imagined that the comfort that it offered, is similar to that which different faiths offer some people today. But what might a contemporary *Ars Moriendi* look like - designed to look past what the poet Philip Larkin described as, 'that vast moth-eaten brocade, created to pretend we never die,'¹⁸ particularly in the light of a secular and arguably science-obsessed society? First, let's think just a little, about our faith in science and how it is described through the language of sensation, often co-opting the arts to tell its story to an impact-hungry public, spoon-fed a diet of sound-bites and conflated possibilities. In the case of medicine this is often cast in the language of battle-lines and of a war on disease that is mediated by a complicit relationship between the pharmaceutical giants and impartial research.

THERAPEUTIC NIHILISM

The general practitioner and former president of the Royal College of General Practitioners, Iona Heath, highlights the rise of preventative health technologies, in which we are witnessing what she describes as 'a new arena of human greed, which responds to an enduring fear.'¹⁹ This fear of our own mortality and commodification of wellbeing is reflected

in the way that, 'more and more of life's inevitable processes and difficulties—birth, sexuality, ageing, unhappiness, tiredness, and loneliness —are being medicalised', Dr Richard Smith, one-time editor of the *British Medical Journal* argues that 'medicine alone cannot address these problems and that common values and attitudes towards the management of death, whilst well known about in scientific circles, have yet to be acted upon because of lack of imagination'.²⁰

Whilst the modern version of the Hippocratic Oath urges clinicians to avoid the 'twin traps of over treatment and therapeutic nihilism', it also stresses that 'there is art to medicine as well as science, and that warmth, sympathy, and understanding may outweigh the surgeon's knife or the chemist's drug',²¹ and urges a focus on the human being, not the illness. Smith suggests, that the arts might just be the vehicle to address these points.

It could be argued that blind religious belief is being replaced by a misplaced faith in technology and science and a new age of consumer miracles, with just the possibility that every new intervention, however traumatic, might add extra time and defer death. What then, are the contexts in which plural versions of a contemporary *Ars Moriendi* might emerge? Perhaps the 21st century evangelist and the 21st century atheist could meet somewhere in the middle and explore their humanity, an exquisite corpse conjoined by some equally deluded apotropaic ritual. The obsequious unblinking fanatic, hell-bent on life eternal through votive offerings or a life of sacrifice, videoed and uploaded to youtube. The ultra-Darwinist, stubbornly denying human fallibility and imagination in favour of physical evidence - of pounds shillings and pence, but succumbing with age, to some obsessive compulsive traits, born out of a fear of the unknowable.

Both sides of the coin appear to be a little lost and arguably, a little deluded in their unmovable ideologies, when the inevitability of death could be explored more in terms of humanity rather than near-psychotic posturing.

The physical impossibility of death in the mind of someone living is an interesting title for a mildly sensational piece of work, but as an idea, it offers something useful to play with in terms of a real conversation about how we think about our own mortality. Unlike our Victorian ancestors and fellow humans in war-torn areas of the world, a Western experience of death seems sanitized and divorced from day-to-day mortality, mediated by a mix of carefully edited news footage, or else digitally enhanced for a new generation of child soldiers addicted to shoot-em-up virtual reality.

Divorced as we are from an intimacy with death, I would argue that death's physical impossibility is not unimaginable for most people - what is perhaps unimaginable to those with religious beliefs and atheists alike, is the possibility of our own personality being gone - our soul or spirit: whatever we think of as the life spark that makes us who we are - eternally extinguished. Perhaps this is why, of all the deaths from disease possible to us, dementia seems so cruel, in its prematurely taking away something of our essence.

READY FOR ENORMITY

Professor of Philosophy at Harvard University, Robert Nozick (1938 - 2002) usefully questions our asymmetrical fear of death in relation to the eternal time prior to our birth and asks, 'Is the crucial fact about death not that it makes us finite or limits our future, but that it limits the possibilities that we can

realize?'²² Nozick explored the possibility that death deprives our lives of meaning because in some small ways, we all aspire to have made a difference of some sort, and by leaving 'traces,' we want to believe that our lives have had some impact beyond fleeting transience.

Artists provided us with traces of themselves and fractured biographies of others: Steve McQueen in *For Queen and Country* (2007)²³ confronts us with the faces of 'fallen' soldiers killed in Iraq between 2003 - 2008 on postage stamps. Sylvia Plath (1932 - 1963) through one of her final poems, *A Birthday Present*, offers a now post-mortem warning of her own self-destruction through the quiet declaration: "I am ready for enormity."²⁴

These memeto mori, however, are not the sole preserve of artists - the internet is awash with a heady mix of confessional cancer-blogs and martyrdom videos and highways the world over, are littered with faded roadside memorials to countless victims of road traffic accidents and street crime. For those people charged with helping us through our deaths - the nurses and doctors, those palliative and where needed, spiritual guides - offer seemingly impossible support in the face of the void. The task of encouraging conversations around dying is fraught with difficulties.

In the UK, the National Council for Palliative Care is attempting to engage people to take part in conversations about end of life, through its Dying Matters²⁵ campaign, which focuses on 'things you can do to live and die well,' which it lists as: making a will, recording your funeral wishes, planning for future care and support, registering as an organ donor and telling your loved ones your wishes. These are all realistic and important things and probably avoided by the vast majority of people, until we are facing a serious health crisis.

The place of creative therapies are well accepted

in this context and participatory artists and designers have a well-established role in the humanising of hospice environments. The creative delivery of celebratory funerals and the production of fiction, poetry and drama that explores bereavement and encourages communication is gathering wider credence.

But this essay is concerned with the numinous potential of the arts and how the contemporary arts in more oblique ways, might influence, provoke and inform us. Let us leave the caring and gentle instrumentalists to nurture and enable people in the here and now, whilst we unpick what this contemporary *Ars Moriendi* might look like and think, how might we have a good death? When Philip Larkin asks 'what are days for?' - and answers, 'to be happy in,' he's quick also, to remind us of the shadowy specters of the priest and the doctor.²⁶

A GOOD DEATH

The English artist Keith Vaughan (1912 - 1977) was a copious keeper of journals, which he kept from the 1930's until the day he died in 1977. Following a diagnosis of cancer, his journals portray inevitable anxiety, but also his sober ruminations on existence and a determination that he should be in control of his destiny: in particular, the manner in which he would die. In his entry on 22nd October 1975, Vaughan writes,

The possible, or indeed likely, proximity of death does not worry me. But I do want to make a graceful exit. Not in pain or prostration. And alone, alas, because I can see how good it would be to die holding someone's hand. But I do not know anyone to whom this

would be agreeable.²⁷

Almost a year later, Vaughan was ruminating further on a friend's attempt to reassure him about the afterlife. On the 13 August 1976, he comments, 'Immortality of the soul is without a trace of meaning to me. What is a 'soul'? An invention of people who dislike the idea of oblivion. Oblivion holds no terrors for me.' Describing his span of life as 'a tiny dream in an eternity of non-life,' Vaughan echoed the meditations of many before him, eloquently captured almost 2000 years earlier by the Roman playwright and poet, Seneca, (ca. 4 BC - 65 AD) who suggests, 'it is not a question of dying earlier or later, but of dying well or ill. And dying well means escape from the danger of living ill.'³⁰

The very thought of choosing the manner in which we die is as potent a dilemma as can be had, because its inference is that we have a legal choice and the methods in which to end our lives. Language around passive and assisted suicide and the polarity between the Commission on Assisted Dying on one hand, and organised religion on the other, seems to be dominated by the extremes of bigotry and self-righteousness with the dying individual with a desire for self-determination, forced to flounder in the media spotlight. The need to engage people in intelligent dialogue about death and dying is significant and difficult. At the moment, it appears restricted to genteel conversations about writing a will or organ donation and certainly not aimed at children. The disagreeable notion of death in the minds of the living, that Vaughan alluded to, seems indeed, to be the norm.

Any serious conversation about mortality could be explored as part of personal, social and health education within the school curriculum, but critically as a dialogue with young people, not a standardised

nanny-state formula for prescribed 'good' and 'bad' behaviours and their consequences. Perhaps an early journey into ethics and a contextualising of killing by the state; through war and through suicide might help, but whilst rates in children's and young people's suicide are rising,³¹ any attempt to meaningfully discuss suicide, can cause outrage. In France, attempts by one teacher recently, to facilitate conversation about suicide, resulted in his suspension, following knee-jerk public outrage. In an exercise designed for 13 - 14 year olds, the following prompt was given.

You've just turned 18. You've decided to end your life. Your decision is definitive. In a final surge you decide to put in words the reason behind your decision. In the style of a self-portrait, you describe the disgust you have for yourself. Your text will retrace certain events in your life at the origin of these feelings.³²

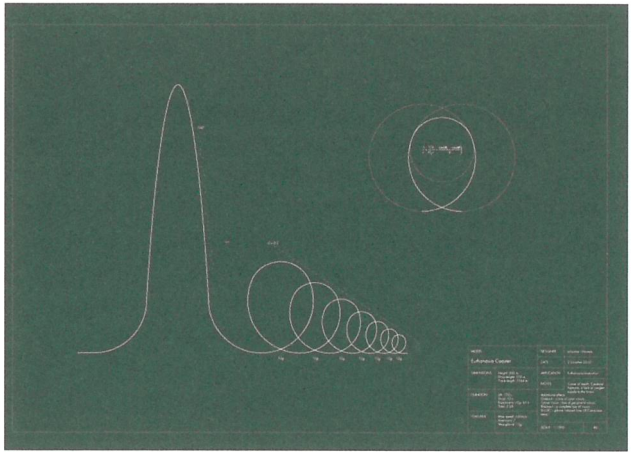
It could be argued that addressing these issues might best be tackled as part of the school curriculum, instilling in future generations, the need to normalise conversations around how we live and die. It seems the French approach was perhaps handled insensitively, but with the right preparation, sensitive delivery and appropriate support, discussing suicide and understanding the factors that lead to it, would seem healthy. However we choose to describe ourselves, this secular, multi-faith world with its 140 character interactions and dreams of infinite wellbeing, is seeing the architecture of Notre Dame competing with Disney-inspired theme parks and IMAX cinema's vying with museums and galleries for blockbuster shows. That said, any meaningful conversation around mortality should begin with the imagination.

TOWARDS A RITUALISED DEATH MACHINE

Lithuanian artist, Julijonas Urbonas offers us an unlikely dystopian segue through his *Euthanasia Coaster* (2010). Putting the ethical question whether euthanasia should be legalised or not, to one side, Urbonas investigated highly clinical approaches to GP assisted suicide in countries where it is, or has been legal. This has typically been through the intravenously administered sedative, sodium thio-pental to induce a coma, followed by pancuronium which stops breathing and causes death.

For Urbonas, the well-intentioned interventions of clinicians seem devoid of ritual or meaning. Where Australian physician Dr. Philip Nitschke³³ developed the sterile, but effective 'Deliverance Machine' to help individuals take their own lives, Urbonas explores Gravitational and Fatal Aesthetics arguing that churches and shrines are being replaced by theme parks. Describing the *Euthanasia Coaster* as 'a hypothetic euthanasia machine in the form of a roller coaster, engineered to humanely – with elegance and euphoria – take the life of a human being,'³⁴ Urbonas has created a 1:500 scale model of what would be a 510 meter high, 7544 meter long rollercoaster that through a maximum speed of 100 meters per second and a g-force of 10g, would 'induce various unique experiences: from euphoria to thrill, and from tunnel vision to loss of consciousness, and, eventually, death,'³⁵ through cerebral hypoxia: the lack of oxygen supply to the brain.

Urbonas provokes us into questioning what we are seeing: is this real? His research is multidisciplinary and through robust collaboration with engineers, scientists and clinicians, the impact of his design



would no doubt, be effective, but for now can safely be ‘interpreted as a social design fiction.’³⁶ However he does more than provide us with an aestheticised deliverance machine, he offers us a poetic platform to discuss the most difficult conversation, with arguably the blackest of humour, which, he suggests

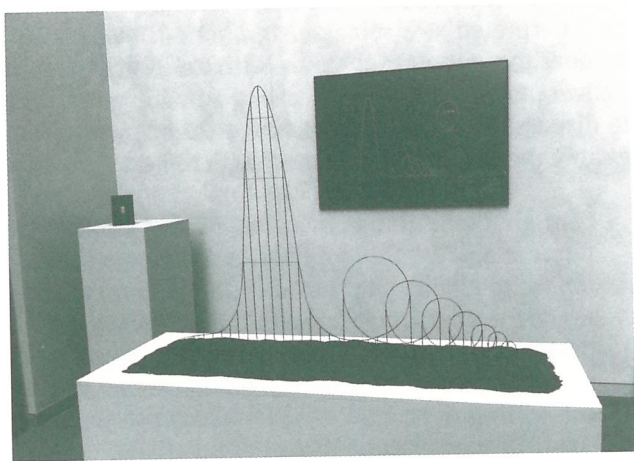
‘...might be desirable, because, first of all, humour is a powerful tool to talk about painful topics, to challenge preconceptions, but also to make the contact with the public more intimate, design becomes less didactic and less elitist yet open to more serious contemplation to those who are willing to do so.’³⁷

In a society where the dying are hidden away and where those who contemplate taking their own lives are subject to the full weight of the law and emotive public scrutiny, the *Euthanasia Coaster* offers us a potent symbol to enable conversation: a heavily loaded *Aesthetic Third*³⁸ that potentially mediates be-

tween those considering taking their life and those in a supportive position, but more critically, enables public discourse.

TRACES

Classes in writing suicide notes and a 'ritualised death machine,' seem some distance from Potter's near serenity facing his own death, as does that exposure to a numinous artistic moment described by De Quincey, but any conversation about how we might achieve a good death, needs to engage beyond the confines of the Hippocratic oath or deathbed confession and embrace imagination. That



Urbonas proposes a machine that induces euphoria prior to death, could be exactly the numinous death that a terminally ill, thrill-seeking atheist would desire. Whilst the internet offers its darkest corners

to explore suicide, it is on one hand liberating, and on the other dangerous and pitiful, with chat rooms for the terminally ill, who through frustration and fear, discuss self-suffocation and where they might purchase lethal poison.

Potter shows us the creative potency of an artist driven by his terminal condition, in comparison to Seneca who illustrated vividly that gladiators, rather than enduring the sordid degradation of mortal combat in the arena, would take their own lives with honor, rather than live a protracted and undignified death sentence.

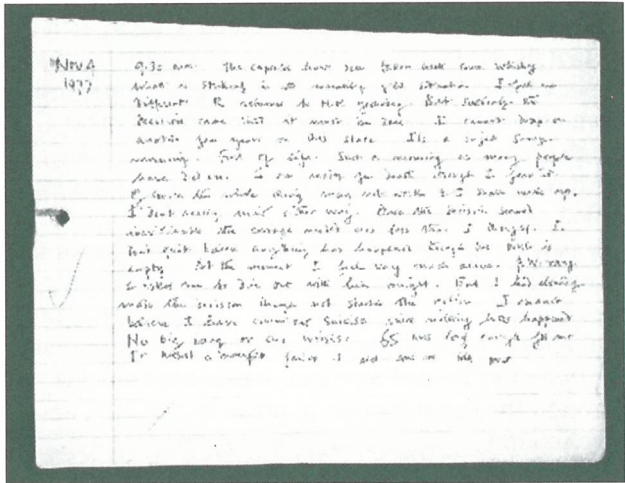
It is with the artist Keith Vaughan that I begin to draw this essay to a close. His final journal entry was made on the 4th November 1977 at 9:30 am and appear to be the words of a fully sentient man, written after he had in effect, committed suicide through the consumption of prescription pills and alcohol. In this short entry, he begins:

The capsules have been taken with some whiskey. What is striking is the unreality of the situation...Once the decision seems inevitable the courage needed was less than I thought...I cannot believe I have committed suicide since nothing has happened.³⁹

Author William Boyd, in his essay 'The Book of Life', captures something of the intimacy of Keith Vaughan's reflections towards his moment of death, recording his final moments of conscious life.

I had the opportunity once to see the manuscript and the sight of that final page with the words tailing off into weakening squiggles, freezes the soul. It is as if the terminal downward slash of the pen scarring the page (as his hand went limp and slid away) symbolises

the fall into the void that Vaughan longed for and had at that moment entered.⁴⁰



Boyd sees the cessation of Vaughan's marks in a fundamental way, commenting: 'we keep a journal because we want to leave a trace of some kind. Like the prisoner who scratches the passing days on his cell wall, or the adolescent who carves initials into the trunk of a tree, or even an animal depositing his spoor, the act of writing a journal seems to say: I was here - here is some record of my journey.'⁴¹

Executor of Vaughan's estate, Veronica Gosling describes seeing him, 'sitting slumped over his table in the studio, carefully dressed, and wearing a brown jacket, soft material. His pen is still in his hand...'⁴²

CODA

Perhaps we can learn something about our own mortality from the creation of art, glean something from the quiet dignity of Vaughan's journal, experience something of the numinous through our deep immersion in others vision - learn something deeper than fact, and independent of a deluded dependency on supernatural governance. Potter saw any notion of spirituality as what separated humans from, 'the purely animal in us...why we sing and dance and act, why we paint, why we love, why we make art.'⁴³ But this thing we call art, can be brutal and challenging too and the way we attempt to understand its meaning in terms of the language of value, quality and excellence is utterly flawed in relation to mortality, after all death is seen as the ultimate failure of science and of medicine. Larkin again poetically measures this - the ultimate of deficits - as, 'nothing to think with, nothing to love or link with.'⁴⁴ Death by natural causes or by our own hand, is inevitably perceived as negative and Julian Barnes, in *Levels of Life* reflects: 'grief is the place where statistics run out...the needle goes off the dial; the thermometer fails to register; barometers burst.'⁴⁵ Perhaps in one sense, this allows us to understand the value of the arts in relationship to how we die, in a way that is removed from blinkered cost-benefit-analysis.

In this context, any attempt at meaningful conversation is skewed by bigotry and prejudice. If religion commences with disappointment and is designed to make us 'fearful and afraid and servile'⁴⁶ and ultra-Darwinism tempers inevitable human imagination in the face of mortality, then perhaps art born of an essential humanism, offers us at least the chance to question dominant ideologies and make sense of our brief lives. A new humanist perspective presents a

way of being in the here and now, promoting sentience alongside individual and communal accountability and action, but not at the subjection of free will, or as a simple counter-blast to rigid orthodoxy.

Imagination enables us to construct scenarios in which we might die, but our logical selves cannot process our eternal non-existence and we fall into the default position of myth and superstition - or empirical evidence - both, arguably controlled by wider political interests. Our contemporary *Ars Moriendi* will take note of what unfamiliar possibilities artists might show us and of course, our ever-evolving technology might be part of this resilience armoury, as opposed to merely being a tool to prolong our protracted deaths. Perhaps our children should not only learn about suicide, but be encouraged to keep a journal to explore their own unfolding autobiographies. Perhaps those same children might design apps and officiate at their own virtual funeral, a Second Life that enables them to hear



their obituaries and reflect on their contribution to society and explore grief, the harshest consequence of death.

Perhaps constructing your own roadside memorial might encourage you to create an advanced directive and like the birth-plans familiar to expectant women, a death-plan might become normal. Perhaps these young and emerging minds might dare to have conversations we can barely imagine. Perhaps finally they may even come to understand grief more deeply and in some small way, be more prepared for it than those of us who are repressed by science and religion.

Dignity and choice in the way we die, must be central to the concerns of a civil society, regardless of our moral and intellectual standpoint, after all in terms of wellbeing, a good death is the positive outcome of a life well lived.

Before Keith Vaughan's hand slipped from his journal on that clear November morning, he left a small poetic trace of himself that illustrates his sentient clarity of purpose and above all, the complete normality of dying.

It's a bright and sunny morning. Full of life. Such a morning as many people have died on.⁴⁷

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