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Repressing the Reality of Death and Burial Ritual in Modernity

Background: For a long period the thesis of repression of death and dying dominated the discourses of social and cultural studies regarding death. Sociological theories of death interpret the ways of symbolizing and communicating death in our organised modern era as a social »repression of death« that is also expressed by placing rites and places of burial at the edge of the city (Nassehi and Weber 1989). In the recent years, however, this thesis of repression was more and more opposed by a growing public interest and an intensified discourse concerning death (Schäfer 2002; Knoblauch and Zingerle 2005). The driving force of these processes developed in books by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, Verena Kast, popular guidebooks, in discourses about near-death experiences and new funeral and memorial practices (natural burials, virtual cemetery etc.). In addition, those developments also depict a new institutionalization of dying and new social 'movements' of death (hospice societies, hospices, palliative ward, AIDS-movement, etc.) as well as a reorganization of the previous structures of death that are connected to those novel approaches. Hand in hand with this also goes a rising valorization of the individuality of a dying person. Not least because the demographic developments resulted in an increase of elderly people as well as the rising interest of media and mass culture surrounding the dead body (e.g. TV-series like *Six Feet Under* or documentaries surrounding undertakers), death and dying are nowadays not only omnipresent in media, dying has also become a much discussed topic in politics, confessions, economy and legislation (Feldmann 2004). Dying today is, as so many other aspects of modern life, not treated as an event that one has to encounter at some point, but has turned into a *project* of some sort, a so called 'resonance-project' that often goes hand in hand with new individualised 'ritual designs' and new practices of aesthetization. Therefore, it is possible to prepare oneself actively and independently for this resonance scenario which is to be kept in mind, to be planed and prepared (Moebius and Weber).

Goal: The dissertation is therefore to deal with the late modern discourses and practices surrounding death and compare those to the ones identifiable in antiquity. The goal is to identify the changes of practices in regard to death and burial rituals, but also the changes of how our minds handle death. How do the rituals relate to the production of resonance? How did the world relations to the ancestors change? In which relation do rituals, aesthetization and death stand to one another?

Methods and disciplinary background: The methods will be methods of qualitative social research, especially discourse analysis, content analysis, interviews and participating observation.

References

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