

Social Design

Meets Death

The Potential of People- and Planet-Oriented Design
in Advancing the Modern Reimagination
of Germany's *Death* Culture and Communication

For Mama and Papa.

I am sure you never imagined that I would write my master thesis inspired by your untimely deaths, but I wouldn't be your daughter if I hadn't.

Love you both.

For all the friends

who have been on this journey with me. You have provided me with an unimaginable amount of love and support. Every one of you in your individual and uniquely beautiful way. I wouldn't be here without you.

Thank you.



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Introduction

Chapter 1

1.1 *Death* and Design?

Why write a master thesis on *death* in the field of social design?

Designing for socially, environmentally, and economically sustainable transformation lies at the core of social design. According to professor of design Elizabeth Resnick (2019, p. 3), social design is the “practice of design where the primary motivation is to promote positive social change within society” by focusing on so-called wicked problems in life. Richard Buchanan (1992, p. 126) describes these “wicked problems” as defined by “indeterminacy”: they are “social system problems which are ill-formulated, where the information is confusing (...) and where the ramifications in the whole system are confusing”.

Death poses such a wicked problem. Within our Western social system, design has predominantly focused on designing for life – what about its role in designing the socially and environmentally sustainable transformation of death in Western society? Truly socially responsible design must focus on the needs that arise when inevitably, *death* becomes part of the equation of life.

The one certainty of life, for all living things (not just humans) on this planet, is *death*. However, as the social psychologists Jeff Greenberg, Sheldon Solomon and Tom Pyszczynski (2015, p. 7) describe in *The Worm at the Core: On the Role of Death in Life*: Western, predominantly Christian societies, are defined by their *death* anxiety and fear of the inevitable end. Thus, *death* is considered an uncomfortable, if not taboo topic to speak about openly and goes unaddressed across personal relationships, in our communities and on all broader societal levels. An unchallenged avoidance of death at all costs, dictates how our social, economic, and political (if not all) systems are structured and construed (ibid, p. 9). This has dire consequences: the needs of the dying and grieving are not being attended to, even though every

Design for end-of-life is an emerging area, gaining visibility and interdisciplinary interest. (Nickpour, 2019, p. 2275)

individual will inevitably find themselves in this position. Losing a loved one in Germany today, feels like travelling back in time as outdated funeral practices and *death*-related customs are being preserved by the funeral home industry.

In Germany, *death* rites remain closely tied to religious practices and traditions on a surface level, but today profit-driven funeral homes attend to the dead and grieving. The state of *death* care in Germany today seems mostly void of real compassion and individual decision-making. The combination of memorial practices routed in Christian religion, fear of *death* in Western culture and the state of the funeral home industry, has resulted in *death* being a truly wicked problem. I believe that socially responsible design can intervene and open the space for sharing and respectful envisioning of a more empathetic, personalised and need-based future of death and grief.

Exploring the intersection of design and *death* is important and valuable to me due to personal experiences. I have lost both my father and mother within the last five years and became a full orphan at age 24. It is through these losses, that I as a social designer have been able to notice the above-mentioned shortcomings of German *death* care and Western *death* industries. I have seen and felt *death* first-hand as a wicked problem for design in the Western world and can therefore identify the need for social innovation – there is a vacuum in which social design can enter and mediate. While design opportunities are

1.2 Research Question

abundant *death* has rarely been considered a place for design and designers. While we design for all other life milestones, such as birth and weddings, *death* has been left out of the equation. However, change is slowly coming: a few select funeral homes, palliative care facilities, hospices and non-profit organizations focusing on the end-of-life, have recognised the transformative possibilities of designing for *death*. Now, a small, still disjointed movement of product, graphic, interior, strategic and social designers, are addressing the dissonance between how society treats *death* and the highly individual needs of people experiencing *death* and grief. It is here, where an avant-garde of a design for *death* can possibly be discerned and this thesis builds upon.

Western society and specifically Germany, the site of my personal experiences, is in dire need of a social and sustainable transformation of its *death* practices and grief offerings. Perhaps this can be achieved through a decoupling of commercialized, religious traditions and focusing on personalisation, empathy, and compassion. If humans at some point designed the system of how we view, experience and treat *death* as a society, there must be space to re-design it too. Possibly with the help of social design's uniquely multi-disciplinary and collaborative approach.

In *Design Meets Death*, the design researcher Farnaz Nickpour (2019, p. 2278) proposes that to explore an "end-of-life collaboration", designers should apply a two-tiered systemic approach, originating in design thinking, that addresses the following two research questions:

"What are the critical questions, strategic opportunities and significant contributions around design and end-of-life?"

→ Goal: identify the Why and the How

"Building on the above, how might design help reimagine and improve end-of-life experience?"

→ Goal: identify the What

By reframing the above proposal to apply to social design and Western *death* culture in part one, and more specifically designing for *death* in Germany in part two, this thesis will research and intends to answer the following two research questions:

→ Research Question 1:

What are the critical questions, strategic opportunities, and significant contributions around *death* and design in the West?

→ Research Question 2:

Building on the research insights above, how might social design help reimagine and improve *death* culture and communication in Germany?

1.3 Research Objectives

The objectives of the following research are to:

—> Explore the human relationship to *death*, from a historical and socio-psychological perspective and understand how the inevitable end-of-life defines daily life.

—> Investigate Western, so-called “spectacular *death*” of the 21st century, and identify its key characteristics, issues and movements, with a specific focus on Germany (Jacobsen, 2016, p. 3).

—> Survey *death* attitudes and actors to help understand the emergence of ‘moderne Bestattungskulturen’¹ in Germany

—> Identify what social design can do to contribute to the field of ‘moderne Bestattungskulturen’ to improve German *death* culture and communication.

1.4 Structure of Paper

This master thesis comprises two parts, covered in five chapters. The first is the theoretical part, which introduces the topic of *death* in Western human life by reviewing literature in the field of thanatology (the study of *death*) and social psychology. The core of the theoretical part reviews desk research and literature to present key characteristics, issues, and trends in the so-called “spectacular *death*” of the 21st century (Jacobsen, 2016, p. 3). This is used as a foundation for, and combined with, the evaluation of interviews with German actors in the ‘moderne Bestattungskulturen’ movement. In addition, a survey has been conducted to identify significant contributors, needs and strategic opportunities for a social design intervention in Germany.

The second part of this thesis proposes a practical social design intervention that addresses the strategic opportunities identified in Germany's *death*. Combining the insights from part one with design research, ideation, prototyping and testing, the concept and final design outcomes were developed. **These will be showcased in the master thesis presentation. Chapter six is therefore marked as TBA.**

6

1| Modern burial cultures:

1.5 Acknowledgment of Bias and Limitations

→ Bias

This body of work was researched and written by a white, cis-gender woman of privilege, who prescribes to an intersectional-feminist worldview. Moreover, having received higher education in the United Kingdom, Canada and Germany, these perspectives are implicitly represented. In addition, as this thesis was written in the context of the SRH Hochschule for Design and Communication in Berlin, Germany, it is thus informed by a Eurocentric social design discourse. I, the author, acknowledge that this results in inherent bias.

→ Limitations

To reduce the scope of this master thesis considering time and resource limitations, I chose to focus on a Western perspective on death. The conscious choice was made to largely exclude views from other parts of the world, as these did not fit into the research objectives. However, I aim to continue research at the intersection of *death* and design and further work building upon this thesis, will include more diverse perspectives from which *death* culture in the West can largely benefit.

1.6 Methodology

The research framework of this thesis is based on design researcher Farnaz Nickpour's (2019, p. 2278) two-tiered systemic approach to designing for end-of-life as proposed in *Design Meets Death: A case of critical discourse and strategic contributions*. Reframed from Nickpour's original two research questions, the following two questions create the basic structure for the design research methodology:

1. What are the critical questions, strategic opportunities, and significant contributions around death, and design in the West?
2. Building on the research insights above, how might social design help reimagine and improve death culture and communication in Germany?

To answer the first question an extensive literature review and desk research was conducted. The most important consulted works on *death* history and social psychology include James Gire's *How Death Imitates Life: Cultural Influences on Conceptions of Death and Dying*, Jeff Greenberg, Sheldon Solomon, and Tom Pyszczynski's *Worm at the Core: On the Role of Death in Life* and Michael Hviid Jacobsen's *Spectacular Death—Proposing a New Fifth Phase* to Philippe Ariès's *Admirable History of Death*. Moreover, to uncover the Western relationship to *death* in the 21st century, Michael Hviid Jacobsen's work mentioned above was essential as well as Lucinda Herring's *Reimagining Death: Stories and Practical Wisdom for Home Funerals and Green Burials*, and brand eins's recently published *Sterbereport 2022*.

Moreover, to build the bridge between the theoretical and the practical part of the thesis, both qualitative and quantitative data were collected. Eight interviews with significant contributors in Germany's 'moderne Bestattungskulturen' movement were conducted

and a qualitative content analysis in the form of coding was completed. In addition, the answers to a twenty-minute online survey entitled *Death and Design* were analysed. Using the qualitative content analysis method, categorisation and clustering, produced both qualitative and quantitative insights. The combination of literature review, desk research, interviews, and the survey aims to provide answers to the first research question and allows for a deduction of research insights for the second.

To identify how social design might help reimagine and improve *death* culture and communication in Germany, design research was conducted by collecting and analysing the current state of *death* design in the West. Making use of design research methods throughout this process, allowed for an exploration into death in the arts, the media. It also allowed for the comparison of traditional designs of, for example funeral homes to the emerging avantgarde of modern designers tackling the topic of *death*. Compiling these design insights on the online whiteboard *Miro*² enabled a continuous visualisation, which together with the theoretical research, helped identify the type of design outcome to most likely be able to produce tangible and compassionate results.



*Humans and
their Inevitable End*



Chapter 2

2.1 What We Mean When We Talk About *Death*

Human existence on Earth is defined by the inevitability of *death*. The predetermined end of life is at the core of the anxiety that comes with conscious (and subconscious) existence. Asking what *death* is, is almost as impossibly big and disturbingly complex to answer, as trying to understand what life is. However, these two unconditional certainties of human reality go hand in hand.

In simplest terms, *death* marks the end of all biological functions of an organism operating. According to the cultural psychologist James Gire (2014, p. 4) in *How Death Imitates Life: Cultural Influences on Conceptions of Death and Dying*, contemporary *death* in the West is defined by medicine and rooted in Christian tradition. Customarily, Western medicine declares a person dead once all vital organs stop working – the heartbeat has ceased, the brain has stopped functioning and the breath has stilled. The completion of being alive. However, as the journalist Erica Buist (2021, p. 274) points out in her book *This Party's Dead: Grief, Joy and Spilled Rum at the World's Death Festivals*, medical and scientific advancements have transformed the end of life into a more vague, complex in-between state of human existence/non-existence, which so often plays out in a hospital setting. Once brain activity became measurable, it became unclear as to which organ ultimately determines *death* - it is now the finite diagnosis of brain *death* that determines a human being's end (ibid).

However, both medical and spiritual conceptions of *death* define how we live our lives. These differ across cultures and world religions. Hindu beliefs of rebirth as well as "Native American tribes and certain segments of Buddhism," which believe that "the dead and the living coexist, and the dead can influence the well-being of the living", are examples of symbiotic approaches to *death* in life (Gire, 2014, p. 4). Similarly, the toraja people

of Indonesia believe that "*death* fixes problems" and because they become semi-gods after *death*, they are not afraid (Buist, 2021, p. 96). *Death* in these non-Western conceptions is something to welcome: a state to reach after life in which one remains in contact with the living and is in a position of power. The historical dominance of Christianity in the West has in contrast resulted in a conception of *death* as a single, fearful event – a person can only die once and is then selected for either the promised heaven, the fearful fate of hell or the unknown of purgatory (Gire, 2014, p. 4).

*We're on a planet
sustained by nothing,
carried through pure
space by a willful star
made of fire and in
constant ebullition.
We're travelers covering
traveling grounds.
Going, always going.*

From Shifting the Silence

by Etal Adnan

2.2 A (Very Brief) History of *Death*

A significant history of *death* in the West was written by historian Philippe Ariès (1982) in *The Hour of Our Death*, where he categorized death into four time periods spanning across the last 1000 years: tamed *death*, one's own *death*, *death* of the other and hidden *death*. However, in "Spectacular Death"—*Proposing a New Fifth Phase to Philippe Ariès's Admirable History of Death*³, the Danish sociologist Michael Hviid Jacobsen (2016, p. 2) points out that *death*, like any other social construct, is subject to change and it is therefore essential to contextualize and interpret according to time, place, "historical, social and cultural circumstances". In his work Jacobsen analyses Ariès four categories, builds upon them and introduces "spectacular death": the contemporary attitude of the 21st century⁴ (ibid). The following table provides an overview of Jacobsen's summary of Ariès's interpretation of a thousand years of *death*, up until the beginning of the 21st century.

Until not very long ago, *death* was amid Western life but underwent an extraordinary vanishing act throughout the societal transformations that resulted in the forbidden *death* of the 20th century (ibid, 7). From being part of public and everyday life, experienced and seen in the open, *death* became institutionalized - first by the Church, and then medicalized by hospitals (ibid). Moreover, as society removed *death* from life, grief and mourning were removed from the public realm into a personal, private matter to be dealt with in silence.

In *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, the sociologist and cultural theorist Jean Baudrillard (1976, p. 147) describes the reality of this banning of *death* in life:

"(...) today, it is not normal to be dead, and this is new. To be dead is an unthinkable anomaly; nothing else is as offensive as this. *Death* is a delinquency, and an incurable deviancy. The dead are no longer inflicted on any place or space-time, they can find no resting place; they are thrown into a radical utopia."

No more mental space, nor physical place or time in life, seems to be left for *death* and the dead. They are hidden, removed, placed out-of-sight and out-of-mind as *death* became something divergent from the norm. The emergence of a pathological view of *death* - *death* as abnormal, dangerous and to be avoided - is especially visible in the Western obsession with physical health (Jacobsen, 2016, p. 7). The rise of the fitness and diet culture throughout the second half of the 20th century, has humans physically trying to outrun, spin, and train *death* away. Participation in this 'outsmarting' of death seems compulsory - the healing powers of healthy nutrition and exercise feed into the (im)mortality complexes that developed as *death* was pushed in the dark.

To summarize, *death* throughout the 21st century became: "(...) extraordinary, something that we would seldom encounter and experience first-hand, something that was predominantly "managed" or "processed" professionally and something that was primarily filtered through media representations" (ibid)

3| Recently turned into a book entitled *The Age of Spectacular Death* (2020)

4| Both authors solely focus on Western death mentalities. Choosing their works is an explicit exclusion of non-western history and attitudes before the medieval period. However, to limit the scope of research, their works are sufficient for providing the basic understanding needed to inform a social design approach that focuses on specifically death culture in German.

2.3 Death and Knowledge

*Even though we know
objectively that we are mortal,
we come up with all kinds of
schemes to escape this
devastating truth.*

(Cathcart & Klein, 2010, p. 14).

As *death* was banned from life, Western society began to avoid *death* at all costs. It begs the question of how humans have developed such a toxic relationship with *death* in the first place? The German sociologist Norbert Elias (2001, p. 3) finds that the specific "knowledge of *death* causes problems for human beings" because we are the only (known) species aware of our impermanence and this awareness terrorizes the human existence. On a conscious level we know that no matter how hard we try to avoid *death*, we cannot escape it. However, as the father of psychoanalysis Sigmund Freud (1918, p. 2) writes in *Reflections on War and Death*: "we cannot indeed imagine our own *death* (...) at bottom no one believes in his own *death*, which amounts to saying: in the unconscious every one of us is convinced of his immortality". So, while humans are aware of their end, their unconscious is unable to reckon with that reality and as a result, developed a variety of coping mechanisms and social structures to circumvent *death*.

This ambiguity between the fear-inducing "unbearable awareness" of the end of life and its unconscious denial, is the key characteristic of the human relationship to *death* (Jacobsen, 2016, p. 2).

2.4 Death and Fear

*Worm at the Core: On the Role of Death in Life*⁵ establishes that with our awareness of *death* – "the downside of human intellect" – comes *death* anxiety (Greenberg, et al., 2015, p. 7). The authors propose that „terror is the natural and generally adaptive response to the imminent threat of *death*“ and to deal with this mortal terror, humans have developed an expansive, two-fold coping mechanism (ibid).

According to Greenberg, Solomon and Pyszczynski's terror management theory, humans have to find identification with culturally specific realities as well as maintain their own personal significance, in order to manage their *death* anxiety (ibid). For thousands of years humans have been creating their specific realities by installing "order, meaning and permanence" to structure an unstructured, impermanent world (ibid, p. 9). An example of this is religion and as the philosophers Thomas Cathcart and Daniel Klein (2010, p. 22) point out, human fear of *death* has been "one of the major factors that drive humans to create and defend the illusion of gods and religion". This has also led to the creation of cultures, which promise "immortality," and provide us with meaning and a sense of belonging in a seemingly meaningless world (Greenberg, et al., 2015 p. 9). Thus the creation of our own reality as a way of defying *death*, is achieved through identification with a culture and when personal "cultural worldviews" are maintained in "governmental, educational and religious institutions, and rituals" (ibid).

5| Based on over thirty years of experimental research and interdisciplinary consultation

2.5 *Death* and Denial

Simultaneously, humans spend their lives trying to establish their own individual significance in the world. In order to cope with *death* anxiety, we need to feel like we have personal significance and a sense of worth in the world. Greenberg et al. (ibid) define this as a need for high "self-esteem". A question such as who do you want to be when you grow up, signifies the value placed on well-developed self-esteem and the human search for legacy. Feeling 'worthless' on the other hand, brings humans too close to the feelings of impermanence and nothingness - too close to despair around life's meaninglessness in the face of *death*.

Humans have created a protective shield to manage their terror by combining a sense of belonging to something larger than life - a culture - in which your worldviews are signalled to you as true, with high self-esteem. However, there is great variety in the extent to which different world cultures harbour and express *death* anxiety. Gire (2014, p. 7) categorizes these as "*death* affirming societies" and "*death*-denying or *death*-defying cultures". These two categories are based on the notion that "Eastern cultural beliefs (...) largely conceive of *death* as a mere transition, and that the most effective way to defeat *death* is to accept it as a primary fact of life," while Western cultural beliefs do not provide such acceptance but rather promote denial and the illusion of being able to escape it (ibid).

Death is the main "continuous task for the living" and it is not an easy one (Jacobsen, 2016, p. 2). In modern Western cultures, these notions of impermanence have been relegated to the side-lines of life, as seen with the terror management theory. Instead, achieving stability and forms of permanence are celebrated: manifested in a career, settling down, a successful relationship or one's ability to buy a home. The task of living in the face of *death* defines the choices humans make every day - these choices are in defiance of the end-of-life and thus in denial of *death*. As Cathcart and Klein (2010, p. 2) point out, the "social structures and customs of whatever society we happen to live in" today, make it relatively comfortable for us to be in denial of our own *death* on a "moment to moment basis". According to the cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker (1973, p. 17), these have come about because Western civilization's denial of *death* is its "survival strategy". In *The Denial of Death*, he specifies that "society everywhere is a living myth of the significance of human life" and thus, what we consider as society is actually a "defiant creation of meaning" against the inevitability of *death* (ibid, p. 7).

Becker's diagnosis of human mythmaking and our constant need to create meaning in a meaningless existence, may seem crass. However, is an individual's life on Earth not just the creation of an elaborative narrative (or myth) about who one is, where they are from, and who they want to be? Thus, Becker (ibid, p. xvii) maintains that the "mainspring of human activity" is our fear of *death*, and this leads humans into a state of delusion, in which, according to Cathcart and Klein (2010, p. 15) they believe that they are essentially immortal, resulting in "nonrational belief structures," or "immortality systems". Becker (1973, p. 17) sees these "shared immortality system(s)" as the pillars of every world civilization and act as the "basic function of culture" in the past,

present and future. In these systems, humans delude themselves by creating meaning by identifying with: religion, art, money/wealth systems and/or national/tribal/racial belonging (ibid). These identifications offer different survival strategies, providing hope and stability in the face of an indefinite future.

In *Reimagining Death: Stories and Practical Wisdom for Home Funerals and Green Burials*, the green burial guide Lucinda Herring (2019, p. 6) writes how *death* during the 20th century was forbidden and “banished from the cycle of life”. The persistent denial of *death* has made the West ignorant of what she describes as an “interdependence with all other sentient beings on this planet, and the possibility of communication and co-creation with the great web of life” (ibid). Not only are humans often unable to understand other culture’s immortality systems and worldviews but have lost the ability to place oneself within the ecosystem of the planet - of what sustains life in the first place. Humans for too long have seen themselves as independent actors, as the only ones whose lives are worth living, forever.

Not only is one’s own *death* avoided, but so is reckoning with the *deaths* of others, animals, and especially that of the natural environment. By removing ourselves from

the reality of our own mortality, we are cut off from nature itself and from what it really means to be human: in denying death, we deny the very substance from which we are made - matter, water, the Mother (ibid).

This is most obviously visible in the climate crisis, how long have we humans ignored that we are not just killing the planet but ourselves as well?

Death Today

Chapter 3

3.1 *Death* as a Spectacle

The previous chapter focused on historical and psychological aspects of the human relationship to *death* in the 20th century. However, the first two decades of the 21st century are defined by the world's transformation into a globalized and interconnected place. The world has undergone a paradigm shift and so the human relationship to *death* must have undergone some transformation as well. This chapter, therefore, moves away from fear of *death* and aims to describe *death* today in the West which has reached what Jacobsen (2016, p. 17) coins the age of "spectacular death" – defined by new performative, ethical, mediatized, commercial, academic, and ritual components. Today, *death* is coming into sight again and this process has been sped up by the global pandemic in 2020, in which the entire world came face to face with *death* at the same time. Now death is defined by it being "discussed and exposed in public through the media", which is causing its commodification and turning it into a "bizarre object of shallow consumption and entertainment" (ibid).

This chapter is structured by the five key developments that according to Jacobsen, rang in the age of spectacular *death*: the hospice movement, mediatization, commercialization, academic interest, and re-ritualization (ibid). These are used as a framework and supplemented by further research into trends and changes in Western society and specifically Germany over the last few years. The aim is to answer the first research question and identify what the critical questions, strategic opportunities, and significant contributions around *death* and design are in the West.

3.2 *Death* and Ethics: A Good *Death*

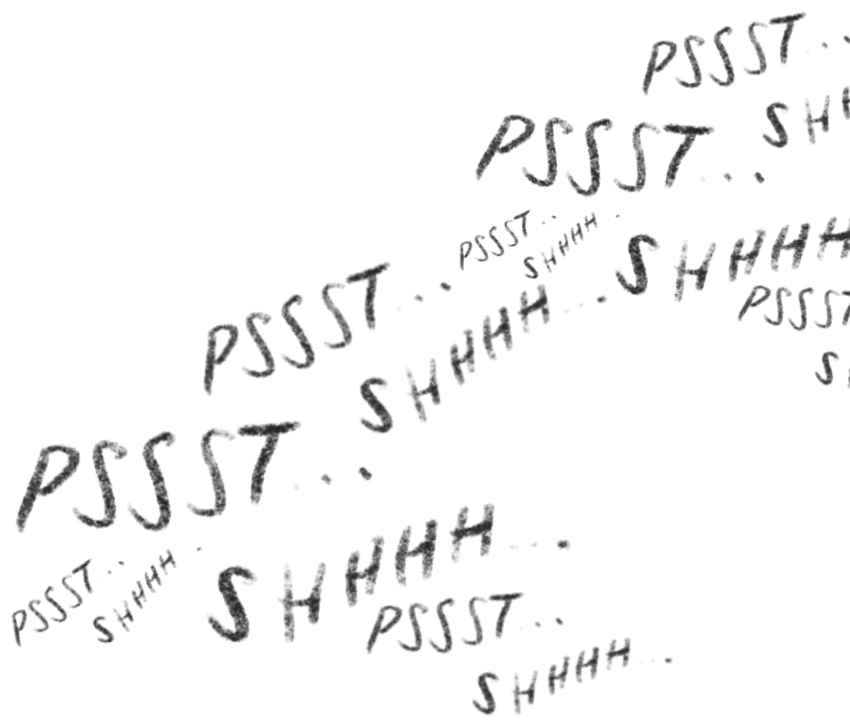
Today, people want and are more often able "to die with dignity" - this has been made available thanks to the "palliative care revolution," which aims to provide people with a good *death*, that is both pain-free and dignified (ibid, p. 13). According to the Institute of Medicine a good *death* is "free from avoidable distress and suffering for patient, family, and caregivers" and, is in "accord with the patient's and family's wishes, and reasonably consistent with clinical, cultural, and ethical standards" (Field & Cassel, 1997). In *Defining a Good Death (Successful Dying): Literature Review and a Call for Research and Public Dialogue*, medical researchers in the United States, identified what this means for patients and family members and found a total of eleven "successful dying" themes, including the pursuit of "preferences for a specific dying process, pain-free status and emotional wellbeing" (Meier, et al., 2016, p. 5). Ultimately, a good *death* comes down to the individualisation of end-of-life care in which the dying person is treated as an individual with highly personal needs that need to be met for them to die well.

End-of-life care in a dedicated institution – a hospice - provides such individualisation and is now much more common practice. However, this only emerged as an option in the 60s and 70s, due to leading advocacies such as the psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross⁶ (Jacobsen, 2016, p. 13). Her, for the time revolutionary work, on the five stages of death, published in *On Death and Dying* in 1969, brought attention to the emotional well-being of patients and their families - something that had not been considered in the medical space previously. Stephen Levine (1989, p. 168) writes in *Who dies? An Investigation of Conscious Living and Dying*, that the success of the hospice movement was and is "a manifestation of the desire for people to

6] Elisabeth Kübler-Ross revisited and addressed limitations of her own model on the five stages of death in *On Grief and Grieving* (2005).

die without pain and with as much psychological support as possible". Options such as assisted *death*⁷ and 24-hour hospice care, which were previously considered taboo in the West, are now obtainable for those in the later stages of dying. The transformation of palliative care and the emergence of concepts such as 'dying with dignity' as well good and successful dying, are symbolic of *death* attitudes currently undergoing a reconfiguration.

In a study of the *Deutsche Hospiz- und Palliativverband* in 2017, 56% of Germans answered that they found that society did not address the topic of dying and *death* enough (Kowitz, 2022). Exemplary of this is the tendency to avoid those who are dying, which leads to us "killing our loved ones socially before they even die, because we 'don't know what to say' or 'want to remember them as they were'" (Buist, 2021, p. 288). By not speaking about *death* in society, humans then lack the appropriate communication skills and tools when faced with *death* in their personal lives. So, while dedicated spaces for empathetic end-of-life care now exist, this is not enough if Western society cannot communicate matters on *death* and make it a topic in daily, public life.



20

7| Assisted death provides the opportunity to choose an end before the complete degradation of the body occurs for people who still have a fully-working mind. As seen with legalisations across the United States and Canada, there is increasing consensus among medical experts, law-makers and general society, that people should gain autonomy over how their life may end during the often prolonged and painful transition from life to natural death.

3.3 Visibility of Death in the Media

After the death of her father-in-law and finding no solace in British mourning culture, journalist Erica Buist travelled to *death* festivals around the world. She reflects on her experience of these celebrations of *death*, love and life, with the following words from the zoologist Jules Howard (2016, p. 291-22):

We humans have an inherent interest in life-threatening situations. We like telling stories about it. We like passing it on. Pick up a newspaper: you'll read about disease, war, plane crashes, earthquakes, drownings, murders, suicides, injuries, car crashes and plenty else to do with death. People who say death is taboo are mostly wrong. We love talking about death.

In response Buist (2021, p. 292) writes:

And yet when it comes to our own, we blanch. We demand a subject change. We imply our daughter is ruining Christmas dinner (sorry, Mum). When our loved ones mention their own demise, we shut them down (...).

This exchange points to a dichotomy that has crystalized in another major transition from the preceding century – what Jacobsen (2016, p. 10) coins the “new mediatized visibility of death”. While *death* was in the media previously, the ability to visually see *death* has been accelerated in recent years through widespread access to screens. We used to see images of *death* in the newspaper, snippets on television news or in thrillers and horror movies (ibid). Yet, today our smart phones, tablets and laptops notify us of and show *death* at any moment in time and place - even in livestreamed moving images.

3.3.1 Detachment due to overexposure

We now witness and come face to face with *death* every day - even though we are not conscious of this reality. As Jacobsen asserts, people in the West have become numb to the spectacle of *death* because so much violent *death* is seen everyday: one cannot avoid being exposed to beheaded journalists in the Middle East, drowned refugees on the Mediterranean, or have live footage on Instagram be shown from the war in the Ukraine (ibid). This heightened visibility of *death* in the media in combination with humans having unprecedentedly access to media outlets, results in a constant exposure to and ‘seeing’ of *death*. Nevertheless, while humans are fascinated and drawn in by it, we watch *death* from a safe distance and do not dare let it in our own lives (and whoever does is considered morbid).

In *On Photography*, Susan Sontag (1977, p. 87) illuminates what this distance of the viewership to the image results in: “despite the illusion of giving understanding, what seeing through photographs really invites is an acquisitive relation to the world that nourishes aesthetic awareness and promotes emotional detachment”. It is this detachment

that dominates today and has transformed *death* into a spectacle, witnessed from afar with an “obsessive interest [that] draws death near and keeps it at arm’s length” (Jacobsen, 2016, p. 10). Statements such as ‘I never thought it could be me’ or ‘something like this could never happen in my family’ reflect this kind of mindset. Despite being so exposed through the media, humans remain incapable of comprehending their own end. Instead, detachment is just growing stronger - we cannot face our own *death* but can binge watch entire Netflix documentaries on serial killers.

Considering how *death* is mediatized for children today, a modern re-framing is needed that removes the negative connotations based on morally deviant character traits. Instead, the incredibly powerful tool of storytelling should be harnessed to portray *death* not as violent but as something natural. Sharing realistic portrayals of *death* with children (and adults), makes it become part of life. Contemporary German children’s books that deal with the topic, such *Papas Arme Sind ein Boot and Ente*, *Tod und Tulpe* or *Wieso, Weshalb, Warum: Abschied, Tod und Trauer*, already show what this can look like.

3.3.2 The *death* story told to children

22

At the age of three, children begin to think about their own and their parent’s *death* (Greenberg, et al., 2015, p. 27). However, the way that media consumed by children portrays *death* does not take this awareness into consideration and instead creates significant misunderstandings, which later need to be unlearned (ibid). From Grimm’s fairytales to Disney movies: in these stories, *death* often takes a human form and is depicted as the villain, which signifies to children that “death is for bad-dies” (Buist, 2021, p. 38). If only the ‘bad’ people die, then dying becomes something related to wicked and evil behavior, which gives children the illusion that if you are special enough (like a Disney princess) *death* can be avoided (ibid). This type of storytelling is so effective, that studies have shown children between the ages of five and nine that believe *death* to be preventable “if you are swift or smart enough to avoid getting caught” (Greenberg, et al., 2015, p. 27). To a significant degree this establishes *death* denial and anxiety in children from an early age.

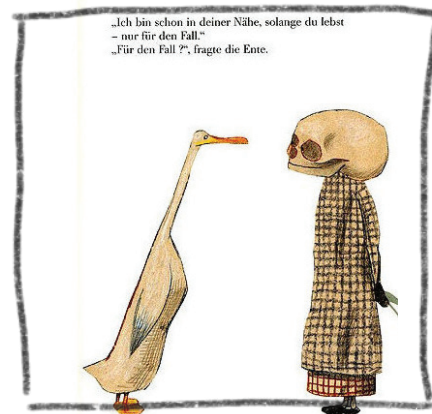


Figure 1 Death educational children’s picture books (2023)
Sources: <https://www.gerstenberg-verlag.de/Kinderbuch/Bilderbuch/Papas-Arme-sind-ein-Boot.html>, https://www.kunstmänn.de/buch/wolf_erlbruch-ente-_tod_und_tulpe-9783888974618/t-0/

Conveying *death* to children in a healthy way should not just be the parent's responsibility in choosing the right stories to tell but should occur through adequate and open communication on a societal level: in schools, places of community, and of course, on media platforms.

3.3.3 Solace: social media and podcasts

The mediatization of *death* in recent years has brought upon positive changes too. Specifically social media has allowed those affected by and/or interested in *death* and grief, to connect, commiserate and educate. There are now multitudes of grief and *death* positive communities on Instagram such as the three accounts showcased below: @21gramm.wdr, @thegriefspace and @untanglegrief.



These accounts all have different approaches ranging from personal life stories to illustrations of experiences and modern *death* education. However, all harness social media's storytelling capabilities to communicate on *death* in an open and public manner, and thus create safe virtual spaces for those interested in or who have experienced loss. What makes platforms such as Instagram so uniquely fitted for bringing *death* into daily life, is the combination of being able to portray *death* in a consciously visual and contemporary way, accompanied by explanatory texts of factual or poetic nature, to a global audience.

Figure 2 Screenshots of popular death and grief Instagram accounts (2022). Sources: <https://www.instagram.com/21gramm.wdr/>, https://www.instagram.com/thegriefspace_/, <https://www.instagram.com/untanglegrief/>



Social Design

Similarly, recent years (especially in light of the Covid-19 pandemic) have seen a significant increase in informative podcasts addressing *death* and grief in Western cultures including: *The Grief Gang* (UK), *You're Going To Die* (US), *Mortality and the Morgue* (CAN), *endlich – wir reden über den tod* (GER), *Good Mourning* (AUZ) and *The Art of Dying Well* (UK). Podcasts are incredibly popular and allow for a low barrier to access – listeners may find it easier to connect and engage with the topic by casually listening to others speak about *death* and grief, rather than having to talk or read about it themselves. The various podcasts, range from self-help, to talk-show style sharing of personal experiences, to educational content, and offer listeners a community to identify with and get auditive support from. The conversations on *death* and dying that fail to occur in Western society, happen in these podcasts and open the space for better *death* communication.

Jacobsen (2016, p. 15) describes these current trends in Western *death* culture as inherently “paradoxical,” full of contradictions, opportunities and ambiguities. We see this in the digital spaces that are now available and provide people with novel ways of voicing loss and memorializing those who have passed. While online memorial sites or publicly posting a loss offer new forms of solace, social media accounts and any other online activities outlive us. Concerns such as whether to delete a deceased person’s profile and how to erase one’s digital footprint before passing away, are characteristic of the multi-faceted changes that contemporary *death* communication is undergoing.



Figure 3 Six popular death and grief podcasts (2023). Source: Spotify

3.4 Commercial Component of *Death*

"Why do we hand our dead loved ones over to strangers straight away, as if they're something to be disposed of?"

*- Husband who held a home vigil for his
dead wife for 6 days in the U.K.*

Death practices are meant to honor the deceased but are just as important for the bereaved and their grieving processes. As Shelvock et al. (2022, p. 642) address in *Beyond the Corporatization of Death Systems: Towards Green Death Practices*, ideally, "death practices can support the bereaved in maintaining bonds to the deceased" as well as providing an "opportunity (...) to express their love in a way that is personally significant and meaningful. However, with the ever-expanding "commercialization of death" over the last hundred years, *death* practices are becoming financially and emotionally unaffordable (Jacobsen, 2016, pp. 12-13). This is significantly altering the experiences of bereavement, inhibiting the grieving-to-healing process, and fostering *death* anxiety.

3.4.1 Funeral home industry: monopolizing *death*

In *How 'Big Funeral' Made the Afterlife So Expensive*, journalist Eleanor Cummins (2021) points to how the funeral home industries in North America (and Europe) hold a "monopoly" on modern *death* and "the after-life" – the industry is essentially "pricing people out of dying". How come Western society arrived at this financially detrimental state of *death* affairs? Life in the West became

more secular over the last 100 years, as demographic trends such as the fact that church members in Germany are now "a minority" reveal, the Church's role in people's lives and thus also in *death*, was strongly reduced (Der Spiegel, 2022). This meant that *death* practices and bereavement support, that were traditionally connected to the Church, became uprooted – in Germany this paradigm shift manifested with the emergence of the funeral home profession in the middle of the 19th century, merging the craft of the carpenter, gardener, coachman and undertaker (brand eins, 2022, p. 24). Moreover, Christoph Koch (2022, p. 20) points out in *Erde zu Erde*, laws specifying *death* procedures such as Germany's 'Beisetzungs- and Friedhofszwang'⁸, require anyone who has died to be buried according to certain regulations and (except in the case of burial at sea) in a place designated as a cemetery. These laws and regulations further established funeral homes and related professions as the only option for people to turn to when a loved one passes.

Today, *death* care in the West solely lies in the hands of funeral homes, with little alternatives to choose from. This has brought upon a multitude of issues, specifically around pricing, affordability, and individuality. Most significantly, the industry exploits the concept of what we consider as 'traditional' to "encourage consumers to spend more money on a funeral service, and to justify the increase of services provided by the funeral home" (Shelvock, et al., 2022, p. 642). However, as Shelvock et al. (ibid) point out, "there is nothing 'traditional' about a profit-driven funeral industry that charges exorbitant fees to manage our deceased loved ones" and shockingly, "funerals are one of the largest expenses a person will incur in a lifetime".

8| Burial and cemetery obligation

The *German Trade and Crafts Code* considers funeral services as a craft and therefore „they are not subject to licensing or price transparency regulations“ (Competition and Markets Authority, 2019, p. 12). Germany is in fact “the most expensive European country to die” in and the second most expensive country in the world after Japan (Sunlife, July 2020). End of life rituals cost “16% of the overall average (German) salary” and costs can vary greatly - from less than 2,000 euros for an anonymous cremation to 35,000 for a grandiose funeral (Molitor, 2022, p. 9). The cost breakdown of an exemplary urn burial was done for brand eins’s *Sterbepreport 2022* (image) and it shows that on one hand there are many obligatory costs, related to bureaucratic procedures and laws, that families need to cover. On the other

hand, it shows there are a large variety of extra options (e.g. decorations, casket bedding, flowers, stationary, music) that funeral homes may offer and where profits are made. Losing a family member in Germany can quickly become a financial burden. Especially due to the traditional and societal expectations in which honoring a person one last time is equated with being able to pay for ‘the best’ funeral home services. This financial weight is socially and emotionally destructive for family members of the deceased, who may suddenly have to locate large sums of money to bury their loved ones in their states of grief. *Death* is therefore very much a social (design) issue, a wicked problem, in which class divides become apparent and shows that one isn’t as equal in death as one might think.

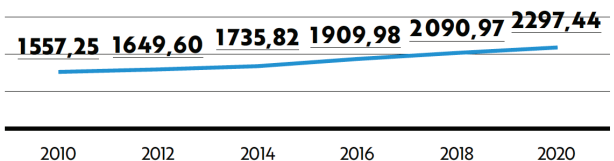
The journalist Andreas Molitor (2022, p. 9) writes in the *Sterbepreport 2022*, that the funeral market is “stable, adequate and crisis-proof”; with almost one million people dying in Germany every year. Additionally, as the baby boomer generation is getting older, “the human (and older) population is significantly expanding in Western society, (...) the funeral home and funeral service industry will likely continue to flourish and expand” (Shelvock, et al., 2022, p. 644). In Germany, this trend is already visible if one looks at the period between 2010 to 2020. Within ten years, the

KOSTENAUFSTELLUNG FÜR EINE URNENBESTATTUNG	
	● obligatorisch ● optional
Handelswaren	
• Sarg inkl. Beschläge/Schrauben	500,00 €
• Sargmatratze	50,00 €
• Bespannung	100,00 €
• Kissen/Decke	80,00 €
• Damen-/Herrentalar	80,00 €
• Schmuckurne	250,00 €
<small>In den Preisen der Handelswaren sind Lager-, Einkaufs- und Beschaffungskosten einkalkuliert.</small>	
Bestattungsdienstleistungen	
• Erstüberführung und Grundversorgung	499,00 €
• Zweitüberführung zum Krematorium	337,00 €
• Verstorbenenversorgung	145,00 €
• Kühlung	175,00 €
• Abschiednahme	119,00 €
• Beratung und Organisation	367,00 €
• Erledigung der Formalitäten	189,00 €
• Trauerfeier-Dienstleistungen	170,00 €
• Dekoration	160,00 €
• Musikanlage	60,00 €
• Porträt mit Rahmen	70,00 €
• 30 Trauerkarten mit Umschlägen inkl. Versand	200,00 €
Fremde Dienstleistungen	
• Trauerrede	515,00 €
• Orgelmusik/Trompete o.Ä.	100,00 €
• Urnenschmuck (Florist)	150,00 €
• Gesteck/Kranz mit Schleife	200,00 €
• Streublumen	30,00 €
• Traueranzeige in der Zeitung	500,00 €
• Gebühr für Kremierung	220,00 €
Durchlaufende Posten	
• Todesbescheinigung	200,00 €
• zweite Leichenschau	31,00 €
• 2 Sterbeurkunden	18,00 €
• Friedhofsgebühren	1000,00 €
gesamt	6515,00 €

Figure 4 Cost breakdown for an urn burial in Germany (2022). Source: brand eins, Sterbepreport 2022

WIE VIEL UMSATZ ERWIRTSCHAFTET DIE BRANCHE?

2010 – 2020; Deutschland; in Millionen Euro



Quelle: Statistisches Bundesamt

Figure 5 Rising trend of increasing turnover of Germany's funeral industry (2022). Source: brand eins, Sterbepreport 2022

the industry went from a turnover of 1557,25 million to 2297,44 million, showing the rising demand of services and profits to be made (brand eins, 2022, p. 24).

These potential business opportunities have not gone unnoticed, and it seems like the West is entering a new stage of *death* commercialization. Defined in large part by profit-making, as the journalist Markian Hawryluk (2022) reported in *Fortune Magazine*, that private equity-backed firms are increasingly "gobbling up" a "growing percentage of the funeral home industry and the broader death care market" in the United States. These firms are "attracted by high profit margins, predictable income, and the eventual deaths of tens of millions of baby boomers" (ibid). On the other hand, alternative burials offered through a select few modern funeral homes, are on the rise, and in Germany these are especially popular in major cities such as Berlin (Molitor, 2022, p. 13). A counter movement seems to be emerging, focused on individuality, and based on the notion of "what feels right" to the family, intentionally moving away from a "package deal" (ibid). It is here, where strategic opportunities are starting to come up in this transformational stage, and in which social design can play a role.

3.4.2 Traditional *death* practice's destruction of the planet

The last decade has been marked by an increasing environmental consciousness in the West (brand eins, 2022, p. 96). More and more people are trying to live sustainable lives closer connected to nature – perhaps *death* and dying in the 21st century should reflect these values too. However, Western avoidance of death has made us unwilling to look at the destructive reality that lies underground - we bury our dead out of sight and out of mind. Herring (2019, p. 113) describes what this has led to: "our cemeteries today are toxic landfills, even the ones that are beautifully kept and peaceful and serene on the surface". Whether you are standing in Paris's iconic Pere Le Chaise or Berlin's beautiful Walfriedhof,

the ground will be filled with non-organic waste and chemicals, that are slowly but surely damaging the environment.

Herring (ibid) paints a bleak picture of what the United States⁹ buries: "(...) 2,700 tons of copper and bronze and 90,272 tons of steel from caskets, enough to build a Golden Gate Bridge each year". As well as "20 million board feet of hardwoods for caskets - the equivalent of 77,000 trees, many of which are from endangered species of wood" (ibid). There are many unsustainable facets in the West funeral practices that need to be addressed – for example, the burial of caskets and urns made from non-organic, non-biodegradable materials. Current designs often feature metal elements, may have polyester bedding and/or have been painted or lacquered (ibid). Once these are buried in the ground, harmful toxins are released over time and contaminate the soil and ground water or may never break down in the first place (ibid). Moreover, cremation, which according to the *Sterbereport 2022*, 76% of Germans would opt for, produces exorbitant amounts of pollutants:- Germany's 160 crematories release approximately 48 374 000 Kilogram of CO2 emissions into the air yearly (brand eins, 2022, pp. 57-58). This is equivalent to driving 318 250 000 km with an average German car (ibid).

Death practices have been unsustainable for many years: disconnected from nature and reflective of our inability to allow *death* into our lives and accept it as the cycle of life. As Rachele Younie (2022), host of the podcast *Mortality and the Morgue*, points

9| Additionally, Younie (2022) pointed out that in North America, burial plots are land purchases and thus cemeteries keep expanding into the natural environment. Moreover, the practice of embalming of the body to prevent decay (predominant in North America and rarely done in Germany) has dire consequences as the chemicals used pose significant health risks for funeral home directors and result in soil and ground water contamination.

out “we have no ideal method for disposing of the dead”. Options in Germany specifically are limited, by law, to either casket burial or cremation, with little leeway for emerging alternative practices such as green burial or human composting. However, things are changing. In 2001, the first *FriedWald* burial forest (Bestattungswald) opened in Germany and today there are over 415 natural burial places across the country (brand eins, 2022, p. 96). Not only are tree and nature burials more sustainable options, but they are also significantly more affordable and are increasingly popular in German society (ibid, p. 97). Like the gradual emergence of alternative funeral homes, there is also a societal turn towards alternative funeral practices and this is characteristic of the move away from forbidden to spectacular *death*.

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3.4.3. Consumption as the contemporary immortality system

In *All We Want: Building the Life We Cannot Buy*, the journalist Michael Harris touches upon the intersection of *death* avoidance, capital means and unlimited consumption. Harris (2021, p. 116) describes how the advertisement industry, starting back in the mid 20th century (think *Mad Men*) created and encouraged an “intimacy between ourselves and our things”. Today, the effects are detrimental:

They encourage us to pour some part of ourselves into each possession: if those possessions are lost, we are prompted to feel a 'sense of the shrinkage of our

personality, a partial conversion of ourselves to nothingness'. Perhaps each of these miniature losses is an initiation of that loss - our death, when we lose our most valuable material treasure, the body. Perhaps it hurts so much to lose a coffee mug, a book, a toy, because it reminds us that nothing material is everlasting, and we will one day forfeit even our flesh and bone. If losing things can feel like we're losing ourselves, the opposite also proves true. Buying new things gives us a sense of being renewed. Purchases often feel like an affirming of the self.

(ibid)

Consumption is a coping mechanism for *death* anxiety and capitalism is now the West's biggest “immortality system”: it makes us believe we can outperform and outbuy *death*. In *My Year of Magical Thinking*, the author Joan Didion (2005, p. describes her realization of: “(...) how open we are to the persistent message that we can avert *death*. And to its punitive correlative, the message that if *death* catches us, we have only ourselves to blame”. *Death* is the antonym of growth, of progress and thus stands in opposition to the capitalist system of the West, that is so focused on life.

BUY BUY BUY
MORE MORE MORE

Performing daily labour and purchasing goods and services, gives a sense of meaning in life and hopes of progress within the immortality system.

Today, humans are willing to pay the high prices of funeral homes because of consumerist tendencies – especially the West places a high monetary value on the dead and see it as an honour, an obligation, and an expectation to pay so much. The founders of *Urifold*, who offer sustainable paper urns, describe how people tend to choose the most expensive options because this signals that it is the best and most respectful towards the deceased person - a inexpensive paper urn is less appealing because this might be considered disrespectful (Steinhauf & Scheidig, 2022).

3.5 *Death* and Academia

In recent years there has also been an increase in thanatological researchers – thanatology being the study of *death* – and it has “become a topic of academic attention” (Jacobsen, 2016, pp. 13-14). In Germany the first ever Thanatology-related program was only established in the winter semester of 2020/21: M.A. in *Perimortale Wissenschaften* at the University of Regensburg. This may be the beginning of a shift towards thanatology becoming a field of research in Germany and reflects the extent to which *death* is becoming a topic of discourse in wider society.

As of now, thanatology is the most established as an academic field in the United Kingdom, with for example the *Centre for Death and Life Studies* at Durham University and programs like an M.A. in *Death, Religion and Culture* at the University of Winchester or *End of Life Studies* at the University of Glasgow. This is in stark contrast to the rest of the West: in all of North America, there is one university that offers a Bachelor of Arts in *Thanatology*, King's University in London, Ontario.

3.6 Ritual Component of *Death*

Finally, a tentative “new counterculture to (the) disappearance or denigration of many death rituals” has led to a “rise of new rituals and the reappearance and reinvention of old ones” (Jacobsen, 2016, p. 12). This “re-ritualization of death,” is visible in different aspects of today’s *death* culture, from the previously mentioned establishment of green burial cemeteries such as *FriedWald* to the revival of home vigils (ibid). In addition there has been a rise in popularity of decomposing and sustainable caskets and urns, as well as newfound interest in working with a *death* doula for end-of-life support.

People are recognizing the need for a new way of honoring and celebrating *death* that fits to the standards and way of life of Western contemporary society, especially because religious-based rites do not suffice anymore. Considering environmental, financial, and social concerns of the 21st century, it seems that people lack connection to how *death* ‘is done’ in the mainstream, one-size-fits-all, funeral industry way. Buist (2021, p. 84) describes this highly mechanized process in the United Kingdom: “(...) when someone dies the body is removed by professional body removers, burned by professional body burners, and handed back to you as ash in two stapled bags and a sealed box”

In Germany, the impersonal package deals of funeral homes are seemingly not sufficient anymore: people are craving individualization and as the *Sterbereport 2022* highlights, they no longer want “black and silent”, as “the new way to mourn is colorful, emotional and free” (Rasche, 2022, p. 117). Part of the new counterculture is therefore the rise of alternative, modern funeral homes and *death* services providers, such as the Berlin-based *mymoria*, *Das Fährhaus* and *Junimond* (ibid). These are the significant contributors willing to provide a space to discover old and new *death* rituals.

Moreover, the slow revival of home vigils, in which the deceased remains in the home and family and friends can say goodbye and take care of the body as a community, is also indicative of re-ritualisation. Home vigils offer people a connection to life and *death* and allows for an understanding of how our bodies return to the Earth at the end of our lives. Unbeknownst to most, this is an option in Germany - it is possible to request to take a body back home for 36 hours, even if they passed away in hospital. My own mother passed away in a Berlin hospital in the Summer of 2021 and I was not given this opportunity. Finding out about the possibility throughout this research process has been heart-breaking, as I believe in the benefit that such a practice would have offered to me, my family and my mother’s friends in the mourning and grieving process.

Herring (2019, p. 124) whose work as a green burial guide is based on finding old and new rituals that deeply resonate with individuals, describes the benefits of the current move towards personalized re-ritualization:

When we creatively engage in rituals and ceremonies that give something back to nature, there is often a tangible sense of wholeness and completion, and a kind of peace that seems to come from the earth itself, and the cyclical webs of life welcoming our loved one home. Such experience can be a potent remedy for the fear, avoidance, and denial so many of us carry about death today.

3.7 Key Findings

In what Jacobsen coined the age of spectacular *death*, the West is currently developing a new relationship with *death*, transitioning towards the needs of the individual, transparency, and sustainability. This chapter partially aims to answer the first research question of what the critical questions, strategic opportunities, and significant contributions around *death* and design are in the West. The key research insights can be summarized as:

—> Society has changed significantly due to digitalization and globalization in the 21st century.

—> Accelerated by the pandemic and *death* mediatization in recent years, concerns regarding sustainability, lack of financial transparency and impersonal rituals, have become louder.

—> People are looking for alternative funeral options and in response contemporary *death* businesses and services are emerging.

Modern Western society is in a state of transition when it comes to dealing with *death* considering these certain challenges and needs of the 21st century – this poses an opportunity for social design.

The following chapter summarizes insights from interviews and a survey to answer the first research question and begin to uncover how social design might help reimagine and improve *death* culture and communication in Germany.

Strategic Opportunities
in German *Death* Culture

Chapter 4

As stated in the introduction, social design promotes positive social change and uses the myriad tools design has to offer, to tackle wicked problems. The wicked problem to tackle, as the research above has shown, is an outdated *death* culture.

To identify the specific design needs for a socially, environmentally, and economically sustainable transformation of *death* in Germany, this thesis now turns from theory to practice and investigates how people today are affected by and are working in or contributing to this field.

4.1 Interviews in the *Death* Industry

Interviews were conducted with eleven German actors who have experience with the 'moderne Bestattungskulturen' movement, ranging from urn makers to condolence card designers. Each Zoom conversation lasted between 45 minutes to 1.5 hours and the individual interview summaries can be found in Appendix A.

Urnfold (*Urnmakers*)

Kristina Steinhaut
& Katharina Scheidig



Figure 6 Urnfold's first collection of urn (2023).
Source: <https://www.Urnfold.de/geschichte/>

In 2022, the two co-founders of *Urnfold* successfully launched their very first collection of fifteen handmade, folded paper urns, made from high quality, sustainable paper. After personally experiencing discontent with unattractive and expensive urn options offered at German funeral homes, the two decided to provide sustainable, attractive alternatives. They are one of the few modern urnmakers changing the market with their contemporary aesthetics. Kristina stressed that "it's not about making death more beautiful, when someone dies it sucks" but that "one can deal better with the death if it is aesthetically pleasing and fitting to the person that has passed away" (Steinhaut & Scheidig, 2022). The two also offer a *Speeddating with Death*: weekly Tuesday night Zoom meetings providing space for openly talking about *death*.

Bestattungen Dabringhaus im Thanatorium (*Funeral Home*)

Lena Dabringhaus

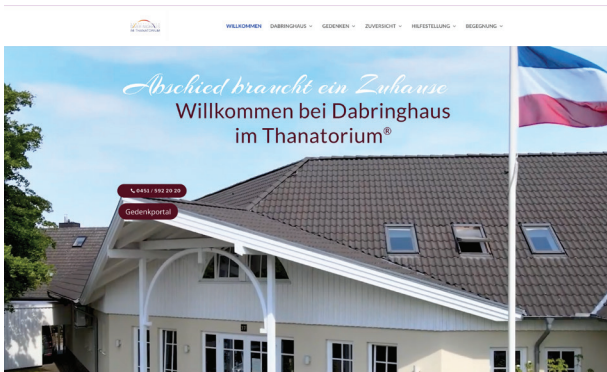


Figure 7 Website of Bestattungen Dabringhaus (2023)
Source: <https://dabringhaus.de/>

34
Lena's parents own *Bestattungen Dabringhaus im Thanatorium*, a modern funeral home in Lübeck. She plans to join the family business with her partner and brother after completing her studies in forensics. Lena "grew up around death" and has a unique, first-hand perspective on German *death* culture and funeral homes (Dabringhaus, 2022). Her grievances are clear: "German funeral rituals are gloomy and have a stick up their ass,"- somehow everywhere but in Europe, people are able to embrace *death* and a more positive culture around it but "our funeral culture is backward, old-fashioned and conservative¹⁰" (ibid). She wants to change

Schwer Okay (*Modern Grief Support*)

Chiara Sterzl & Lena Daur

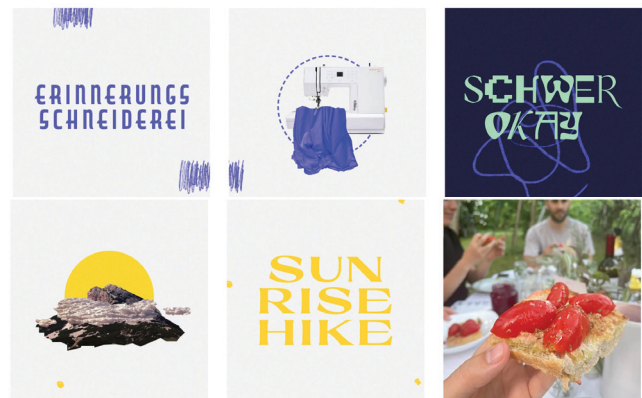


Figure 8 Schwer Okay's website (2023) Source: <https://schwer-okay.com/>

Schwer Okay was created in the context of the two women's master thesis in eco-social design at the University of Bolzano. Having identified the lack of support for those experiencing grief (whether it's been a recent loss or many years), the two decided to explore this absence in Western society from a design perspective. Looking into unconventional ways of helping those who have lost someone, their first grief events this summer included *Silent Nature Dances*, *Eat'n'Grief*, *Erinnerungsschneiderei* and a *Sunrise Hike*. *Schwer Okay*, in collaboration with professional partners, offers unconventional, alternative, and truly empathetic grief support.

10| Translation from the German word 'bieder'

Trauerei (Podcast)
Evangelischer Kirchenkreis
Tempelhof-Schöneberg
(Grief Counsellor)

Anna Ziegenhagen



Figure 9 Logo of *trauerei* podcast (2023) Source: <https://www.trauerei.org/>

In all of Berlin, Anna and her part-time colleague are the only grief counsellors offering free, accessible counselling services for young adults in the form of grief groups. The *Trauerei* Podcast was born out of a *Soul-food* event, where young grieverers come together, cook and chat. Mira, Kathleen and Sara (former grief group attendees) created 11 episodes together with Anna, to help young mourners like themselves. By broadcasting voices of people with similar experiences of *death*, the podcast gives space for a larger grieving audience to be felt heard, understood, and connected.

La Muerte
(Webseries & Online Platform)

Rebecca Emmenegger



Figure 10 La Muerte webseries (2023) Source: <https://lamuerte.ch/>

La Muerte is Rebecca's bachelor project at the Zurich University of the Arts. The web series features three protagonists on their way to accepting their own *death*. Three episodes entitled acceptance, repression, and confrontation, aim to get people closer to dealing with finiteness: a rendezvous with *death*. The project reflects that "the design, the aesthetics must adapt to our generation and our taste" (Emmenegger, 2022). It stands in opposition to the design in *death* care and funeral homes, that is still directed at the elderly and alienates younger generations. *La Muerte's* digital platform *lamuerte.ch*, showcases people in the modern *death* industry and is designed to create a relaxed virtual space: the user intuitively clicks on floating, colorful shapes.

Mortality and the Morgue (Podcast)

Rachelle Younie

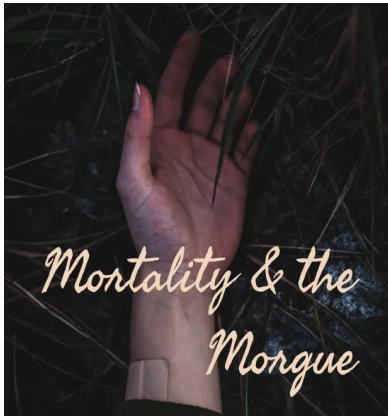


Figure 11 Mortality & the Morgue podcast cover (2023) Source: <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/mortality-and-the-morgue/id1596503981>

Based in Vancouver, Canada, Rachelle is the host and creator of the podcast *Mortality and the Morgue*. She discusses the “morbid details” of her former job at the morgue and “sits down with death care workers, doctors, artists and more to delve into societal views and philosophies surrounding death, dying and grief” (Younie, 2022). The podcast is supposed to be “judgment-free zone” and stands in opposition to the still prevalent “stigma and fear around death” and the “idea that if you speak about death more, you are inviting it into your life” (ibid).

Death Positiv (Death Travel Companions)

Verena Brunnbauer
& nicole honeck

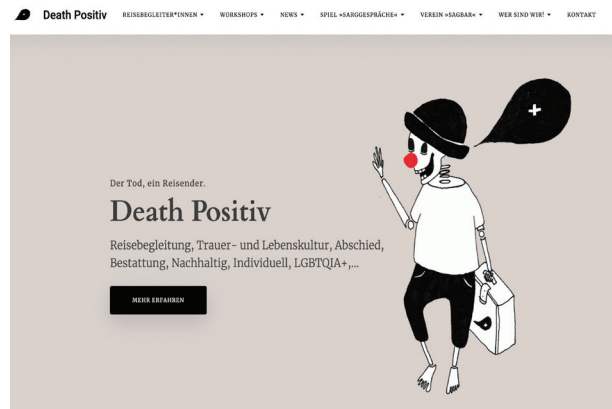


Figure 12 Homepage of Death Positiv (2023) Source: <https://deathpositiv.at/>

Based in Linz, Austria, *Death Positiv* offer secular services as funeral orators. With their mobile coffin bar *Sargbar*, a “performative and inviting” art object, the two aim to “create space and time to discuss, explore, and break taboos together on the topic of death and mortality” (Brunnbauer & nicole, 2022). It provides a room for storytelling and sharing. They have also published a card game called *Sarggespräche* for all ages, which is “a tool to exchange thoughts, preferences, stories about life and death in an entertaining way” and together “discuss, explore and break taboos about death and mortality” (ibid).

heartfelt paper & co.
(Condolence Stationery)

Laura Willen



Figure 13 Homepage of heartfelt paper & co (2023) Source: <https://www.heartfelt-paperandco.de/>

The freelance designer and art director founded *heartfelt paper & co* in November 2020, together with her friend, Julia Reich. After having experienced that, “on a design level you get it shoved in your face how crappy everything is”, the vision for a better way of dealing with uncomfortable issues such as grief and serious illness led the designers, to create stylish and timely bereavement stationery (Willen, 2022). Standard condolence platitudes like “Stille Anteilnahme (Silent Sympathy)” printed on black and white cards, are the opposite of what many want. Using sustainable materials, *heartfelt* is modernizing condolence stationery with warm-hearted messages and colorful designs. Laura now runs the business herself and was just recognized with the *German Design Award, Gold for Posters, Cards and Photography* in the *Excellent Communications Design* category.

4.1.2 Evaluation: qualitative content analysis

To structure the interview responses and deduct insights for a social design intervention in German *death* culture today, the psychologist and social scientist Philipp Mayring’s qualitative content analysis was conducted. The interviews were led in an open, free-flowing conversation style during which notes were taken by the interviewer. The questions varied slightly according to the interview partner; however the following topics were touched upon every time:

- personal pathway to *death*
- personal work with *death* / *death* work
- issues in the current *death* industry and its effects on society
- *death* and design / aesthetics.

According to Mayring (2014) in *Qualitative content analysis: theoretical foundation, basic procedures and software solution*, transforming spoken word to text needs to have specific “transcription rules” (p. 45). For this coding process the chosen “transcription system” was a “comprehensive protocol”: a 2–4-page summary written immediately after each conversation based on the taken notes (p. 45).

The protocols were then used as the base for the following coding process:

1. Review and familiarization of interview data
2. Creation of visual structural framework using the digital tool miro
3. First round of classifying data and employing open coding of text fragments into overlying categories
4. Second round of selective coding of text fragments within each overlying category into multiple subcategories
5. Clustering and visualization of subcategories, categories, key quotes as well as relationships of categories to each other

4.1.3 Findings

The qualitative coding of the interviews into categories and sub-categories resulted in a quantitative and relational clustering, which revealed that the approaches to *death* in German culture seems to be outdated. It does not align with the needs of contemporary society. This category is defined by the following problems (further sub-categories) in *death* culture: restrictive bureaucracy, focus on capitalism and profit-making, the backward state of funeral homes, societal expectations, and the former role of religion. The effects of this *death* culture are most likely to be experienced with personal loss or close death. Furthermore, it made those, who are now actors in the 'moderne Bestattungskulturen' movement, recognize these faults and engage with the *death* industry.

Moreover, coding revealed many unmet needs in German *death* culture. This is especially true in the funeral home industry and in the aesthetics and design for *death*: more empathy, more time and individuality are needed. Furthermore there are unmet needs when it comes to offering space for *death* and grief, sustainable practices across the board, better communication and education on *death* and grief, *death* pre-planning, design that is inclusive of life and death as well as diversity regarding different religions, lifestyles and needs. The actors, who are currently trying to address these needs are predominantly women, who have started projects and businesses that offer alternatives to the dominant *death* culture.

4.1.4 Interpretation

All interview partners were women – an unintentional outcome that arose naturally throughout the research and interview request process¹¹. This reflects the general trend of women as the leading changemakers in Germany's *death* and grief culture. In summary, the interviews showed that:

1. There is a movement of actors across Germany and the DACH region, that is attempting to revolutionize the way *death* is handled - from a communication, services, therapeutic, as well as design perspective.
2. This movement developed in recent years as actors recognized that in German society there is no space for *death* and grief, often after having had personal experiences or in light of the pandemic.
3. This movement of 'moderne Bestattungskulturen' is growing as young, non-traditional actors are creating businesses and initiatives that 'do *death* differently'.
4. However, it is a disjointed movement of individual actors, and remains largely invisible to potential consumers and retailers (in this case funeral homes).
5. Many actors described that they operate in their own alternative *death* culture "bubble".

Connecting this interpretation of interview insights to the two research questions of what are critical questions, strategic opportunities, and significant contributions around death, and design in the West and as how might social design help reimagine and improve *death* culture and communication in Germany? One can deduct that there is an opportunity for social design to create access to this "bubble" for the public while simultaneously showcasing it, thus enabling the emerging movement of 'moderne Bestattungskulturen'.

11| While I was in contact with multiple, potentially male interview partners in the alternative funeral

4.2 Survey: *Death* and Design

Using the online platform *typeform*, a survey on *death* and design was published in October 2022 and ran until December 2022. It brought in 91 personal opinions on, and experiences of death, predominantly from people residing in Germany and Canada. The link to the survey as well as the complete survey results can be found in Appendix B.

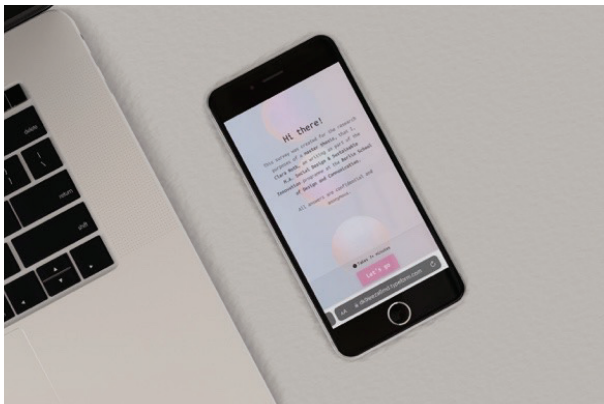


Figure 16 Mock-up of typeform survey (2023) Source: <https://dk9ieeza6md.typeform.com/to/TBIS1Coy>

4.2.1 Discussion

Discussing the outcomes of the entire survey is outside of the scope of this thesis. However, for future projects, this research will be useful especially for further North American-European cross-cultural examination of death attitudes. The following discussion focuses on the most insightful outcomes for the research question of how social design can help reimagine and improve *death* culture and communication in Germany today.

→ Survey respondents

The survey respondents totaled 91, from 13 different countries. The two largest group of respondents by current residing country were German (37 responses, 40%) and Canadian (36 responses, 39.6%). Moreover, as seen on the right, most respondents (80%) were in the age group of 20-30. Finally, 52 identified as she/her, 20 identified as he/him and 1 as they/them. The remaining participants preferred

not to identify themselves. The survey thus reflects a Western, young and largely female perspective on death.

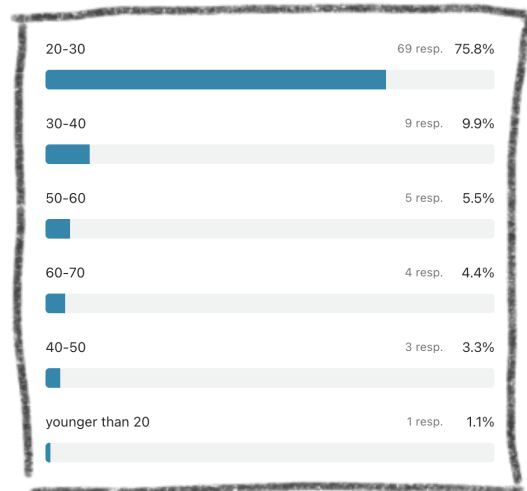


Figure 17 Age of survey respondents (2023), Source: <https://dk9ieeza6md.typeform.com/to/TBIS1Coy>

→ Personal experience with death

Over 92% answered that they had experiences with death. When asked to share more specifics, if comfortable, almost all respondents provided detailed descriptions of the friends, family and pets they lost e.g. "My father died two weeks ago" or "Childhood best friend died of brain cancer in 2021 at the age of 28". Overall, most survey respondents had lost at least a grandparent. An overview of these responses can be found in Appendix B.

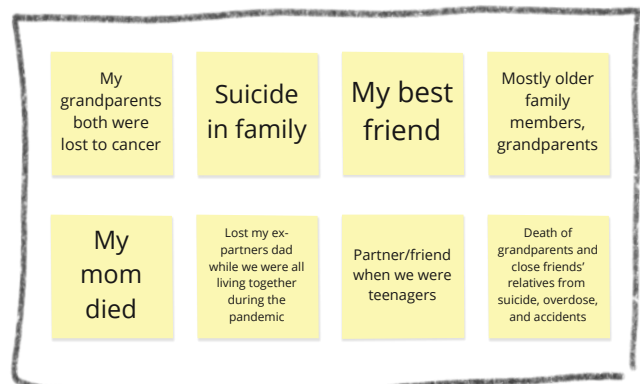


Figure 18 Selection of personal experiences with death (2023) Source: <https://dk9ieeza6md.typeform.com/to/TBIS1Coy>

→ Personal relationship to death

The first set of questions revealed that respondents were more scared of other people in their life dying than of their own death (Appendix B). To the statement "I think about death a lot" 65% were leaning in-between "kinda" and "never". Death seems to be in the back of people's minds.

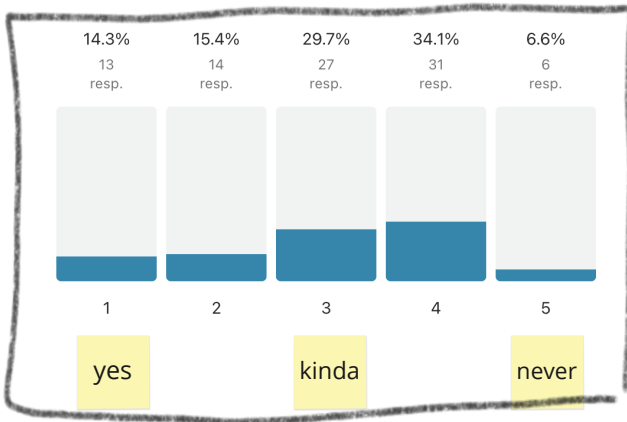


Figure 19 Answers to "I think about death a lot" (2023) Source: <https://dk9ieeza6md.typeform.com/to/TBIS1Coy>

The following open answer questions relating to respondent's personal relationship to death were clustered by thematic key words:

What is death to you?

memory
loss
inevitable
part of life *interlude*
physical end
end (of life) *inevitable*
scary *unknown*
nothingness
cycle of life

transition

How does talking about death make you feel?

uncomfortable *sad*
 anxious *grounded*
denial *detached* *present*
 uncertain
contemplative *ok*

good *not sure*

What are your personal coping mechanisms (conscious and subconscious) that help you deal with the fact that you (and everyone around you) will at some point have to face death?

avoidance *talk* *memory*

be mindful *party*
 exercise
say yes *acceptance*
focus on loved ones
living life *love*

legacy *nature*

→ Death rituals and their aesthetics

In this survey, funerals, memorial services, and celebrations of life were listed as death rituals. In response to the question of how did the ritual you attended make you feel?

sad *distant* *lonely* *heavy*
 mixed feelings *helpful*
comfortable *community* *respectful*

the most mentioned feelings, point to the ambivalence that currently exists regarding these death rituals in the West. On one hand, many responded as feeling very sad and distanced from the ritual, but simultaneously

This became even more visible in the next question asking respondents to describe the 'visual identity' of the ritual that they attended. Almost all answers described funerals as black – mentioned over 60 times. Respondents also mentioned flowers as the only sources of color during the predominantly black themed events. On the other hand, descriptions of celebrations of life referred to warmth and light, colors and also flowers. Many described the use of outside spaces such as gardens or backyards of the family's home.

	<i>light</i>	<i>cold</i>	<i>sombre</i>
<i>casual</i>			
	<i>colourful</i>	<i>black</i>	<i>music</i>
<u>Celebration of life</u>	vs.	<u>Funeral</u>	
<i>warm</i>		<i>many flowers</i>	
<i>outside</i>		<i>(only colour)</i>	
<i>semi-formal</i>			

→ Condolence and design

Respondents were shown eight different condolence cards, ranging from traditional to modern designs (Appendix B). They then selected the three, which they had come across the most often. Traditional cards in black and white, with religious motifs such as a cross or psalms, were chosen the most often and reflect the dominance of this type of design in Western mourning culture.

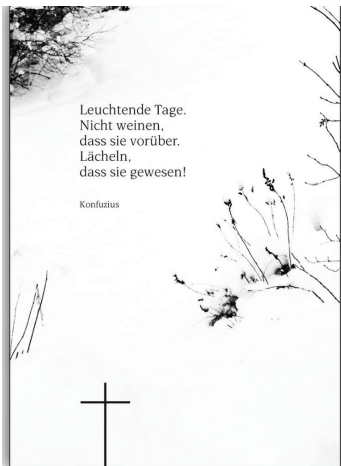


Figure 20 Most common condolence card according to 56.6% of respondents (2023) Source: serafinum.de



Figure 21 Second most common condolence card according to 50.6% of respondents (2023) Source: daskartendruckhaus.de



Figure 22 Third most common condolence card according to 40.8% of respondents (2023) Source: friendlyfox.de

→ The end: a celebration of life

To the final, open answer question: "when you pass away, how would you like to mark the end of your life?", most respondents imagine a big party to be remembered by, motivated by wanting to provide all their loved ones with a space to grieve, a place to remember the person by and especially celebrate one last time. Celebrations of life were preferred over funerals by almost all respondents, and many wanted these to take place in nature. Multiple respondents mentioned that marking their end of life was not about them but about all those left behind, and that they should do what is best for them.

4.2.2 Interpretation

1. People are very willing to share their highly personal, often internalized experiences with, and relationship to death.

→ This shows that once a space for sharing about death has been established, people are comfortable to open.

→ One of the most mentioned coping mechanisms for dealing with death was to openly talk about it with family and friends.

→ This is in line with what the interviews revealed: there is a need for more open communication around death and once space is offered people are very willing to engage.

2. Death is not as much of a taboo topic anymore and thus stands in contrast to the traditional death and funeral culture in Western society.

3. Most people in 2022 would prefer a celebration of life, rather than a traditional funeral

→ Regarding aesthetics and rituals, most respondents either felt distanced from what funerals offer or voiced the wish to celebrate rather than mourn life.

4. The color black, accompanied by Christian symbolism and text remains dominant in funerals, card design and Western death culture

→ This seems unfitting to a more and more secular society, which would rather opt for celebrations of life

→ This poses a strategic opportunity for social design.

5. Women made up over 50% of the respondents – pointing to a potentially higher willingness of women to engage with the topic of death.

→ This has come up throughout the entire research process and the interviews.

The survey insights suggest that social design may be able to help reimagine and improve death culture and communication in Germany. This could be done by facilitating a space for open death communication and helping to enable a transition away from the traditional, black funeral industry to alternatives that offer individualized, colorful celebrations of life.

4.2.3 Limitations

1. Overrepresentation of 20-30 year old respondents as the survey was predominantly shared through social media channels:

→ Facebook and LinkedIn attracted respondents above the age of 30 but the use of Instagram resulted in the large proportion of ages 20-30.

→ Results are skewed towards a younger generation, however are reflective of their needs, which the 'moderne Bestattungskulturen' are trying to address.

2. Survey language was English:

→ Not inclusive of non-English speakers in Germany and for further research a German survey would be necessary

→ English chosen to appeal to an international respondent group and because it is the language of the master program.

Meets *Death*

Social Design

Social Design and
Death Culture

Chapter 5

5.1 What a Social Design Intervention in Germany's *Death* Culture Should Address

From the qualitative and quantitative research showcased and interpreted in the previous chapters, the following five key insights can be addressed by social design interventions in Germany's death culture:

1. The strategic opportunity of using social design to create access, for the general German public, to the significant contributions of the growing 'bubble' of alternative, individualized death culture and modern funeral practices.
2. The strategic opportunity of using social design to further empower the emerging movement of socially and environmentally sustainable 'moderne Bestattungskulturen' by creating a network of these businesses and services and publicly showcasing their significant contributions in one space.
3. The strategic opportunity of using social design to make death look less terrifying by introducing modern aesthetics and making it look more warm, vibrant and a part of life, which people may consider more beautiful.
4. The strategic opportunity of using social design to facilitate a space for open death communication.
5. The strategic opportunity of using social design to enable the transition from traditional funerals to celebrations of life.

In conclusion, the insights from the literature review and desk research showcased in previous chapters of this thesis – in combination with the strategic opportunities identified above – show that exist ample prospects for social design to intervene in Germany's death culture. Most significantly, social design as a discipline focused on enabling social change through the means of design(ing) interdisciplinarily and collaboratively, seems matchlessly well-equipped to support and bring together the different actors in the emerging 'moderne Bestattungskulturen' movement. The next chapter showcases the conception, development, and final practical design outcome, that was created in response to the conclusions of the academic research presented here.

5.2 Concluding Personal Statement

I had not intended on including a personal statement of conclusion. However, the process of engaging, researching, and writing on death, resulted in such a significant personal transformation and level of clarity, that I want to mention my own experience of this thesis in the last months.

I knew I wanted to research the intersection of death and design within days after my mother passed away. The experience of sitting in a funeral home – which looked like an insurance office – and having to choose from a selection of aesthetically unpleasing death products and services for my mother, an art historian and extremely aesthetically-oriented person, was traumatizing. I felt misunderstood by the people across the table from me, I felt lost as an orphan expected to spend thousands of Euros and I felt like the funeral home space itself and the products offered to me, were all sending me the same message: how terrible the death of my mother was. When I now look back at myself, sitting on that terrible office chair, I realize how much I simply ‘operated’ and did what was traditionally expected of me by society. I did not know that you could do things differently, that death and its memorial rituals could look differently.

What I was also missing was open communication about, and an understanding for, the individual death of my mother. Her death was not terrible – it was a relief. She had been sick with cancer for over fifteen years. While she was too young to die in her late fifties, it was a relief after months of extreme pain and suffering – for her and for me. There was no space for me to tell this story or show feelings of relief in the funeral home or in any of the other expected death rites. Even now, people do not like when I describe her death as a relief or even good – it simply goes against the way death has been portrayed as bad to us for hundreds of years.


However, engaging with death so incessantly for months on end, might have been one of the hardest endeavors I have ever committed to and while I had a hunch that the academic engagement with my parent’s death would be beneficial to me, I never expected to feel this good as I do right now. Facing my grief by trying to understand what death’s role in life is supposed to be and how we can better design for it, has helped me understand that my own loss is actually natural and normal – I can now say that I accept my parent’s death. I hope that this shows to you, a person who is reading this thesis and has thus engaged with mortality for many pages already, that facing death and allowing it into your life is a rewarding, eye-opening and life-accepting experience.

It remains astonishing to me how removed design is from the death world and thus, there is so much to be done. This excites me! We need to understand that when we actively design for death and the dead, we also design for life and those who stay alive – because good death design has the capability to help lighten the pain of loss and grief. We need social death design. I see social design as an essential tool for mediation between aesthetics, communication, and the wicked problem that death is. Especially when it comes to offering those who will or have recently lost someone, and who are in dire need of death services (funeral home, urns, clothing, flowers), social design can give the grieving a voice. Provide the language and the space for people to communicate what they want to see and how they want to celebrate their loved ones.

Finally, after having written this body of work, I can happily say that I am not the only one who is passionate about changing our current approach to death in Germany. So many of the people I spoke to in the last months – whether

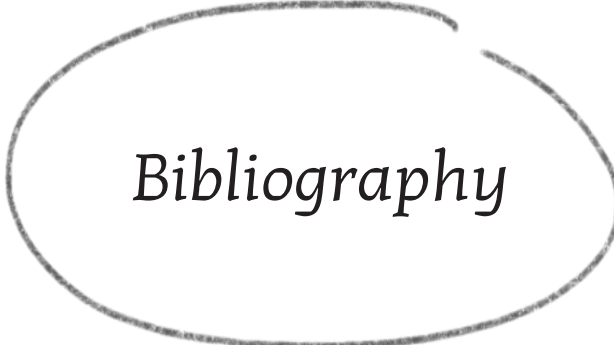
they were interview partners very engaged in the alternative death industry, my 84-year-old joyful grandmother who is not afraid to die or every single friend who asked me about my thesis and then immediately regretted chatting about death in a loud bar – they all expressed discontent with the way Western society approaches death. Their grievances, the stories they shared about loss, their own dreams for a more individual, empathetic, and warm approach to death – all these interactions made me feel less alone and instill in me a hope for a more death positive and death accepting society in the future. We are on our way there.

While I did indeed constantly question my own choices around the death and funeral of my mother, this thesis has inspired me to finally plan a celebration of life for her in the future. A day to mark her death that reflects the beautiful, warm and 'ray of sunshine' person she was. I have learned to accept that there is no right or wrong way of 'doing death', there is no good or bad timing – in the end it is all about remembering a loved one who has passed away, in whatever way feels right to you.



I hope these very personal concluding words provided some food for thought. For any questions, concerns, stories you would like to share or academic queries, please send an email to clara.a.roth@gmail.com .

I want to hear from you.



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Appendix

Appendix A: Interview Summaries

A.1 Interview with Lena Dabringhaus

Lena Dabringhaus grew up surrounded by death. She is the daughter of funeral home owners in Lübeck and is in her final year of completing her studies in forensics before she will return to join the family business with her partner and brother.

At the beginning of our first forty-five minute conversation, it became clear that she had spent a lot of time with death and had similar inclinations towards German death and funeral home culture, as me. After describing my investigation into social design and communication around death and dying in Germany as well as sharing my personal, traumatic experiences with funeral homes, Lena simply said: "German funeral rituals are gloomy and have a stick up their ass". Somehow everywhere else but not in Europe, people are able to embrace death and a more positive culture around it but "our funeral culture is backward, old-fashioned and conservative (bieder)." What got to me was when she said that the mourning are expected to "be as quiet as possible, no sobbing." This resonated with me so deeply, why do we feel like we cannot openly cry and show the full range of emotions at the funeral rites that we have today?

To the question of how her family actually came to be funeral home owners and morticians, Lena described how her dad's driving passion in life has always been to become a mortician or "Bestatter". She lovingly called him a "weird child", because he knew he wanted to work with the dead and have a funeral home from the young age of six - he even built his first casket as part of a school project that same year. Following his intuition and completing a Kaufmannausbildung (at the time there was no formal education for morticians in Germany) and thanalogy studies in the UK, lead him to open the Thanatorium in Lübeck over 20 years ago. The Thanatorium takes its name from Thanatos, the god of the dead. As Lena described it, "fear is taken away from you very quickly once you enter the funeral home, it is the opposite to a 0815 funeral home".

In a brief description of the physical space, Lena talked

about the fact that they have a chapel which is there for individual use - whether you want to "put up a cross, listen to ACDC or put in a Ferrari", everything goes. Additionally, they have three "Abschiedsräume" (farewell rooms), to which relatives get key cards so that they can go and visit their loved ones day and night until the actual funeral. Here we started to talking about the notion of home burial and Lena mentioned that they offer to stay with the relatives in the home and wash the loved ones body before taking them to the funeral home. They are happy to provide more time and space for the family as they need it, rather than just rushing the body away (as it is commonly done). They offer casket burial, cremation and urn burial as well as anonymous lake burial (Seebestattung). Her parents own a boat and for people who do not have any relatives, they provide urn burials on the lake, marking their placement.

Further discussing the Thanatorium's normal procedure when they have been contacted to take care of a deceased person, it became apparent how intuitive and caring their funeral home is. When a person dies and the family contacts them, they provide as much time as needed for the family before getting the body (and offer washing at home etc.). In the consultation session with the family, they offer a lot of space for wishes and needs to be voiced, rather than trying to place something onto the family. In the session they discuss: the type of funeral, music, whole organization of the funeral (rituals, certain cultures, individual desires to be expressed), specify whether jewellery from ashes want to be made, question whether they want to be present with technical care (coffin, clothes, make-up), florist, and help with the deregistration and documents. The technical care of the body is done, with or without the family, and the farewell room is offered as an option before the funeral proceeds to take place as wished by the family.

The Thanatorium offers a space for people's last wishes to come true. No matter how individual or unconventional requests may be, they will try and offer as much freedom as possible for the last goodbye. "Thanatorium is a place that people know of, where you can live out your last wishes" and for Lena this especially means being open to "different cultures and diversity". They

offer everything from conventional, Christian rituals to non-religious funerals and even the dead's favourite car placed next to them during their final service. Being open to other cultures and their death rituals seems to be unusual for German funeral homes, as Lena described the experience of a Chinese family that recently used the Thanatorium's services. Their needs and wishes had not been respected when they had last lost a family member in Germany, but were forced to adhere to German practices. They came to the Dabringhauses on recommendation and were able to perform the Chinese death rituals, such as the last meal for the deceased, carrying the body head forward only as well as the practice of hiring professionals to cry and wail for the deceased.

However, "German burial law is very strict and 'not diverse'" and Lena expressed how much she wished that "you could bury people the way they want to be buried". An example of this is the new burial type of "Reerdigung", which the Thanatorium has now offered twice already. In Reerdigung, the body is placed on soft, natural material and then into a cocoon. Within this cocoon, the body is then transformed into fruitful mother earth (Muttererde) over forty days with the help of microorganisms. The body is turned into extremely fertile humus and ideally would be given to the family. However, due to German burial law, this earth has to be buried in a cemetery within an urn or casket. As Lena said, "the Germans are once again in each other's way..."

As we were nearing the end of our conversation, we got to the topic of what she would like to change or implement when she becomes part of the Thanatorium, for a better death culture in Germany. Lena grew up with death but as a child, the people around her, "always met her with incomprehension (Unverständnis) on the subject of death." For this reason, she wants to "provide more education: offer a person to school children that they can ask about death and funerals". Another aspect is the need to somehow remove the fear from people to deal with death personally, for themselves. So that people start asking themselves "What do I want and what do I want for my loved ones to make this time easier?". Part of this is raising awareness that one can go to a "preliminary consultation". According to Lena,

very "few people know that you can come for a preliminary consultation, which takes a burden off the relatives! The possibilities are there but no one knows that or cares about it."

Finally Lena expressed how sad it makes her, that most funeral homes in Germany are not like the Thanatorium. Relative's "decisions are implemented in such a narrow-minded way" and while death of a loved one is already bad but what is offered at the mortician makes it even worse. This upsetting to her because most people have terrible experiences and end up disliking funeral homes in general, but there are good ones out there!

Interviewed November 1st, 2022, 45 minutes

A.2 Interview with Kristina Steinhauß & Katharina Scheidig

The founders of Urnfold, Kristina and Katharina are from Germany but met in the UK as teenagers – back then the friends definitely didn't expect to become urn makers by the time they reached their mid-20s. Fast forward to 2022: with their visions of sustainability, contemporary aesthetics and a more personalized funeral culture, the two successfully launched their very first collection of 15 handmade, folded paper urns, made from high quality, sustainable paper from Gmund.

We began our conversation with establishing common ground: you are also a woman in your 20s, you are also deeply aware of death and the limitations of German death culture. Great to meet you! Before diving deeper into Urnfold's work, Katharina (who studied Communication Design in Weimar) and I had a short philosophizing session around the aesthetic pressures that have come into fruition because of social media – everything needs to look good these days in order for it (whether personal brand, company, news etc.) to be successful.

In response to my question of how these two ended up working at the intersection of death and design, it began with (as for so many) with unsatisfactory experiences with the German death culture and its funeral home offerings. Katharina described how when Kristina (who at that time was completing a violin-making education) lost her father in 2014, the family went to a funeral home. Kristina had described this experience to Katharina by comparing it to when she had recently booked a Ryanair flight to go to the UK: tons of extra offers, add-ons, garish options to choose from. It felt like a very strange sales performance. Especially when it came to the urn, her family had the limited options of either extremely ugly or less ugly but expensive vessels for her father's ashes. Faced with these two non-options, Kristina asked the funeral home director if she could build her own urn, which he confirmed with some confusion. So, she did. In the process of creating this urn for him, she was able to ask herself what her dad liked (cherries) and what wood (cherry wood) would fit to him – an intimate and healing process. Katharina described how she herself had been to many funerals, considering her age. One of the most memorable

funerals had been the one of a very close friend, a joyous and fun-loving person. The family had chosen (from the most likely very limited options) a green and black marble urn, surrounded by white roses.

When she saw that, she could only think that her friend would have probably made a stupid joke about how hideous this urn was, and she remembers thinking to herself: what is this very strange event that is happening here right now. These were formative experiences and the two would joke about, if nothing else would world out, "we could always just start making urns". But then on a walk a few years later, they were ready to give it a try (despite things 'working out'). Urnfold was born.

The conversation moved towards the philosophy and products of Urnfold. On a product design level, the function of an urn is an aesthetic packaging to hold 3-5 kg of ash for a special moment, that then passes. That moment just like life is very impermanent. For their first collection, Katharina and Kristina therefore chose to make urns out of paper because "paper is a very good material to show this impermanence". The paper they source is sustainable and from the company Gmund. The special folding technique, signature to their urns, is made even more unique by the paper physical attributes, especially its haptics and weight. After this first collection, they are now looking into designing urns for children, for burial at sea as well as for pets. As Katharina pointed out, that while for many people nowadays, pets have the same emotional value as a family member, the options for animals urns are "amazingly ugly". For this reason they are starting to research into ceramics and 3D printing of ceramics for pet burials – making the vessel for the ash a "Wohnobjekt".

Talking about the subject of aesthetics, design and death, we asked ourselves why urns, caskets, and most of the end-of-life products look so terrible. As Katharina said, "people have always designed life beautifully for themselves and it's not as if there was no good design twenty or hundred years ago. All aspects of life were designed for but death was ignored and not designed for at all". Additionally, the few individually and aesthetically designed options in the past, have been very costly. In general, the end of life product

world is actually incredibly interesting and in need of change as Katharina pointed out. In product design (but also design and honestly, life in general), "the focus lies on being young, when you are older you are no longer attractive" – for people, for the design industry – because you're going to be gone sooner or later anyway. Why design for you?

Asking both Katharina and Kristina about their personal relationship with death, Katharina mentioned she recently recognized how early on she was interested in death. The first time she worked with death was with 16 for a college project in the UK, where she ended up taking photos of cemeteries across Europe. This is where she noticed the different ways in which people dealt with death for the first time. But she was a kid who thought about death a lot and when in 2001 her grandmother died out of the blue, age 64, she came to realize the fact that tomorrow, everything can be different. Life is impermanent and in this, she accepts that "I am basically alone". Accepting and knowing death provides her with calmness and clarity. Kristina on the other hand mentioned that on a professional level, she is totally distanceless to death – in her work, death is extremely close and present. But personally, while she is on a logical, rational level aware of her own finiteness, she is less fully accepting than Katharina: "preparing to be alone, when all others are gone, that is something you really can only do on a theoretical, cognitive level until it happens to you."

We turned to discuss the barriers that unfold have faced and spoke about where we think some of these come from. They mentioned that the funeral industry in Germany is rooted in craftsmanship - carpenters who were responsible for making caskets and urns, at some point also started driving them to the cemeteries and the funeral home industry started to develop into a business opportunity. But simultaneously, the Church had the power over the topic of death in society. It is there, according to Katharina, that a larger and larger gap has now opened between the funeral director (more conservative, rooted in craftsmanship and capital accumulation) and the church (which is losing relevance and unable to provide "Seelsorge"). Today, it is especially the lack of spiritual care and death counselling that is missing in German society.

And on top of that, a huge barrier is the complacency of people and the acceptance of "that's just the way it's always been done". Another barrier is when it comes to pricing and value. They mentioned that when they first discussed finding appropriate pricing for their handmade products (that was also supposed to be affordable), people would tell them to make sure they didn't make them too cheap. Because urns (and caskets) have external values attached to them: "this person is important to me, so I want the best of the best (and the way it looks like is not so important)". The problem is that this best of the best and what is considered the most valuable for a worthy person is considered the most expensive. In German society, value is determined by its monetary price. Additionally, the clash between old-established funeral homes and the new, modern ones is another barrier. Especially rural funeral homes see no reason to change anything – they have a secure position in their market and see no need for sustainable products, for counselling etc.

Kristina mentioned that she had a conversation with Germany's biggest urn maker, who had stated to her that there was no demand for modern, individual urns – most people chose the traditional styles. She thinks this is very emblematic of the current problem: individuality is difficult, and people cannot imagine what would be possible or doable. "No one can really imagine what else is out there because imaginative powers around death have been restricted for so long by Christian rituals". The highest amount of individuality at funerals is that somebody from the family or friends might speak during the service. This is not to say that rituals aren't important in these moments, but it needs new actors that lead by example and model new death rituals. Then you decide what works. As Kristina said, "you get your ideas because you see something, if you don't see the mourning, death and dying, in society at all, then you don't get the idea that you can do something to individualize that. You don't get what you need because you don't have the possibility."

The two mentioned that they have been in the bubble of what is called "neue Bestattungskulturen" (new funeral cultures), and that most people who are in that world now, came because of having had terrible experiences. So few had been exposed to death and funeral culture

before and “didn’t ask themselves about who was a ‘cool’ funeral home in their area or got to check the price-performance ratio, before stepping foot into a funeral home after someone’s death” and being’ locked in.’

Finally we discussed whether the people who come to buy urns from them are able to talk about death. Currently they have a pop-up shop and they mentioned that the people who come into their space, can talk very well about death with them specifically. “People are happy about a place where they can talk about it” and it turns out, that actually everyone talks about death to them all the time. There is a “huge need to talk about it”. They are currently selling Christmas decorations that ask you about your own death: you are meant to fill them out at home with your family but people really struggle with that idea. They don’t want to bring death into their home. As Katharina pointed out: “you know it’s happening, but you don’t want to look at it” and then there’s the fear of when “I talk about it then it becomes real, so I choose to repress it”. This provides a perceived sense of control.

Closing our conversation, the two invited me to take part in their weekly (Tuesday, 7.30 pm), “Speed dating with Death” Zoom Session, in which you get paired off and discuss topics about death and grief.

Interviewed November 8th, 2022, 1 hour.

A.3 Interview with Anna Ziegenhagen

Anna Ziegenhagen is a grief counsellor and has been working at the counseling center of the Evangelischer Kirchenkreis Tempelhof-Schöneberg since 2016. She quickly recognized the need for grief counselling specifically targeting young adults in Berlin, as more and more young people reached out to her. She now has her 10th grief group, of which the 8 spaces that are offered are always immediately full. Right now, Anna together with her part-time colleague are the only ones in Berlin offering free and accessible counselling services for young adults. There are two other spaces in Berlin, one of them not being free and the other one being Studentenwerk, where they only offer services to university students.

At one of Anna’s monthly events for young mourners called Soulfood, the idea for the podcast Trauererl was born. Soulfood is an event at which young people come together, cook and simply chat. It is not organized like a grief group but rather “for people who want to give their grief some space”. At one of those evenings, the three women Mira, Kathleen and Sara (all former members of Anna grief groups) met. Reflecting on how good it felt to exchange ideas and experiences at these evenings, the three women together with Anna, wanted to help other young mourners by spreading the word. By broadcasting voices of people with similar experiences of death and giving a space from where a larger grieving audience can feel heard, understood, and connected. The podcast is a way of offering services for people in the countryside, where there is no access to for example young grief counselling centers – Berlin with its three options has a good offering in comparison to the lack of services across Germany. Once the idea was set in stone, Anna applied for funding at the Evangelische Kirche Deutschland, and it took a year due to corona for the sum to be approved for 11 episodes. The podcast has been well received and the counseling center has already become more and more busy with the popularity of the podcast and young people seeking therapy.

The podcast offers an alternative space to griever, who in Germany don’t have many options. Specifically, because grief spaces target older people. For example,

the classic Trauercafe, offered by many churches across Germany, is mainly used by older people who may have lost a partner. Young adults do not feel addressed by them or included, especially because they have often lost a parent and their grief needs are very different. Grief is something that does connect, but it still is dependent on age and type of loss.

Anna described that she had a strong feeling that "change is coming", regarding both mourning and death. The "young adults of your generation are much more aware, they want therapy, are consciously looking for spaces". "They fear of repressing too much" and Anna pointed out that she sometimes thought that they're almost too focused on mourning! Anna can sense that things are changing but there remain many issues because "we don't grow up with a self-understanding/conception of death":

1. We are no longer in large families, "we no longer see how someone is dead and few people have seen how someone looks like who has died peacefully"
2. Moreover, today people die mainly in institutions, such as nursing homes and this means that "death is outsourced"
3. She also mentioned how she recently had come across more scenarios in which parents decided to not take their children to funerals. This is a big mistake, because it means that they do not grow up with death and they don't know how a funeral may look like when they must organize one or be faced with a death.
4. Death is mainly seen in movies and on tv, but Anna called this a "violent death" and representative of real death.
5. Additionally, we also lack organic rituals today as "we don't grow up with rituals around death anymore and so mourners have to find their own rituals"
6. Death also makes people very insecure, especially young people. Out of this insecurity people tend to withdraw from mourners - mourners are then left to contact them e.g. "call me whenever you need anything", which doesn't help at all.

From these issues, our conversation moved to cemeteries and aesthetics, where Anna also sees change happening but even more a need for change to happen. Cemeteries are losing more and more meaning because they don't appeal to people (also aesthetically)

and this is clear in the first banishment of the compulsory cemetery burial law in Bremen. She believes the law will be out phased more and more, as over 50% of Germans do not want a compulsory cemetery burial. Many want to be buried in the Friedwald. There is a need to "design cemeteries differently, with cafes, places for coming together and for exchange, to naturally integrate them into life." She talked about the need to get rid of the "high walls" surrounding cemeteries because we need openness around death and the dead. Mourners are and will continue to be looking for a place because when someone dies you feel powerless and graves are helpful because you can do something there, you can create something. So these places, like cemeteries, where you can feel useful are super important for mourners but they need to become contemporary.

This led us to discuss what communication and design can achieve in the topic of mourning and death. Anna immediately said that the most important thing around communication is that you made aware of the options you have when someone dies. But this should happen in advance. Most people do not deal with the topic until someone has already passed and they are then overwhelmed. In this state, people often end up simply trusting and following the opinion of morticians and doctors, where information may be partly withheld - not for the benefit of the family. Anna sees this as the main problem because if "I don't do something because I simply don't know or am advised against it, then it is harder for me to deal with death in the long term". For example, "most people don't know that you can take deceased person home for 36 hours, even if they have died in the hospital". You aren't making an informed decision in the moment but only know better afterwards - that's traumatizing.

Anna pointed out that in Berlin, there already are some great alternative morticians such as Jan Möller with memento bestattungen. One can go to memento during one's lifetime, plan one's funeral for free and make sure that "the questions are answered". Memento accompanies in a process-oriented way and makes sure that one, singular (and same) person is available to the family. This approach stands in opposition to how things are done in most funeral homes, in which

family's choose everything in one day, from catalogues and under the pressure of being sold something and having to purchase. Especially in the countryside there only traditional morticians with "horrible" farewell rooms (Bestattungsräume), horrible music, thousands of plastic flowers, and angels. These spaces are excluding ("ausschließend") for families and mourners.

The monthly Soulfood Evening, that Anna organizes is so special because it recognizes the need for new rituals and spaces for communication (like the podcast that came out of it!). She described how she's seen a huge difference between the needs of older and younger people in their mourning process. Older people come to her as a grief therapist because others told them to. A friend might have told them that they do not seem well - for many it is their first time doing a form of therapy and they come with the expectation that Anna will 'make it go away'. In contrast, Anna finds that "young people come to have the space to mourn" and that "mourning has a much more positive connotation". Younger generations come asking "I want to mourn, how can I express that, how can I do that?" and this challenges the current communication around death. This is also clear in the funeral industry where alternatives are needed and wanted e.g. such as painting the coffin yourself. Older people are on the other hand are totally fine with the current offering.

Finally, we came to the topic of women and their dominance in the death and grief world. Anna pointed out that like most social professions and social work, grief counselling is also female. From Anna's experience most of the clients seeking grief therapy as well as the professionals offering it, are women. She gave an estimate of at least 80% of the people coming to the counselling center being women. Anna believes that women grieve differently than men, as they find it easier to show feelings and to reflect on loss. Men, from her experience have other coping strategies such as rushing into work, doing sports, and spending a lot of time with their friends - which is also a totally valid form of grieving and mourning. There of course isn't a right or wrong way of grieving but there are differences. For example, men find group situations such as Anna's young griever's group, harder. This has a lot to do with socialization, which also links to how older

people grieve - they also find group settings harder. She brought up the example of Jan Möller from *memento*, who set up a mourning group for men, but it didn't work out because not enough men showed up. On the topic of people working in the alternative funeral industry in Germany, she did point to *Thanatos*, *memento* and *Lebensah* funeral homes, which have both male and female founders.

Interviewed November 30th, 2022, 1 hour.

A.4 Interview with Rebecca Emmenegger

Rebecca Emmenegger (25) created *La Muerte* as her final bachelor project to complete her studies of Audiovisual Media at the Zürich Kunsthochschule. *La Muerte* is a webseries in which three protagonists are followed on their way to accepting their own death. It's meant to be a rendezvous with death, to get a little closer to dealing with finiteness. The related digital platform "lamuerte.ch" creates a relaxed virtual place that reduces fears around death and showcases people who work in the death industry.

Rebecca and I immediately connected because of being of the same age. We talked about the question of how both of us got to the topic of death in our relatively young lives. She mentioned that she had asked herself the question of her own finiteness and death from an early age and it preoccupied her as a teenager. However, when she sought to talk to her parents about it, they seemed rather irritated by her interest in death and dying. This installed in her an avoidance – she had these thoughts but didn't dare to speak about them in the open. Rebecca therefore didn't learn how to deal with these feelings and while it wasn't a persistent fear of death, it was rather her inability to deal with the heaviness once the fear hit. Additionally, the more philosophical aspect of "what do I do with my life" and "what is a meaningful life in the face of finiteness", was something that she considered a lot. Then after her fifth semester, before starting her bachelor thesis, she did an internship at the Swiss television station SRF and helped create a piece on the *Hallo Tod* Festival that occurs yearly in Zürich. This was a memorable turning point for her, especially because as part of the segment, she was filmed testing coffins and interviewed about the experience. This wasn't just broadcasted on Swiss television but shortened for the German *Tagesschau*. Her parents and their friends saw it and it shocked quite a few people. Her mother said she found it weird to see her child in a coffin. This overall experience encouraged her to pursue her bachelor project, as she saw how many people were triggered by it and also the discussion that ensued within her own family.

We started talking about *La Muerte*, the goal of it and the process of working on this project. Rebecca began by describing how hard it was to concretize the story-

telling and angle that she wanted to take. Eventually she chose three themes for three videos: acceptance, repression and confrontation. These are inspired by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross 4(-5) stages of death/mourning. In each video, the same three protagonists share their different approach to death in the light of these themes. Each person, according to Rebecca represents a certain death attitude you find in society. The first person is a woman who works in a hospice. She is very much in tune with death and for Rebecca, she is very close to the ideal of acceptance of death. The second person is a man who believes in cryonics, which means he wants his body to be frozen and stored, in the speculative hope of being regenerated in the future. For Rebecca, he represents the type of person who just cannot accept death, wants to further life at all costs and represses the inevitability of it. The last person is a skydiver, who in his partaking of extreme sports on one hand is constantly confronted with his own death (two almost death accidents) but on the other hand, also tends to not deal with death too much.

The goal of *La Muerte* is on the most basic level, that people talk about death - that communication takes place on the basis of her work, and this doesn't have to be a dialogue between two people but is just as valuable if it stimulates an inner discussion. She noticed herself how she had been suppressing death and how much better she felt when she confronted it. Talking about death takes away the fear of it. She also experienced how certain things became less important after confronting death so regularly as well as that people opened up to her a lot, once they discovered the topic of her bachelor project. However, Rebecca also felt the need to sometimes take a step back and not talk to everyone about death because she felt that there was always a "forced transition" in the conversation.

Lastly, we turned to the topic of aesthetics, design, and death. Something she clearly considered a lot in her studies of Audiovisual Media and is reflected in her videos and online platform. *La Muerte* is carefully and intuitively designed and visually staged. Rebecca made a very important point: the fact that "the design, the aesthetics must adapt to our generation and our taste". Today, the design in death care, of websites and funeral homes etc., is all still directed to the elderly and as a

A.5 Interview with Chiara Sterzl & Lena Daur

person of the younger generation, you feel alienated. In her own work, she chose a “reduced, aesthetic feel” and also presented other people in the death care industry who have a similar style on her platform. Hoi ceramics who design urns, is representative of that young, new aesthetic and a great example of how according to Rebecca, death should look like today because “I don’t want to deal with something that doesn’t appeal to me aesthetically”. She also mentioned how Germany has more alternatives to offer than Switzerland, simply due to the country’s size, however there is the Hello Death festival in Zürich, “a place where you will find the people who want to modernize death in Switzerland”. We ended our conversation by quickly turning to the topic of women in death, as for example the two organizers of the Hello Death festival are women (one of them also hosts the podcast endlich.sein). For La Muerte, she ended up having two men and one woman because she found their contrasting stories the most interesting. However the people who are involved in the death world and are featured on her website are mainly women, which Rebecca related to women generally being in the position of doing care work.

Interviewed December 1st, 2022, 45 minutes.

Schwer Okay was created in the context of Chiara Sterzl’s (27) and Lena Daur’s (24) master thesis in eco-social-design at the University of Bolzano. Having identified the lack of support for those experiencing grief (whether it’s been a recent loss or many years), the two decided to explore this absence in Western society from a design perspective and looked into unconventional ways of helping those who have lost someone. With their first grief events this summer, Schwer Okay, in collaboration with professional partners, offers unconventional, alternative and truly empathetic grief support.

But how did these two female designers end up in the world of death and grief? Lena had lost a friend of hers a few years back but otherwise, she did not experience close death. However, already during her bachelor studies of product design, she had played with the concept of “can I even afford to die” and questioning the current Bestattungskultur. When it came to her master thesis project, a major starting point was how it bugged her that she knew that the people were grieving and in pain but she didn’t know anything about it or how to react to it. She wanted to change that. And Chiara joined her on that journey. Chiara grew up in a large family in which death was talked about and experienced openly. When her grandmother died, she accompanied her on that journey and thus experienced close death. In her family, death was considered a “beautiful topic.”

How do designers begin to immerse themselves in such a seemingly design-foreign space? In the beginning, Lena and Chiara approached all the experts they could think of: pastors, terminal care professionals, hospice workers, caregivers, funeral home professionals etc. From these conversations as well as case studies, key findings emerged which they proceeded to map by asking themselves: what is already out there? They decided to focus on grief instead of death and very early on recognized the need for a partnership with a grief support professional. Alexandra Eyrich, who specializes in working with grieving youths and young adults, ended up being the perfect collaborator. After the two joined one of Eyrich’s youth weekends, they realized that while they weren’t grief counsellors,

they did want to organize events for the grieving to come together and facilitate a space for grief. And that how Schwer Okay's "Summer of Grief" was born, which featured events including two Silent Nature Dances, Eat'n'Grief, Erinnerungsschneiderei, Sunrise Hike, Plant Swap Night and a Photo Walk. In October, a Living Room Concert happened as well. For each event, people came together in different scenarios and spaces, in which they were able to find solace and be and be open about their grief in a communal setting.

From this summer, the next steps for Schwer Okay will be working towards publishing their very own book. This will include the documentation of their research, a write-up and reflections of the experiences during the 'Summer of Grief,' as well as all the materials needed to host different, unconventional grief events on your own.

Talking about their takeaways, Chiara and Lena mentioned that a key aspect of their research was realizing the need for people who have expert knowledge, which for them meant bringing in Alex for official grief support. This helped them feel secure during the events that they were hosting. But facilitating also meant overcoming their own fears, for example in the beginning navigating the scenario of "what if someone cries?". Many did cry but the group dynamics – people that understands each other through grief – was able to support themselves. In consideration of making sure to provide adequate support, the two also decided not to work with people who experienced the death of a loved one very recently, because they felt like they weren't able to provide enough of a safety net for them. Much more they wanted to be there for everyone experiencing grief in the long term as "grieving is by no means over after the year of mourning" (Trauerjahr) and that means that maybe after twenty years you need the space to talk about and miss your grandpa again, then you can come to Schwer Okay too.

The conversation shifted to the German death industry in general and I pointed out that predominantly women seem to be the driving actors of change in the modern, alternative "Bestattungskultur". Lena and Chiara wholeheartedly agreed, mentioning that their entire team of partners for Schwer Okay are women and the innovators in this field are female. From podcast- and urn-

makers, to alternative funeral home owners, the only two men they could think of that they came across during their research was the director of the Bestattungsmuseum in Kassel as well as an alternative funeral home director in Berlin. They pointed out that the overt presence of women, just seems like another continuation of the patriarchal structures seen in the social work and care industry, in which men are rarely at the forefront. While it's amazing to see so many, especially relatively young women involved in the reconfiguration of the death and grief industry, it's also very sad to see so few men.

As three eco-social designers we ended our conversation with the big question: what role can design play in death and grief?

1. Design can help overcome hurdles
2. While classic design is derogatively considered to make things 'nice,' it's finally time to make mourning and death look like it has value ('wertig') in society and make it as beautiful as things for life
3. Make engagement with death and grief appealing and create space e.g. invitations for the grief events 'looked really cool' according to the young mourners of the grief counsellor
4. Designers act as facilitators, communicators and organizers e.g. the ability to get a famous singer play the living room concert for five mourners
5. Increase social value and societal awareness of death and grief through design
6. Be more than just a beautiful facade by offering content and resources e.g. Instagram account of @21gramm.wdr
7. Bring innovation into the grief and death world through the use of design thinking and design methods
8. Accelerate the rethinking of an old-established, dormant industry
9. Visual language helps talking about death and addressing issues at hand

We concluded with acknowledging that "the need is clearly there because there actually are many people that are involved in hospice and bereavement work, but there is a lack of content, innovation and communication".

Interviewed November 9th, 2022, 45 minutes.

A.6 Interview with Rachelle Younie

Rachelle Younie (27) is the host and creator of *Mortality and the Morgue*, a podcast in which she discusses the “morbid details” of her former job at the morgue and “sits down with death care workers, doctors, artists and more to delve into societal views and philosophies surrounding death, dying and grief”. She is based in Vancouver, Canada.

We began our conversation with a brief introduction to my research at the intersection of death and design, as well as my personal relationship to death and experience of the funeral industry in Germany. From this starting point, I asked Rachelle about her way into the ‘death world’, a term we both decided to be quite fitting, as it seems like “once you’re in the world of death, you’re in to stay”. Describing herself as a “very morbid kid”, she was interested in death from a very young age and generally gravitated towards darker subject matter, literature and eventually academia. Fascinated by the intersection of medicine and sociology and by how we structure our society, Rachelle ended up studying criminology in her undergraduate degree and was trending towards medicine, specifically pathology. During her studies, she shadowed a forensic pathologist at the Vancouver General Hospital, which, after graduating with her B.A. in Criminology, led her to look for jobs at the morgue. Rachelle found a job as a body donation programme technician at the University of British Columbia’s medical school, where she worked for three years until August 2021.

Once she left the morgue, the podcast came to life. Before leaving her job, Rachelle had already thoroughly explored the idea of creating a podcast as a creative outlet that connected with her day job. Especially because “when people hear you work in morgue, they ask so many questions” and she felt like there was a genuine interest in what she was doing. So she thought: why not make a podcast to answer all the questions people seem to have! Additionally, Rachelle finds the academic and sociological standpoint around death fascinating and was looking to have those kind of conversations and broadcast them. However, initially the podcast started as a sort of time capsule to document her experiences at the morgue. She began recording episodes after leaving the body

donation programme in 2021 and finding herself in the pandemic, with lots of time to pursue creative work.

After recording the first few episodes, she started reaching out to other people in the industry, and established the podcast as an open platform in which death can be “honestly, candidly” talked about. The podcast as a “judgment-free zone”, stands in opposition to the still prevalent “stigma and fear around death” and the “idea that if you speak about death more, you are inviting it into your life”. Rachelle talked about the fact that there might be people out there that are suffering in silence, and that if she has those conversations in the open, it may encourage others to have them too. For example, how helpful it is to talk about and make a will early on in your life and having those conversations out in the open with friends and family. However, she stressed the fact that she didn’t start the podcast to “change people’s lives but out of a more general interest” in the subject matter. Then as time and content progressed, people would reach out to her with very personal messages. For example someone having grown up in a religious household reached out to her and mentioned, that talking about death had been a taboo and once they left this religion, they suffered because the promised “blanket of heaven” had gone away. Listening to Rachelle’s podcast had made them realize, that death wasn’t as scary they thought it would be.

Moving from her podcast to a more general discussion on death in society, I asked Rachelle what she saw as the biggest issues that exist around death in contemporary North America. She described how “right now, the death industry in North America is facing a reckoning”, due to an influx of knowledge and because of the impact of the pandemic. Covid-19 meant that people on a global scale were affected by death, the most (in number and extent) they had been for a couple of decades. This is “changing the way we are handling death”. For Rachelle, the intersection of the death industry and capitalism as well as the death industry and its ecological impact, are the two largest issues of today.

She described how in North America (unlike Europe), the death industry is disguised more by a seemingly

empathetic approach. One that pretends to convey that it cares but tries to sell e.g. "we are so sorry for your loss, we are here for you, but do you want this 10,000 \$ casket?". It is this intersection of the death industry and capitalism that is "starting to gross people out". Additionally, the industry is environmentally destructive, and options are limited to either burial or cremation. Extensive land use (in North America, burial plots are land purchases and thus cemeteries keep on growing), chemicals and metals released into the soil from burials, toxic embalming practices (embalming fluid dangerous for humans and released into the soil) as well as cremation releasing pollutants and chemicals in the air (often also coming from embalming, which is done before cremation), are all major ecological concerns. "We have no ideal method for disposing of the dead".

However, changes are coming with alternatives such as green burial, which is being discussed more and more as well alkaline hydrolysis as an substitute to embalming chemicals. Moreover, human composting has just been legalized in California and more green cemeteries in which one is either buried in a shroud (cloth) or a wicker casket are being established. Rachelle describes how she "felt like there is a tide shift coming," but that death remains "entrenched in bureaucracy and legalities" - there is so much red tape . Especially because capitalism/capital accumulation is involved, the "money-making business is pushed to the forefront and that is the funeral-industrial-complex" right now.

Therefore, she sees the "need for a grassroots movement" that offers and shows people the different options that are out there. "The problems in North America come from a very fear-based approach to death", as it is still a death-denying society in which people don't want to have these conversation to begin with. The funeral industry is thus "a massive institution, (led by white men) that needs an overhaul". It is now the young women who are coming into the industry and are willing to change it.

Finally, we spoke about design and death and Rachelle pointed to one of her podcast episodes in which she interviewed Tracey Wheeler, who work for Endwell, a

non-profit that is focused on speaking about death. Wheeler's background is in fashion design and their conversation focused a lot on the importance of aesthetics and how it informs how you feel and talk about death. In regards to design and creation, Rachelle also mentioned her obsession with social constructionism and how the way we manufacture our reality informs how we deal with death for example. These manufactured realities are "very entrenched and hard to change" but also recognizing that they are constructions, "gives us the power to start making changes, to quite practically change the way we think about death and death care". This led us to a larger discussion on the power of storytelling and how who we are, as individuals and societies, is a made-up story we tell ourselves. So, there is a possibility to change that story through design by keeping the barrier to entry low, if a space is for example designed in an inviting way.

Interviewed November 22nd, 2022, 1 hour.

A.7 Interview with Verena Brunnbauer & nicole honeck

Verena Brunnbauer und nicole honeck are death positiv, two women who have made death work at a variety of intersections in life and society, their full-time jobs. The partners are based out of Linz, Austria and with death positiv, they offer secular services as funeral orators, providing a highly individual, empathetic, and non-religious speech style. Additionally, they also have their "Sargbar" – a mobile art object aka a wood coffin turned bar. The coffin bar aims to be both "performative and inviting" and "create space and time at the "Sargbar" to discuss, explore, and break taboos together on the topic of death and mortality". They mentioned that travelling with the Sargbar, to for example trade fairs, has been amazing because positive, productive conversations always take place. The modified coffin suddenly provides a room for storytelling and sharing. Finally (but they do much more), they also created a card game called "Sarggespräche" for all ages. It is "meant to be a tool to exchange thoughts, preferences, stories about life and death in an entertaining way" and together "discuss, explore and break taboos about death and mortality". While the cards put questions up for discussion in the game, the two pointed out that those questions don't even matter that much - it is rather about sitting down together and engaging with death together.

We began our conversation by discussing how Verena and nicole found their way into the death world as well as their background. The two met during their studies of publishing and communication sciences. Verena started working at a morgue part-time in 2006, while she was studying, and that's how she got interested in death work. After graduating, she pitched to the mortician that she wanted to work full-time, and a major part of her work turned towards creating a decent online presence for the funeral home. She modernized the homepage and saw the need for a news blog and interactive experience at a time where this was very unusual. She also build up a Facebook page. Both were very successful, with many people from abroad coming to the funeral home because of their early digital presence and inviting homepage. Verena immediately pointed out that design here played an important role in the funeral home's success. After leaving this workplace,

the topic of death kept on coming back to her and she had always wanted to do funeral rites with humor. So, Verena pursued a clown education and for her final exam she had to choose a name for her clown. Out of an impulse, she chose Death Positiv, referring to the concept of death positivity from the United States, which Verena really liked. In the beginning unintentionally without the 'e', now intentionally without it, this clown is now the main feature of their Corporate Identity.

Both pointed out that they realized that so much more was needed in the death industry: something holistic, something before, during and after death. One way that they believe this can be achieved is through integrating art and culture into death work. nicole, who had been in the field of culture and social work, really stressed the fact that their studies taught them about the power of media and the fact that how you design (and if you do it well) will enable you to get the outcome you want. She mentioned that there one way to create a space in which one can talk about death is through the means of art and culture employed in the public space. For example, on the 8th of August which is the official Memento Tag (a day to remember your own impermanence), they organized a street art workshop at a cemetery in Linz, at which posters (and postcards) were created. These were hung on the cemetery walls. Three months after, the posters were taken down and they got a lot of positive feedback (even from a brother at the Church) about how much they enjoyed them being there and changing the death space. Verena pointed out that this is classic, that it always takes time until people outside of the 'death bubble' get intrigued by their work and are able to reflect upon the positive effects of it.

Regarding further design aspects of their Death Positiv work, they mentioned how extremely affirmative the feedback has been regarding their corporate design and how it works especially well with young people. They are often told how "aesthetic" the Sargbar is and how pretty their website looks and pointed to the fact that for some people, it is important that things are pretty and aesthetic (even in death!). A person at a trade fair for the death industry mentioned that they found them and three other participating stands (out

of 100) aesthetically appealing. Verena referred to her time at the funeral home, where she really tried to implement a holistic design and for example provide a well-designed photobook for family members to take home. Both stressed the fact that design and aesthetics are important!

We moved on to discuss the most important goal of their work: education and awareness-raising on death and dying. They want to make people engage with the topic and find out what they want, what their family members want, because once the scenario occurs, you find yourself in a state of emergency ('Ausnahmezustand'). Verena pointed out that it is in this helpless state, in which people are willing to accept anything, take any advice and this is tragic. On the other hand, people who know what they want or knew what their deceased family member wanted, were much more prepared and had a clear head for other things. Unlike in Germany, this is an even more pressing issue in Austria because a burial must happen within 4-5 days after the death. Therefore, it really helps when things are settled beforehand. Additionally, if you deal with your own death and the logistics of it in advance, then you will consider everything very carefully and can become comfortable with your decisions. Finally, appropriate death planning is important for those left behind and their mourning – they have a different starting point in which they can focus more on themselves.

Then we moved onto discussing morticians and funeral homes, which became a service industry in the early 1800s and this is the root cause of the problems we have today – they shouldn't be just that. They pointed out that at the end of the day, for many employees at funeral home it is just a job and if providing extra support to a family might mean that one goes home at four rather than two, many aren't willing to do that. Verena, speaking from her job experience, mentioned that most of what morticians earn is through the selling of goods and not for the service they provide. She wishes that what family's pay, would go towards the staff and their service, rather than predominantly for expensive coffins, unnecessary urn covers (a new product I've never heard of but entirely redundant as urns then get buried / removed from sight) or cards and envelopes (I still have hundreds and you can't use

them for anything else and you also don't want to throw them away!). Why not have cheap coffins and then better paid staff that wants to provide a good service? What is needed are people outside of the family but who aid and advice (aka a death doula). Essentially, Death Positiv is of the opinion that everything should be possible at a funeral home.

One of the biggest worries that people have is always "what will others think", "what will others say in the fourth row"? We don't have to do it the way funeral homes offer however it is the norm and deviating from it makes people uncomfortable in view of what others might think. Verena pointed to her experience as a secular funeral orator, where she has rarely not had to at least do one prayer of "Vater Unser". Moreover, they also had the experience that because in Catholicism you want to go to heaven, many people who may have left the church ask to pray just before they die, driven by an intense fear of death.

I mentioned that from my experience so far, I predominantly met women rather than men in the alternative death/funeral/bereavement field. nicole immediately jumped into the question and spoke about how both birth and death were fields traditionally occupied by women and that then in the 1800s there was a shift. But she pointed out that there's currently a shift again – more than 80% of the people in training to become morticians are currently women. nicole also talked about their new research project on the intersection of death, women, and the arts, for which Death Positiv just got a grant. While they are still in the beginnings of this research, she believes that the dominance of women in the field has something to do with the fact that women are more empathetic and that many already occupy the field as volunteers (unpaid) in the form of for example grief support. The currently disconnected funeral service industry is unsustainable in the long-term and women are leading that shift. Nicole pointed out that many women who work in the field have to justify what they do and why they want to be paid for it (e.g. grief counseling, why are you asking for money?). On the other hand, at the funeral home, which is led by men, you pay for everything without asking a question. The changes that have indeed happened in Austria in

the industry, have been made by women. But nicole also pointed to the importance of young people as changemakers because they have new values and are building up new concepts parallel to the existing industry (rather than trying to change it from within as that's basically impossible) because the death industry is not contemporary anymore. Tackling problems like it being impersonal and mourners constantly engaging with different strangers rather than one person.

Interviewed November 29th, 2022 1.5 hours

A.8 Interview with Laura Willem

Laura Willem is a freelance designer and art director based in Munich. Together with her friend Julia Reich, she founded heartfelt paper & co back in November 2020. The vision of a better way of dealing with uncomfortable issues such as grief and serious illness led the two designers, to create stylish and timely bereavement stationery. Using sustainable materials, heartfelt has modernized the standard "black card" and replaced the never-ending platitudes with warm-hearted messages. Today, heartfelt is a "one-woman show" led by Laura. Her stationary has been a huge success, heartfelt was just recognized with the German Design Award, Gold in the category Posters, Cards and Photography in the area of Excellent Communications Design.

We began our interview by introducing ourselves and immediately talking about how absurd it is that there is so little contemporary design and communication around death: it "after all, it concerns us all, why should we stop at death". Laura pointed out that in German society we use the "standard phrases", that are always "religiously tinged" but we cannot assume that everyone is religious. This also applies to bearvement stationery, where you have the standard platitudes, everything in black and white, outdated typography. "It's like were stuck in the 80s" and "all I want to do sometimes it ask funeral home owners if they know that its 2022." But, "I'm in the bubble now because of the company, and it's changing".

We moved onto discussing the beginnings of heartfelt, which they founded in the middle of the pandemic after both lost their freelance jobs. Laura saw the pandemic as a pivotal moment for change in Germany: there was sudden awareness in society that death affects us all. The theme of heartfelt is "difficult times", so not just death but also serious illness and mental health issues are addressed by the stationary. But why did they found? Laura said "out of personal need" because the best man of her husband lost both his mother and father in a short time. Their friend when faced with the traditional funeral home offerings basically said he "couldn't do all this shit" and then Laura took over everything regarding stationery, making sure they fit to the indivudal who passed away. Laura described the tragedy (Trauerspiel) that occurs to the bereaved when

they open their mailbox in Germany, “on a design level you get it shoved in your face how crappy everything is”. Saying like “Stille Anteilnahme” / “Silent Sympathy” are so the opposite of what many want.

With heartfelt cards, this tragedy at the mailbox is to be avoided: “we want to send love” instead. As both founders are designers, they had always designed their own cards in case of deaths and when they started looking into starting their business, they were surprised that there is nothing like this (not even on the internet). In the United States they found one or two examples of modern bereavement cards but they were in a very feminine design niche. Heartfelt cards are very different, typographically sophisticated and offer both loud and quiet options. For their first collection, they had to limit themselves to twenty, even though they felt like they could have put out at least 50 cards. They made sure to include “Sternenkinder” cards for parents who lose their child at or just after birth, a taboo topic in Germany and unaddressed by stationary and design. In their second collection, they recognized the need to include pet death, as for many people they are very much family members. Laura pointed out how the mixture of seeing their own need for these type of cards plus having the time during the pandemic to make them, was essential. Additionally, she pointed out how “once one begins to occupy themselves with designing for death, it’s more simple than one thinks”. Her family on the other hand couldn’t really imagine that there would be a market for their stationary.

However, their vision proved to be right and heartfelt received a golden German Design Award in 2022. Laura spoke of how they get so many e-mails with people saying that “your cards touched me as the only one in my mailbox” and that the bereaved felt like the cards “spoke from the soul”. With heartfelt “I trigger emotions with my designs, it’s very satisfying as a designer”. People also constantly tell Laura their stories of loss and grief, which “brings one back down to earth” and “I suddenly pay attention to things that I have not paid attention to before”. Through her work, she now deals with the subject matter in a completely different way. It “has opened my eyes, I can talk much more openly about death, also with people who have lost someone”.

We dove deeper into the topic of communication and talking about death, and Laura pointed out how important it is “that you prepare things, that you think about what you want”. In general “you just have to talk about it a lot more! Every one of us is going to die, everyone is going to lose someone” and it seems so absurd we don’t address this. On the topic of mourning, Laura described the prevailing notion of “three weeks are now over, that’s enough grief” and the general lack of understanding for those who have lost someone.

Laura spoke of how different cultures do it so much better than we do here in Germany and that we have much to learn from them. Such as her stepmother, who is from Africa, and where Laura has experienced how the dead are celebrated, with people wearing lots of colour and basically partying. For further inspiration she also follows many accounts that deal with the topic of death and grief and that’s how she discover “what’s new”. Laura spoke of the urnfold girls (who I interviewed) and how she as a designer wants to be cremated and then placed in one of their beautiful paper urns.

Throughout my desk research and the previous interviews, I had developed the idea of creating some sort of platform or network on which to compile all the different agents and resources of the alternative death and grief industry in the German-speaking countries. I pitched this idea to Laura, as a way to test. She found it to be a “great idea” as when they were starting of, they didn’t know where to start looking. She described this platform idea as a “network, for finding each other and exchanging ideas” and even mentioned how “cool new collaborations can arise” from this. “A place where new ideas can arise”. Especially for end customers might use the platform asking “how do I find out where what (e.g. alternative funeral home) is”. Laura saw the potential for both B2B and B2C.

We spoke some more about what is missing in Germany in the area of death/mourning and design and communication today. Laura spoke of how we design for birth, for weddings and so much work is put into it (especially for her because she is a designer). For her this brings up the question of “why should I stop at my death, I hope that at my death everything is beautifully

A.9 Evaluation and Coding

designed because I am known for it"

Funerals are most "often expensive but not beautiful" in Germany and as Laura pointed out, "if I pay a lot of money then it has to look really cool". But often looking really cool also ends up being expensive and while" quality has its price but it must have a good balance, but if something is extremely expensive (in the death industry) then all my hairs stand up". She revealed that a funeral home director once admitted to her, that some people in the industry sell coffins for 3000-4000 Euros but these are produced in the Ukraine for 50 Euros. are "still many black sheep in this industry". However, Laura sees that there is change happening such as with mymoria, who have six "Bestattungsboutiquen" (burial boutiques) across Germany including Berlin and Munich.

Interviewed December 13th, 2022, 45 minutes.

To view the complete coding process, please scan the following QR code. This will take you to a Miro board:



Appendix B: Death & Design Survey Results

The survey can be found under <https://dk9ieeza6md.typeform.com/to/TBIS1Coy> and can still be taken. The platform *typeform* automatically generated a results report, which was then analysed on Miro. Appendix B contains only a selection of the results and analysis.



To view the complete survey results please scan the following QR code:

B.1 Personal Experiences with Death

70

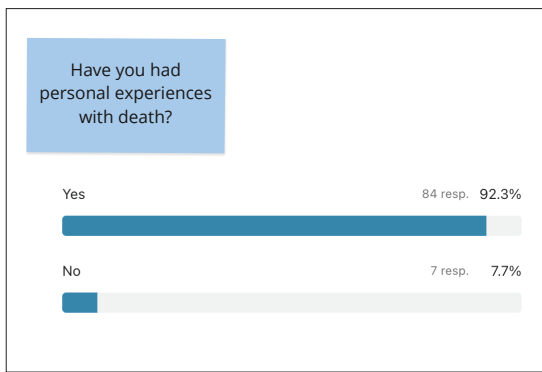


Figure 23
Answers to question 2a

If you answered yes, and feel like you are able to share more about who you lost, please do so below:

Death of family members, and some near death (?) experiences

My grandparents / close allies and friends

Both maternal grandparents

grandmother, grandfather, dog, old friend

my grandparents, also, a family member works in hospice care, so we often talk about death in my family.

Relatives

Lost my ex-partners dad while we were all living together during the pandemic

My aunt recently passed, my grandfather passed 5 years ago.

the death I experienced most closely was that of my grandfather, who passed away at around 90 years old

My granddad when I was very young (cancer) and my beloved cat in my early 20s

I've lost my grandma a few years ago but she died of old age and I wasn't super close with her.

Lost cousins and friends

My grandma died when I was in middle school and my friend overdosed when I was in second year university!

Father

Menschen die eng mit mir verwandt waren bzw. Befreundet sind gestorben

My best friend

parent grandparents close friends and more!

My uncle

My grandparents both were lost to cancer

Suicide in family

My father died two weeks ago. My brothers and our mother were continuously with him until he died

Family members have passed away or committed suicide

Childhood Best friend died of brain cancer in 2021 at the age of 28

Most people have lost grandparents

My grandfather died at home, surrounded by his family and a lot of loved ones of the same age.

My father died two weeks ago. My brothers and our mother were continuously with him until he died

My husband

Family members (older and younger), friends..

Grandparents, a friend

Grandparents, family friends

Partner/friend when we were teenagers

My grandfather, and a close friend

Parent, Friends and other relatives

Grandmother, grandfather, pets (the worst)

A parent

Grandparents, friends, animals

My grandma died of dementia after being in a home for many years. As a child, I lost a grandfather in an open cabinet when I was a child. The memory of her cold, thin body still haunts me. I always wondered where did she go?

I suppose this is more about the death than grief. But I lost my grandmother in an open cabinet when I was a child. The memory of her cold, thin body still haunts me. I always wondered where did she go?

Figure 24 Answers to question 2b

Meets Death



Figure 25
Answers to
question 2c

Meets Death

B.2 Death rituals and their design



Figure 29 Answers to question 3b

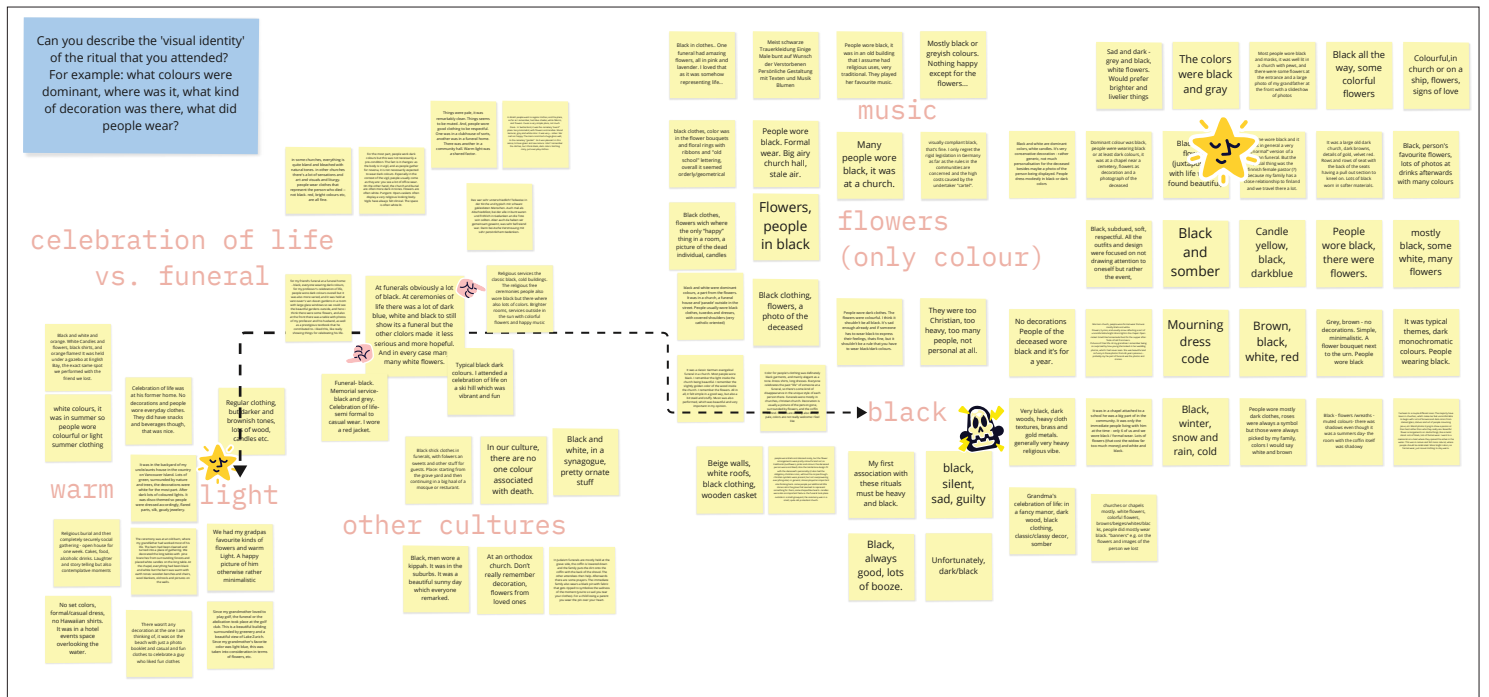


Figure 30 Answers to question 3c

Meets *Death*



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Meets *Death*

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Affidavit

I hereby declare that the presented master's thesis was/has been single-handedly written and completed by me. Furthermore, I declare that only the sources and tools used in this thesis and all references and ideas from other authors have been correctly cited.

31st January 2023

Signature: _____
Clara Roth

Meets *Death*

Meets *Death*

