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The Functional Role of Music in Communicating Death through/in YouTube Videos

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Abstract

Since the establishment of thanatology, the science of death, in the early 20th century, death has not only been considered a controversial subject, but it has also been regarded as a taboo topic. Various ways of communicating death have developed over the last few decades. With the advent of different mass and social media and their increasing impact on everyday life in the 21st century, death can now be communicated via a number of media platforms, such as television, radio, and online videos. This type of communication is underpinned by a series of dimensions, in particular music, that shape the conveyed message. Music has been extensively used in the dissemination of information in the wider media outlet. It is widely seen as a means of evoking emotions and of facilitating the process of assimilating information that is communicated via media. This paper seeks to discuss the functional role of music in communicating death in online video platforms. In particular, the example of the YouTube platform is used to identify the links between death, music and video platforms. This paper is part of a large-scale study on the functional role of music in communicating death through YouTube videos. It is suggested that music may serve as a link between media and death. The conclusions that are drawn in this paper are supported by the authors' current and ongoing study and critical analysis of the deployment of music in the communication of death.

Key words: death, media, music, YouTube, background music

Introduction

Death as a subject is rarely tackled in everyday discourse, or at the coffee table, unless it refers to some experience that goes beyond the personal. People tend to avoid speaking about death, especially when it entails entertaining the possibility of their own death or the death of a loved one (Feifel, 1977; Gorer, 1965). Our understanding of death and the end of life results directly from the fear we experience at

the thought of our own imminent death. This relates to the concept of immortality as a coping mechanism that is employed in order to alleviate death anxiety and stress. Death has been perpetuated as a taboo topic even in contemporary societies. Since the 1950s, when the main premise of thanatology was to explain death, dying and bereavement (DDB) from a psychosocial standpoint, a number of theorists have suggested explanations of death taboo (Feifel, 1977). Ernest Becker (1973), for instance, suggests that human beings subconsciously believe in their own immortality, which can be interpreted as an act of resistance to challenge the fact that death is not part of their lives. As pointed out by Robert Kastenbaum (2007), fear of death and death anxiety only further enhance that tendency. Nonetheless, the attitude of either willingly engaging or not with the subject of death is firmly rooted in a number of beliefs and societal norms as well (Pentaris, 2011).

Geoffrey Gorer (1955) observes that "No society has been recorded which has not its rules of seemliness, of words or actions which arouse discomfort and embarrassment in some contexts, though they are essential in others" (p. 49). Societies abide by some unwritten rules in order to promote cohesion, solidarity and well-being. All these are notions that are related to the topic of death taboo (Feifel, 1959) and that contribute to the debate about the concept of death and dying in modern societies. In addition, the lack of conversation about death might as well indicate the lack of affection and, therefore, the absence of an audience. An illustrative example of this are death cafes. They developed in 2010 and 2011 and their scope has been largely spread across Canada, Europe and the USA. The aim of death cafes is to provide a space for people who want to talk about death and who can find audience for that. It is a simple and civilized concept that forms a space to talk about issues surrounding death and dying in a welcoming, engaging and friendly manner. During such an event people come together, have tea and cake while sharing their opinions on these subjects.

Over the last few decades, the subject of death has been integrated into a bio--medical discourse (Fonsesca, & Testoni, 2011-2012).This assumes an increase of both the quantity of life and the popularity methods of treatment or medical approaches to dying and bereavement; the medicalization and institutionalization of death (Kastenbaum, 2007; Pentaris, 2012).

This paper does not focus specifically on the topic of death taboo. It is concerned with the role that media has played in triggering the debate about death in contemporary society, and how death taboo is not obtained when death is communicated via media. Death and the media have been regarded as strongly connected phenomena. Moreover, it has been observed that death has been communicated by media in different forms and with different representations (i.e. celebrity deaths, online memorialization, etc.). The main premise behind this paper lies both in identifying the means that are used to communicate death in the media and in determining to that extent those communications rely on music and its functional roles.

Thanatology

Foundations for the science of death were laid in 1903 and then again in 1907 by Élie Metchnikov, who saw the need for explaining the event of death in one's

life and proposes its inclusion in the life course, rather than its avoidance. The focal point of thanatology since its development in the 1950s onwards is the study of life with death left in it (Kastenbaum, 2004). Numerous studies since the same period of time (Foncesca, & Testoni, 2011-2012) suggest various facets of the nature of death, including its psycho-social, bio-medical, philosophical, phenomenological and merely existential and humanitarian aspects. Nonetheless, the value of death still remains a neglected field of research.

Death is a concept embedded in people's lives since their birth. It is an irreversible, universal and inevitable event in life. A great number of historians, social scientists, medical scientists and philosophers have looked into the multifaceted nature of death (Kamath, 1978), as well as definition of what death is and how it is integrated in one's life (Glaser, & Strauss, 2005; Walter, 1994; Aries, 1974; Becker, 1973; Kübler-Ross, 1969). Philippe Aries (1974) outlines determinant points that reflect how death was treated in the past and how the understanding and meaning of death have developed through the centuries in Westernized societies. As he points out, "The certainty of death and the fragility of life are foreign to our existential pessimism" (Aries, 1974, p. 44). In the book *The Birth and Death of Meaning* (Becker, 1971), the search for the meaning of human life can best be explained through the *ultimate fear of death*; to possess self-awareness is one of our core qualities as humans (Ibid.). The self-awareness of our inevitable death also shapes our perception of death. John White (2004) focuses on higher human development and stresses those factors in his work that are closely associated with DDB. J. White (2004) talks about self-awareness in the way we die, drawing contrasts between the Western world and the Himalayas. He talks about the interconnection between the nature of objective death (Cicirelli, 1998) and the meanings that are subjectively formed and that guide us through the experiences of DDB (Riley, 1983). Death has two main components: an objective event of death, which is inevitable, and a subjective interpretation of the event. The latter is comprehended via an individualistic approach, as different means of death communication are perceived subjectively in order to generate meanings.

To date the research on death and dying has gathered information from four main approaches: bio-medical, philosophical, phenomenological, and anthropological. Death and dying have been seen either as an institutionalised event that is largely medicalized or in terms of commodification. Bio-medical models suggest the expansion of life-course and the focus on treatment-focused approaches (Pentaris, 2013). Philosophical approaches explain the meaning of life and death. Both Herman Feifel (1959, 1977) and Madhav Vittal Kamath (1978, 1993) propose a number of ways of explaining and understanding death and dying. Becker (1973) suggests that only when we make meaning of our lives can we grasp the meaning of death and accept our mortal nature. Phenomenology, on the other hand, studies the *phenomenon* itself (Reming, & Dickinson, 2005). It is oriented towards the study of death as an event and its constitutions (Walter, 1994). As death is perceived and explained differently by different people (Pentaris, 2011; Rosenblatt, 2007), phenomenological studies have focused on intersected variables of death research (i.e. attitudes towards death based on cultural background, also see Parkes et al., 1997).

Last, but not least, an anthropological branch of research, and especially cultural anthropology, is concerned with a cross-cultural study of rites and rituals of death and dying experience (Metcalf, & Huntington, 1991).

A broad subject within thanatology that has drawn the interest of theorists and researchers in the field is death taboo. For instance, Francesco Campione (2004) proposes that dying patients in hospices in Italy choose not to speak of death or their own imminent death. Alas, their resilience is observed, but not explained. Even though such a practice has greatly been informed by research and theory, death remains an untouched subject in everyday conversations.

Death in the public sphere

In 1915, Sigmund Freud authored *Timely reflections on war and death*. This work has sparked off open discussions on death and dying, and how these experiences in one's life can (and do) influence us in various ways. For example, experiences surrounding death influence human beings in the way that the meaning of life is perceived, and on the emotional explanations of human relations and understandings of future experiences. S. Freud's work grew out of his experience of *World War I.* He suggests that war losses have an impact on whole societies, and that their members should express their loss and grief for their loved ones, and *talk* about their losses. At the time, Z. Freud observed the absence of such conversations and felt the strong need to be more open about the subject. In practice, his attempts to introduce death to the public sphere has exerted a minimum influence, but were connected to what Robert Kastenbaum (2004) dubbed *macrothanatology*, namely, large scale deaths in a society, such as September 11 in New York, USA.

A number of researchers and theorists have attempted to tackle the matter of death denial and, by extension, death communication. G. Gorer (1955) was the first to address the problem of death taboo in society. His analogy between death and pornography as conversational subjects shows these two as untouched subjects and unmentionable events in one's home. Referring to G. Gorer's work, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross (1969), a pioneer in death conversations, has explained, alongside a five-stage grief model (denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance), a valuable fact in the dying person's life: the recognition that they seek to talk about death. The noticeable contrast between this study and that by F. Campione (2004) merely reflects the cultural differences and mirrors various needs of a globalized society.

Conversations about death and communication of death are still not favoured by the public. There are yet the means that communicate death and that are, at the same time, welcomed by a wide audience. According to Margaret Gibson (2007), the subject of death shifts from being a private experience to more public spheres via media and communication technologies. Death studies, as well as research in the media, has acknowledged this largely. This shift, however, is merely an indicator of a form of communication, and does not necessarily mean that societies in modernized Western cultures are veering away from death denial and death taboo.

Death and the media

Personal experiences of death and dying can be seen as private instances in life, which promote denial in death communication. Yet, it is very likely that people do not link personal experiences with mass media and the dissemination of information through it. Even if someone has not experienced death and dying on a personal level yet, there is a high likelihood that "simulated death via media technologies" (Gibson, 2007, p. 415) have been watched by the same person. "In the absence of a personal experience with death people rely on media, among other things, for information, attitudes, beliefs and feelings about death and its meanings" (Clarke, 2005-2006, p.154). Celebrity deaths (Davies, 2010; Hollander, 2010) are an illustrative example of how media technologies add new meanings to the concepts of death and dying for the individual, prior to personal experiences.

Death as a subject matter, therefore, has shifted from a private space into the public sphere via media and communication technologies. However, mediated death does not amount to an existential acceptance of death as well. This relates to the wide range of information that one can access via the internet. Communication technologies and the mass media provide a wide range of information available to the public, but for their own use. This means that the information given will be received differently by different people. In addition, this information is already coloured by a number of means that either enhance or minimize our appreciation. A very powerful means of disseminating a death communication online, including video platforms, is music, as will be explained in later sections of the paper.

To briefly illustrate the points raised here, the media coverage of the death of Princess Diana was seen as one of the largest in media history (Merrin, 1999). Millions of people worldwide, some of them might have not known Princess Diana before, grieved over her loss and followed up with all media coverage. The element of music in the communication of her death and after-death events was largely used (Merrin, 1999). A number of concerts by the royal band took place in order to express sorrow and bereavement, while the tone and pace of the songs chosen to be played were thoroughly considered so as to depict a precise image of the grieving process. In other words, music has played a role in intensifying the grieving process. This example demonstrated where things become private rather than public.

As M. Gibson (2007) suggests, death in such a scenario is only approached at a distance. Communication of death via media and technology marks a distinctive line between the subjective meaning of death as an existential issue and an illustrative imagery of the same subject. Receiving a message via media also suggests that you are experiencing the proximity to death at a distance, hence, in a perpetuated form of death taboo and denial. The reinforcement of death communication via media with music has the function of *touching* upon the connection between the audience and the flat information provided and the message given. Music offers a number of expressive devices that link the two as. Additionally, it becomes a filter through which death is largely communicated via media, including video platforms.

Music and its role

Music has been one of the most basic functions of human societies through centuries. No society can exist without sounds and music. They have always been part of all significant events and rituals that mark our existence, such as weddings, or instruments of communicating feelings such as joy or sorrow. On that note and over the last few decades, there has been extensive discussion around the effect of music on the emotional response of the listener. It is argued that music produces feelings. Recent research shows that music not only interacts with the existing feelings of an individual, but that it can also elicit emotions (Garrido, & Schubert, 2011, p. 279-295).

Music and emotions

Research in the field of eliciting emotion through music has proved that listeners feel a particular emotion as a response to listening to a specific music sample (Garrido, & Schubert, 2011). The researchers have used explicit musical structures to examine if these structures expressing an emotion could also reproduce it. By music structures are meant those characteristics of music that make it possible to express different emotions. For example, minor keys and slow tempi evoke the feeling of sadness, whereas major keys and fast tempi incite excitement and joy (Hunter, Schellenburg, & Schimmack, 2010). The researchers found that listeners rated their feelings as sad after listening to musical structures that convey sadness and described their feelings as happy when listening to musical structures that convey happiness. Thus, there is evidence suggesting that music not only conveys emotions but also evokes them in the listener.

Separation in roles

With the passing of time, music has obtained certain roles with which it takes part in human lives. These roles can be divided into two categories. Music can be categorized as:
  a) actively listened music: music that is listened consciously by the listener for various reasons and on different occasions,
  b) background music: music that is used as a background tool to accompany, highlight and reinforce other means and that it is passively listened to.
The present paper deals with the latter category in relation with media as outlined in the next sections.

Background music

Background music is an important part of modern life. In this day and age, it is a crucial part of many aspects of contemporary society and forms a necessary tool for many functions. Films, advertisements, news, social gathering cannot exist without music pointing out their direction and highlighting, accompanying and reinforcing their message. Music has always been part of the majority of life events, although

only passively heard, its absence would understate their substance. Music is widely used in all media forms, such as television, films, electronic and computer games, and in the last years, even in the news. This is due to the aforementioned fact that music can express and also produce feelings, and all of the forms of media mentioned here, are based on emotional responses of their receiver. Hence, music is a purposeful device which is absolutely essential. According to A. Cohen (1999, p. 6), who refers to film music: "Music is a vehicle transporting a variety of information that serve various multimedia goals. The brain selects what is useful. A prime example of this is the role that emotional meaning from music provided to a visual narrative while sounds of the music are of secondary concern".

In addition, A. Cohen (1999) isolates functions that are accomplished by the musical mental processes. According to her, music serves at least eight different functions: it masks distraction, provides continuity, directs attention, induces mood, communicates meaning, cues memory, heightens arousal and suspends disbelief and adds an aesthetic dimension (Cohen, 1999, pp.1-5). In this paper, two of the above mentioned functions, the induction of mood and the communication of meaning, are discussed in the context of outlining the relation of music in emotion production and expression in multimedia.

Furthermore, music can induce and alter the mood and feelings of the listener and viewer. There is much evidence that supports the mood-altering ability of music. In 1986 Pignatiello, Camp and Rasae used excerpts of music that were considered as sad, happy or neutral. The participants in their study watched a tape and were asked to complete describe their feelings. The researchers observed that the participants' moods were altered by music and also in an expected way. This technique had been also used in earlier experiments with similar aims and outcomes.

Moreover, as mentioned before, music can convey emotional meaning. Annabelle Cohen (1999) states that music adds emotion as a third dimension to the visual screen which is often referred to as two-dimensional. It is interesting to notice that in the first decades of the film industry, when films were actually silent, background music was listed in categories of music in relation to the kind of emotion elicited (Cohen, 2000, pp. 362-363). There has also been research and observations of the features of music and how they communicate feelings. Slow pace, falling contour, low pitch and the minor mode convey sadness (Cohen, 2000). In contrast, fast and rising tempo, high pitch and major mode convey happiness (Cohen, 2001). Also, it is interesting to notice how different figures and excerpts can carry a different meaning according to the background music that accompanies them. Background music can alter the meaning of a simple moving geometric figure (Cohen, 2000). Annabelle Cohen (1993) describes a scene where two contrasting musical pieces defined whether the people acting in the scene were fighting or playing. The latter illustrates how music can convey emotional meanings.

Concluding note

Music is a special way of communicating feelings and expressing inner emotions. However, it can also induce and alter them and, as a result, lead them in dif-

ferent directions according to the musical structure of a piece and the use of its spe-
cific characteristics. The previous sections commented on the current knowledge
around the subject in order to explain why music is used in multimedia and, more
specifically, in videos, in order to identify the role of music in the communication of
death in online video platforms, such as YouTube. As we have observed, music is
an essential part of videos communicating death in such platforms and especially on
YouTube. The latter will be examined in order to identify the reasons of the use of
music in videos illustrating death and to suggest future research in the field.

Communicating death in video platforms

Death events, images, and memorials are now mediated through visual and
audio communication technologies, which can be accessed globally. Video plat-
forms are a new form of communication, journalism and exchange of information
between citizens across the globe (Field, & Walter, 2003). A vast number of appro-
aches may be observed with regard to communicating death via these platforms,
with YouTube having a dominant position among others (Crane, & Sornette, 2008).

Death in YouTube

The very first video uploaded on YouTube on April 23, 2005, was entitled *Me at
the Zoo,* and shows a young boy standing in front of an elephant at the San Diego
Zoo, USA. Ever since, YouTube has grown to become a global online commu-
nity that shares a wide range of information (Crane, & Sornette, 2008). This video
platform merely displays what people from around the globe decide to upload,
whether it refers to *how to* tips, or Hurricane Katrina that devastated New Orle-
ans. YouTube is a space where everyone can become a journalist and share his/
her ideas via their own channel of communication, supported by visual and audio
substances. The audio support might be in the form of background music that
colours the information shared via the visual technology.

M. Gibson (2007) suggests that death is not a taboo "in contemporary televi-
sual cultures" (p. 416). Death is not a taboo when it is approached at a distance
and via video platforms, rather than a source of narratives available to inform
and entertain the public. YouTube has largely been used in order to communicate
death. Death-related videos uploaded on YouTube have either an educational
character, an entertaining one, or a journalistic one. In all cases, and as illustrated
above in *Music and its role*, music is an element that accompanies the communi-
cation of information and somehow *leads* the message that is communicated via
the video.

For the purpose of this article, we use the example of the fatal shooting of Neda
Aghan-Soltan. She was shot and killed while watching the protests against the
outcomes of the Iranian elections on June 20th, 2009. Neda was 27 at the time and,
after her death, she became a rallying symbol for Iranians who oppose the Islamic
Dictatorship. The video of Neda's shooting and killing was captured accidentally
by a witness, and caught the attention of the international media broadcasters

instantly. The YouTube video that shows Neda's death has been described by *The New Yorker* as probably the most witnessed death in human history.

The communication of Neda's death in the YouTube video was first captured as visual information only. Background music was, however, added to the video prior to uploading it. The whole video is supported by an instrumental piece of music played by a violin solo, an instrument whose timbre is especially effective in conveying/eliciting sadness. As mentioned already, these characteristics relate, amongst others, to the tempo of the music (slow) and to the tonal mode of the piece (minor key). The music is key for the shaping the perception of viewers who watch the video considering all the functions of background music. The melodic line itself evokes emotions of empathy and sympathy, and feelings of sadness (Field, & Walter, 2003) due to the relationship of the imaginary death and the background music.

Using music to communicate death in YouTube videos

Soltan's death is an example of how music is used as a means to communicate death in video platforms, and in particular, via YouTube videos. A search in YouTube using the keyword R.I.P showed that almost all the videos that refer to death, either those referring to celebrities or not, use music to communicate the message that the creator of the video wishes to get across, for instance, messages of grief and sorrow for the loss of loved ones that have passed away. It is interesting that music usage in this video conveys/elicits sadness, sorrow and, strangely enough, engages the viewer-listener with the content which is now personal to them, even if they have never had any relation whatsoever with the deceased. A noticeable example in relation to this is the case of Princess Diana's death and the death of the famous pop star Michael Jackson, both of which had a global impact and raised grief and sorrow internationally. However, this does not only concern the case of celebrities, but it also includes people that have been killed, committed suicide, died due to illness and their family and friends uploaded videos in their memory.

The question is why everybody uses music in these videos. The role of music is to convey and elicit emotions is partly the answer, considering that the content of death videos is intensely emotional. There is, however, another aspect of music that may explain its use in such expressions. Death remains a taboo topic and people do not feel comfortable when engaged in conversations about issues surrounding death. Music is a way of communicating thoughts and emotions that cannot be expressed verbally. It cannot be absolutely defined, it cannot be seen or touched, and it is only felt in a way that cannot be completely understood or explained through language. Enrico Fubini (in Dissanayake, 2006) points to the complexity of musical experience: "Since ancient times, philosophers, intellectuals and musicians have written about music and have clearly believed it to have a particular status among the arts, being endowed with special powers. Both the fascination it has always exerted and its extreme elusiveness are due primarily to the nature of its expressiveness: it expresses something, and yet, despite the complexity of its 'language,' it says nothing definite about anything; while everybody,

even the strictest of formalist thinkers, seems to concur in ascribing to music a certain power of expression nobody has yet succeeded in defining clearly what it is that music expresses or how it does so" (p.2).

Furthermore, and in relation to the above, music plays a role in cultivating rituals. Death videos that are developed in the memory of loved ones are observed to have a ritualised or ceremonial aspect. It is of particular importance to underpin that the latter is just a hypothesis and still needs to be validated, thus, further research in this field is proposed. However, this hypothesis leads to considerations about the role of music in rituals, which is, of course, tightly connected with the ability of music to convey and elicit emotions. Ceremonies and rituals in the majority of human societies include music as one of their major characteristics: "Anthropological studies of human ritual typically emphasize its (music's) importance for passing on information and group tradition, functions that have been essential in the nonliterate societies that characterized humans for 99.9 percent of their history. It should not be overlooked, however, that rituals accomplish these practical purposes by shaping and even creating appropriate feelings in their participants. Rituals compel participants to feel (or ‹‹go through the motions of feeling››) emotions appropriate to the purposes of the ritual" (Dissanayake, 2006, p. 8).

Hence, music used in video platforms appears to have connotations with nonverbal expression of feelings, facilitation of the videos' message and ritualization of the process, all this with a view to communicating death.

Conclusion

Even in modern societies, death remains a taboo topic, which shows in people's reluctance to engage in conversations that deal with that subject. After the emergence of thanatology as the science of death in the 1950s,, many theorists and researchers suggested different explanations surrounding these matters, with some of them subscribing to the view that people subconsciously believe in their immortality and they do not want to consider death as part of their lives. In the last two decades, the character of debate about death has gone beyond the personal viand has involved media and communication technologies. Currently, death is communicated by way of various media platforms such as films, television, radio and online videos. However, this communication of death does not negate the confrontation of death as a taboo subject.

Communication of death via video platforms has many dimensions, with music being the crucial one. Recent research has showed that music has specific characteristics that prove it able to communicate feelings and express inner emotions, but can also induce and alter them. As a result, lead them in different directions according to the musical structure of a piece and the use of its specific characteristics. In particular, sad music is usually conveyed / elicited by slow tempo, minor key and fluctuation of tempo and dynamics, whilst happy music is conveyed / elicited by fast and vivacious tempo and major key.

Music is segmented into two categories, actively listened music and background music, the latter of which is subconsciously heard. It is background music in

the first place that is used in death videos, such as YouTube, in order to highlight and reinforce the content and meaning of the video. However, the facilitation of the video's message is just one of the reasons that the video creators choose to embellish their videos with music. It is believed that music's nature is similar to our emotions: just like emotions, it has no physical substance, it is indefinite and its nature cannot be verbalized. Furthermore, the addendum of music in death videos denotes a ritualistic aspect; music has always been inextricably connected to ritualistic and ceremonial practices. Consequently, music in death videos suggest a ritualised / ceremonial act in the memory of the deceased loved-ones.

All in all, music, with its special functions of conveying/eliciting emotions and with its substance as a fundamental part in ceremonial and ritualistic practices, plays a central role in the communication of death in online video platforms such as YouTube: it not only influences the viewer/listener emotionally according to the desirable message of the video, but it also contributes to the expression of the emotional world of the video creator and, as such, it serves as a vehicle to transmit emotions of grief and sorrow but also, the way in which he/she will honour the memory of the deceased in a ceremonial / ritualistic manner. Therefore, our hypothesis is that music in these videos conveys emotions for the video creator and elicits emotions to the viewer / listener. Further research is required before this hypothesis can be confirmed. The current paper presents a large-scale study by the authors, based on this research hypothesis.

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