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MEMORY STUDIES

Thanatographical fiction: Death, mourning and ritual in contemporary literature and film

Memory Studies
2024, Vol. 17(6) 1519–1535
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DOI: 10.1177/17506980231188480
journals.sagepub.com/home/mss

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Abstract

In recent years, many authors around the world have taken on the difficult task of commemorating the unmourned dead caused by wars, terrorism or structural violence, or of giving them a literary burial. Their fictions, which I will call thanatographical fiction in the following, play a central role for the collective imaginary in that they provide an archive of knowledge on how violent death and grief are processed. The study of a comparative corpus shows that there is a transcultural and transmedial poetics of grief that serves to frame and channel emotions, to give them a form that allows access to them without sparking further excess. What I aim to demonstrate is that the common grounds of fictions from such diverse places as France, Québec, Senegal and Ukraine are that they can illustrate processes of the economy of emotions: in order to address the subject of violent death, they have to resort to different strategies of emotion control. By modulating emotions, texts and films influence both the regulation of grief and commemoration on one hand, and on the other, the reinforcement of collective identities. They can thus provide an instrument for reflecting on the interaction of grief and violence to gain a better understanding of it. I will thus analyse Wajdi Mouawad's tetralogy of plays *Le sang des promesses*, Mohamed Mbougar Sarr's novel *De purs hommes*, Valentyn Vasyanovych's film *Atlantis* and Julie Ruocco's novel *Furies* to elaborate a first draft of a thanatographical poetics of grief.

Keywords

comparative literature, film, implicated subject, mourning, thanatography

Death, violence and world literature

In recent years, many authors around the world have taken on the difficult task of commemorating the unmourned dead caused by wars, terrorism or structural violence, or of giving them a literary burial: Roberto Bolaño (2004) pays tribute to the victims of the *feminicidios* in Ciudad Juarez in the longest part of his monumental novel *2666*. In *Tout sera oublié* (2013), a graphic novel written in collaboration with the artist Pierre Marquès, Mathias Énard reflects on an appropriate monument to bear witness to all the dead of the war in Yugoslavia. In Mati Diop's (2019) film *Atlantique*,

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the spirits of those who died at sea while trying to reach Europe can only be laid to rest after being given actual tombs back home in Dakar. The efforts to build ‘a huge and universal cenotaph’ (Gefen, 2017: 222) through fiction have intensified over the past years and become a global phenomenon.

The forms these fictions take is as diverse as their origin: Emmanuel Carrère’s (2007) *Un roman russe* is conceived as an epitaph for the author’s grandfather (see Ruhe, 2022). In *Zone*, Mathias Énard (2008) erects a cenotaph for those who died in various conflicts of the Mediterranean area (see Ruhe, 2020c). Gianfranco Rosi (2016) chooses the documentary film format in *Fuocoammare* to commemorate those who die in the Mediterranean Sea while on their way to Europe. In *À son image* (2018), Jérôme Ferrari uses the structure of the requiem to insist on the importance of ritual to give grief a collective space (see Ruhe, 2020b: 128–143). Delphine Horvilleur’s (2021) essay, *Vivre avec nos morts*, reflects on the necessity of mourning and burial rites for those having to cope with violent – as well as non-violent – death.

Burials, inhumations and autopsies are sometimes not only symbolically, but literally, at the centre of contemporary fictions: the Lebanese-Quebecois author Wajdi Mouawad’s entire *œuvre* revolves around problematic burials, mostly of parents whose painful memories need to be put to rest before they can find peace (see Ruhe, 2020b: 197–230). In *De purs hommes* (2018), French-Senegalese author Mohamed Mbougar Sarr recounts the exhumation of a man in the course of homophobic riots in Senegal. Ukrainian filmmaker Valentyn Vasyanovych’s film *Атлантида* (*Atlantis;* Vasyanovych, 2019) is a dystopia that has since become painfully real: set in Ukraine in 2025, ‘a year after the end of the war with Russia’, it follows Sergiy, a veteran with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), who enrols with the (actually existing) organisation Black Tulip. Together with former archaeologist Katya, he helps to exhume and identify the war dead left behind in the Donbass region. French author Julie Ruocco’s (2021) *Furies* first novel, set in Kurdistan, centres on a French archaeologist and a Syrian firefighter who has become a gravedigger during the war – and thus around processes of exhumation and inhumation.

In the following, grief is understood as an attempt of ‘being with the dead’ going beyond a hierarchical ‘cultural-colonial discourse’ (Ruin, 2019: 69); instead, it is viewed as a ‘transcultural predicament’ to be dealt with, as ‘[t]he living will always have to find a way to respond to the dead’ (Ruin, 2019: 82sq.). The subject of violent death and grief concerns authors and filmmakers around the globe, and they tend to frame and shape it in diverse but structurally similar ways, even though they might be positioned on opposite sides of the same conflict. Conceived as reactions to a public discourse that often applies a divisive rhetoric of emotion (Ahmed, 2014), fictions, for their part, have to develop a specific economy of emotion to make their stories bearable. The way violent death in political circumstances construed as crises is addressed in public discourse is closely linked to the willingness to commit further violence (see Butler, 2020). These processes are flanked and reflected upon by a type of fiction that I would propose to call thanatographical fiction. Unlike the public discourse, these fictions aim to pacify by giving us access to what has happened, albeit moderating our emotions so as to impede further violence.

In the following, I will establish thanatographical fiction as ‘the 20th century writing approach’ that gives space to ‘the experience of violent deaths that have pushed aside normal, human death’ (Lachmann, 2007: 433, my translation). While in 1987 Thomas Macho could still state that ‘death demands silence’ (Macho, 1987: 7, my translation), the proliferation of texts and films on (violent) death and grief in recent years has made him revise his position and speak instead of a new ‘visibility of death’ (Macho and Marek, 2007), although, as will be shown, this does not apply to everyone in the same way. At the core of such fictions are always one or more violent deaths that took place either in the context of events that have a collective impact such as wars, genocides, terrorist attacks or due to structural violence. As a means of social reflection, fiction can take up the

function of a 'privileged site in which the phenomena latent in contemporary society emerge and can be explored' (Barclay, 2011: xii): at a time when not only the positions between the Global North and South, but particularly those between East and West, are hardening yet again, thanatographical fiction plays a central role for the collective imaginary in that it provides an archive of knowledge on how violent death and grief are processed. In order to understand the impact of grief, it is necessary to adopt a comparative and transmedial perspective to engage with the way fiction deals with violent death, how it transcends or perpetuates prevalent dichotomies.

I will thus analyse Wajdi Mouawad's tetralogy of plays *Le sang des promesses*, Mohamed Mbougar Sarr's novel *De purs hommes*, Valentyn Vasyanovych's film *Atlantis* and Julie Ruocco's novel *Furies* to elaborate a first draft of the common characteristics of thanatographical fiction. The study of a comparative corpus will show that there is a transcultural and transmedial poetics of grief that serves to frame and channel emotions, to give them a form that allows access to them without sparking further excess:

> The unformed and incomprehensible nature of experience must be translated into clarifying form to appease the distortions experienced by body and soul. Only through form is it possible to tame the experience, to transpose it into a narrative continuum [. . .]. Form enables a regulation of emotions as well as a dialogue between writer and reader that takes these emotions into account and can thus overcome the breach of understanding. (Lachmann, 2019: 473, my translation)

What I aim to demonstrate is that the common grounds of fictions from such diverse places as France, Québec, Senegal and Ukraine are that they can illustrate processes of the economy of emotions (see Schumm, 2016) in a particular way: in order to address the subject of violent death, they have to resort to different strategies of emotion control. By modulating emotions, texts and films influence both the regulation of grief and commemoration on the one hand, and on the other, the creation and reinforcement of collective identities.

The catastrophic generation and its fiction

Previous research on the topics of death, grief and their links to fiction have taken a very fragmented view: examinations of natural death in the literature tend to be divided into, for example, the death of the mother (see Fort, 2007), or of a child (see Hugueny-Léger and Rodgers, 2019), or focus on the portrayal of palliative treatment (see Minich Brewer and Brewer, 2021) – while attention has not yet centred systematically on fictional reactions to violent death. In many cases a single national literary perspective is selected (see Hansen-Löve, 2007 for Slavic literatures; Minich Brewer and Brewer, 2021 and Panaïte, 2022 for Francophone texts; Watthee-Delmotte, 2019 for Franco-Belgian literature; Glaudes and Rabaté, 2005 for French literature), and the focus is usually on one single event or aspect and how it is fictionalised (such as the Soviet labour camps in Lachmann, 2019).

Recent research has also focused on an area that does not deal systematically with grief but is closely linked to it: many studies have examined various bodies of fictional work to analyse the impacts on the present of unmourned deaths in the past, often with reference to Jacques Derrida's term *hauntology* (Derrida, 1994). Derrida suggests that where their memory is suppressed, the unmourned dead return to haunt the living in the form of traumas passed down through generations that often unfold their destructive potential only decades later, so that in many cases it is only the 'generation of postmemory' (Hirsch, 2012) that takes up these deaths in fiction. The studies on how the literally and metaphorically unburied dead of these long-past conflicts haunt the literary and cinematic present are of interest in the present context in that they have identified a number of

topics, processes and conflict lines that can also illuminate studies of the fictional treatment of death and grief in more recent conflicts (see Barclay, 2011; Bronfen, 2012; Etkind, 2013; Goldman, 2012; Goldman and Saul, 2006; Hirsch, 2012; Moses, 2021; Rothberg, 2009; Schwab, 2010; Silverman, 2013). In the wider context of cultural memory studies (see Assmann, 2011; Erll, 2011), they provide examples of research into the danger of conflicts being passed on to the future, the perpetuation of violence through several generations as well as examining how literature represents suppression, expressed, for example, by recourse to intertextual or palimpsestic techniques (see Ruhe, 2020b). Even if these studies do not deal directly with mourning, they analyse the literary treatment of violent conflicts and their social consequences in a way that may serve as a diagnostic instrument, revealing the necessity of dealing openly and in a timely manner with violent death.

In the recent past, the fictional reaction to violent events has accelerated or, to put it another way, the latency period with which fiction reacts to violent death has shrunk considerably: those who die in wars, conflicts, terrorist attacks or due to structural violence in the twenty-first century are almost immediately mourned and 'buried' in literature and cinema by their contemporaries, not a generation or two later. Thus these conflicts are addressed not by the generation Hirsch calls 'postmemory' and Efim Etkind 'post catastrophic' (Etkind, 2013: 3), but by what I will analogously call the 'catastrophic generation' of authors and filmmakers.

The abbreviated aesthetic incubation period might at least partly be linked to changes in the media landscape: in contrast to the news of earlier violent deaths that often only reached the audience after a delay and without lavish images, audiences in the late twentieth and particularly the early twenty-first centuries can be 'present' at violent events almost in real time. It can be assumed that the conceptualisation of contemporary texts and films includes not only familiarity with images of the events they cover but also with fictional reactions to former violence.

While the literary reactions to the two world wars 'shared the grief, tending to silence, about the collapse of all ideas of what civilisation promised' (Ette, 2016: 293), it might be argued that the fact that the 'catastrophic generation' articulates twenty-first century conflicts so immediately and clearly can also be understood as a sign that they are not prepared to accept such a collapse again. In the case of recent violent events, working through them immediately in fiction would impede or prevent the handing down through generations not only of the trauma, but also of the dichotomic construction of an 'enemy' that is often associated with such events.

The fictions that the article examines differ from the texts that give a face and a voice to those who died in the Holocaust, for example, in that they often emphasise not so much the singular, exceptional character of the violent events but depict their continuity within a history of violence that in some cases goes back far into the past, thus pointing to the danger of further perpetuation or even escalation of violence if grief continues to be suppressed or instrumentalised. Examining thanatographical fiction is therefore also focused on the past to the extent that it aims to understand the individual's involvement in 'collective scenarios of violence' as in Michael Rothberg's concept of the 'implicated subject' (Rothberg, 2019: 28), in order to show ways to free the future from the grasp of the past history of violence.

Passing on implication – Wajdi Mouawad, *Le sang des promesses*

Le sang des promesses, Wajdi Mouawad's cycle of four plays which won him public and critical acclaim, revolves around the deaths of parental figures and the difficulties surrounding their literal or symbolic burials. In his volume of commentary on the *quatuor*, Mouawad therefore cites them as one of many 'recurrences' (Mouawad, 2009b: 8; all citations from this text are my translation), for in each play, the story opens with the death of either the father (in *Littoral*, Mouawad, 1999:

14), the mother Nawal (in *Incendies*, Mouawad, 2003: 14), the announcement of the death of the mother Aimée (in *Forêts*, Mouawad, 2006: 20) or the death of the father figure Valery Masson (in *Ciels*, Mouawad, 2009a: 20). Consequently, the first three plays close with burials, two of which are made to correspond with the title of the respective play – a burial at sea for the father in *Littoral*, an earth burial for the mother in *Forêts*.

While the fourth play serves as a counterpoint to the first three, insisting on the fact that '*Ciels* does not tolerate any reference to the past, nor to the childhood, nor to the origins of the protagonists' (Mouawad, 2009a: 10, my translation), in the first three, the quest of the (adult) children, who are mostly representatives of the 'generation of postmemory' – as opposed to the author, who belongs to the 'catastrophic generation' – consists in the successive uncovering of their family's suppressed past and, thereby, of the violence that has, ultimately, surrounded their birth and caused their parent's death. While none of these deaths is in itself a violent death, they are all linked to (extreme) violence experienced in the more or less recent past which has to be uncovered for them to be laid at rest as *pars pro toto* of a traumatised generation. The full disclosure of this history of violence must take place, to hinder a memory that destroyed the parents and their relationship with their children from damaging the next generations in turn.

In *Littoral* and *Incendies*, although neither the country nor the conflict is explicitly named, it has often been assumed that the background against which the action is to be understood is the civil war in Lebanon. The third play, *Forêts*, contrasts with this context, instead dealing with the Franco-German conflicts since the war of 1870/1871. According to the author, his interest in these wars, especially the First World War, did not ultimately lead him far from his origins:

> The First World War [. . .] is the mother of the twentieth century, the one that will give birth, in blood and horror, to the men of today. Also, this birth provoked the fall of the Ottoman Empire, and the Ottoman Empire was this wave that lasted for five centuries and drowned the entire Middle East, so the bridge was established between the subject of the play and my origins. (Mouawad, 2009b: 60)

Mouawad's focus is not on the three wars between French and Germans in less than a hundred years; on the contrary, he is interested in the genealogy of violence and, even more so, in the question of reconciliation: 'how can two nations who have hated each other so much come to shake hands?' (Mouawad, 2009b: 61). He is interested in the seemingly stable reconciliation the two countries achieved even after so much bloodshed. Despite generations of an enmity fomented with the aid of literature, among other factors, the (descendants of) victims and perpetrators managed to establish a relationship and to sign, with the Élysée Treaty, a treaty of friendship that does not deny the past (see Ruhe, 2020a). It is therefore only logical that in Mouawad's plays, too, it is friendship that transcends the old dichotomies of victim and perpetrator and helps put an end to violence: it is with the help of his friends Simone, Sabbé and Amé, whose lives have been ravaged by a civil war, that Wilfried finally manages to bury his father (*Littoral*); Nawal and Sawda, born on opposite sides of a conflict, not only become close friends, but even sacrifice themselves for each other (*Incendies*); the friendship of Ludivine, who, although unknowingly, comes from a family of perpetrators, and Sarah, her pregnant Jewish friend bound to be a victim of the Holocaust, leads to Ludivine's sacrifice and thus allows for the continuation of a genealogy otherwise doomed to disappear (*Forêts*). These friendships and sometimes even sacrifices lead to the formation of a 'hybrid' family transcending the blood ties that have proven ineffectual in pacifying violent conflict. The horrors of the past are passed on genealogically, which will eventually 'stop time from advancing' (Choplin, 2018: 113), while friendship is able to transcend this genealogical deadlock.

Forêts, which is even more complex than the previous plays, opens with the announcement of a pregnancy, which paradoxically also signals the death sentence of the mother Aimée, who has

been diagnosed with cancer. Under the impact of the enthusiasm caused by the fall of the Berlin Wall on one hand and, on the other, the shock caused by the 14 deaths in the massacre at the École Polytechnique de Montréal a few days later, Aimée decides to keep the child she will name Loup. Aimée dies 16 years later of a tumour that 'grew around a solid object in the heart of [her] brain' (Mouawad, 2006: 28, my translation), which turns out to be either a parasitic twin or a fragment of bone from the skull of a woman killed in Treblinka.

After her mother's death, Loup decides to start investigating her family history with the help of French palaeontologist Douglas Dupontel. Complicated by the fact that Aimée was adopted, the investigations lead to the Franco-German war of 1870/1871 and several generations of the Keller family, a family with incestuous and violent relationships. During the Occupation, the descendants of the Keller family are revealed to be involved in collaboration: they are responsible for the production of 'wagons and rails to transport prisoners to the camps' (Mouawad, 2006: 144, my translation). Ludivine, the last descendant of this family, will be adopted and will enter the Resistance at the heart of a network called Cigogne. When her pregnant best friend, Sarah, is about to be arrested and deported, Ludivine takes her place and is taken to Treblinka where she is killed. Luce, Sarah's child, is exfiltrated to Quebec, adopted by a Quebec family and later gives birth to Aimée, Loup's mother, who is adopted in turn.

Geopolitically, the play spans events and spaces from the 1870/1871 war, through the First and Second World Wars, from the Ardennes Forest to Montreal, to the fall of the Berlin Wall and the massacre at the École Polytechnique. As in the first two parts of *Le sang des promesses*, the history of European violence and the traumas it caused cross the Atlantic and continue to haunt the minds of people there, perpetuating a memory that becomes globalised while remaining concretely localised (see Levy and Sznaider, 2011).

By foregrounding friendship and, more importantly, the sometimes very thin line between victim and perpetrator in his plays, Mouawad seems to have anticipated Rothberg's category of the implicated subject. Although they ignore most of the history of violence that their families had to endure and in which some went from being victims to being perpetrators, his protagonists still participate in it and, frequently, perpetuate it. Rothberg points out:

> Foregrounding implication instead of victimhood or perpetration allows us to emphasize the dynamic interplay between subjectivity, structural inequality, and historical violence; supplement absolutist moral ascriptions with more nuanced accounts of power; and above all, leave behind the detached and disinterested spectators who dominate discussions of distant suffering in favor of entangled, impure subjects of historical and political responsibility. The implicated subject, we will see, is a transmission belt of domination. (Rothberg, 2019: 35)

If one takes Rothberg's assumption seriously that the 'more nuanced accounts of power' bring the spectators out of their comfortably distanced observer position, we could posit that the blurring of the boundaries between innocence, responsibility, complicity and guilt, the decision to put 'implicated subjects' at the centre is one of the first characteristics of a poetics of grief. Watching Mouawad's protagonists uncover their implication in a history they had previously ignored, it dawns on the spectators that they are themselves implicated in similar contexts of power. In this way, the border between stage and auditorium is blurred. While seeking a burial ground for their parent or fulfilling their last will, Mouawad's characters undergo profound changes that can be apprehended with the help of Butler's analysis of grief:

> Many people think that grief is privatizing, that it returns us to a solitary situation and is, in that sense, depoliticizing. But I think it furnishes a sense of political community of a complex order, and it does this

> first of all by bringing to the fore the relational ties that have implications for theorizing fundamental dependency and ethical responsibility. (Butler, 2020: 34sq.)

As placeholders for the supposedly uninvolved spectator, Mouawad's protagonists discover their ties to another group and history and their implication in a conflict that had up to now seemed far away or in which they were sure of having been innocent victims. The collapse of a hitherto clear delimitation between right and wrong 'in favor of entangled, impure subjects of historical and political responsibility' (Rothberg, 2019: 35) endows the spectators with a new 'sense of political community of a complex order' in which they may find themselves as involved as the protagonists. This involvement of the spectators or readers is a second characteristic thanatographical fictions have in common.

Moreover, the blended families the protagonists become a part of in the course of their respective searches constitute *nuclei* of a new community of mourners able to overcome a pain that would otherwise be overwhelming – a feature that his plays share with other thanatographical fiction and that we therefore consider as a third characteristics of their poetics.

Structural implication – Mohamed Mbougar Sarr, *De purs hommes*

Mohamed Mbougar Sarr's (2018) third novel *De purs hommes* deals with homophobia in his native Senegal, a subject that the author has been much criticised for, to the point that on social media, some have taken back their congratulations for the Goncourt prize for his fourth novel *La plus secrète mémoire des hommes* in 2021 (see *Le Figaro*, 2021; Vadaux, 2021). His disruptive third text opens with the description of a viral video showing an angry crowd profaning the grave of a young man – a similar clip actually circulated on social media in Senegal in the years 2008/2009. The crowd assumes the young man to be homosexual and therefore deny him the right to be buried in a Muslim cemetery, as they claim that *góor-jigéens* (the Senegalese word for a male homosexual) were too impure for sacred ground. Shocked by the violence of the video, the narrator-protagonist, a teacher of French literature at a university in Dakar, overcomes his own homophobia by learning more and more about the historical and colonial roots of the perception of homosexuality in Senegal. The protagonist attempts first to understand what has happened and then to make sure the young man finds a new burial ground, discovering what might be his own previously suppressed homosexual desire on the way.

Unlike in the other fictions treated in this article, it is not war or terrorism that threatens people's lives and integrity but a structural and officially sanctioned violence directed against homosexuals or those presumed to be homosexual, establishing a necropolitical regime whose causes may be colonial, but which continues to have pernicious consequences in the present (see Mbembe, 2019: 70). While political as well as religious leaders see the 'cause' of homosexuality in 'the influence of dysfunctional Western practices' (M'Baye, 2013: 110), Babacar M'Baye shows in his very well-informed article that 'it is not *homosexuality* but rather *homophobia* that was a colonial imposition' (p. 123).

As the video that opens the novel shows, apart from social exclusion, abuse, and physical violence the most extreme form this violence can take is the denial of a burial in a Muslim graveyard:

> The *góor-jigéen* in the video had been dug up because he defiled sacred ground. It was in the name of purity that he had been exhumed. A purity that was not only the purity of the cemetery that had to be preserved, but also the purity of the souls of all the men who dug him up or who witnessed the exhumation. And all the people who had watched the video, who didn't want to hear about homosexuality, had purified

> themselves by proxy. I too felt purified the first time I saw the video. (Mbougar Sarr, 2018: 126; all citations from this text are my translation)

What Mbougar Sarr describes is an extreme act of violence that can only go unpunished and even be publicly applauded because the Senegalese society the novel describes seems to deny the *góor-jigéens* (or those presumed to be such) their humanity. They are excluded in an operation best described by Judith Butler:

> [. . .] the differential allocation of grievability that decides what kind of subject is and must be grieved, and which kind of subject must not, operates to produce and maintain certain exclusionary conceptions of who is normatively human: what counts as a livable life and a grievable death? (Butler, 2020: 10)

Those considered outside the heteronormative matrix are denied their humanity and hence the right to be grieved or even to be buried: 'if a life is not grievable, it is not quite a life; it does not qualify as a life and is not worth a note. It is already the unburied, if not the unburiable' (Butler, 2020: 45). By addressing the subject, the novel not only tries to remedy this wrong, but also to provide the missing eulogy.

Mbougar Sarr chooses to endow the novel with a narrator-protagonist who is neither a victim nor a perpetrator of homophobic violence, but who becomes increasingly aware of the fact that he, too, is implicated in the violence exerted on homosexuals by the society he lives in and supports with his job as a university teacher: he learns that in the 'dynamic interplay between subjectivity, structural inequality, and historical violence' (Rothberg, 2019: 35), he is just another cog in the wheel. In Michael Rothberg's sense, while not being an 'agent of violence', he is a 'support of domination' and therefore 'useful to power' (Rothberg, 2019: 55). The shock caused by the video leads him on a steep learning curve and, eventually, to a change of mind – 'the idea that the condition of this purification had been the desecration, the violent profanation of another man's body, filled me with shame' (Mbougar Sarr, 2018: 126).

The impression the viral video leaves on the narrator is such that he decides to find out about the identity of the exhumed person and to pay his mother a visit. He learns that rumours about Amadou's sexuality had led to the refusal of all rituals involving the inhumation: nobody had taken part in the bathing of the body, which, according to the Muslim rite, must be done, if it is a male corpse, by male members of the family, so that Amadou's mother had had to give him the funeral bath alone (see Mbougar Sarr, 2018: 132). The burial then has to take place within 24 hours after the death, but as the Imam refused to take care of the funeral, Amadou's body was still at his mother's house two days after his death. When she finally mustered up enough money to pay two gravediggers to bury Amadou secretly in the middle of the night, their haste did not allow her to pronounce 'a single word of prayer' (Mbougar Sarr, 2018: 133), thus breaking another tradition. The next day, an angry mob brought her back her son's corpse and left her with 'a cadaver in decomposition', so that she decided, against Muslim tradition, to 'take a shovel' and to bury him in broad daylight in her own backyard (Mbougar Sarr, 2018: 134). The mother being unable to read and write, there is no name on the tomb, not even a stone (Mbougar Sarr, 2018: 135).

The narrator therefore decides to take it upon himself to accomplish the ritual that Amadou had so far been denied:

> In a confused way, I just felt that there was still something to be done, a mysterious task whose execution alone would alleviate, since it could not erase, that feeling of shame. (Mbougar Sarr, 2018: 137)

By paying Amadou's mother three visits on three consecutive days, he re-enacts the traditional three-day mourning period with her. After she has left for the holy town of Touba, he promises to

take care of the tomb. While he does not, as the protagonists in Vasyanovych's film and Ruocco's text, invent a new ritual, Mbougar Sarr's protagonist chooses to adhere to the existing Muslim tradition, even though he has to do it all by himself. The re-enactment of existing rituals or the invention of new ones can thus be considered a fourth characteristic of a poetics of grief.

Although the idea of writing an 'epitaph of sand' on the grave with a branch crosses his mind, he finally chooses not to be 'the desecrator of the grave by tearing it from its virginal beauty through his writing' (Mbougar Sarr, 2018: 188). In Mouawad's *Incendies*, it is the mother who decides that there shall be neither stone nor name on the tomb until her children have found out about the unbearable violence of her life and their existence. While it is a self-inflicted punishment in the play, the absence of both stone and epitaph in Mbougar Sarr's novel (although beautifully formulated) seems like the tacit acceptance of the society's sentence of ungrievability. Together with Angela, the LGBTQIA+ activist who has led him to Amadou's mother, he forms the smallest nucleus possible of a community of mourners that the novel's readers will hopefully help to grow.

By choosing a narrator who is an academic, and who, at the beginning of the novel, tolerates homosexuality only within the European literature he teaches, but who is otherwise complicit with a homophobia he has internalised to the point of deeming it normal, the text establishes a distance to its horrendous subject. This distance is further emphasised by the fact that the narrator does not witness the unburial directly, but only through the mediation of an amateur video, a video that is not shown, but only described to the reader. However, Mbougar Sarr then slowly deconstructs this distance by having his protagonist understand his implication in the structural violence and by, ultimately, having him meet the mother of the unburied young man. The protagonist slowly comes to understand that he cannot continue to consider himself a 'detached and disinterested spectator', but must accept the fact that he, too, is an 'entangled, impure subject [. . .]' carrying 'historical and political responsibility' (Rothberg, 2019: 35). As in Mouawad's plays, but this time in a complex postcolonial setting, Mbougar Sarr blurs the boundaries between innocence, complicity, responsibility, and guilt. He invites his readers to follow the lead of his narrator-protagonist and to delve into a history they had ignored up to now, to explore their own implication in it. The form Mbougar Sarr gives to his text allows for a moderation or 'regulation of emotions' – a fifth characteristic of thanatographical fiction –, 'as well as a dialogue between writer and reader that takes the emotions into account and can thus overcome the breach of understanding' (Lachmann, 2019: 473, my translation) that the subject might entail.

Only 10 years separate Mbougar Sarr's novel from the events he reacts to: the latency period has thus considerably shrunk compared with Mouawad's plays, for example. It can be assumed that this is also due to the change in the media landscape that allowed not only the narrator but also the author to witness the event nearly in real time (see Marivat, 2018).

Dealing with the dead – Valentyn Vasyanovych, *Atlantis*

Vasyanovych's (2019) film *Atlantis*, though conceived and shot before the Russian assault on the Ukraine in 2022, now functions as a particularly bleak vision that can no longer be called dystopian but is threatening to become the terrible future of the Donbass region. Thus, in this case, there is no latency period to speak of, but the film rather anticipates a grief that has since become much too real. Set in a 'post-apocalyptic' (Sabitova, 2022) Eastern Ukraine in 2025, 'a year after the end of the war with Russia' (Vasyanovych, 2019), it follows Sergiy and his friend, both veterans of the said war with PTSD, who struggle to adjust to life in so-called peace. After his friend commits suicide by jumping into the slag pit of the smelter they both work at,[1] the factory is closed and Sergiy is blamed for it by his co-workers. He then enrols with an organisation that helps deliver clean water into the Donbass region which has been declared uninhabitable as a consequence of the

war – the 'flooded mines, destroyed factories' have 'polluted all the water. The changes are irreversible' (Vasyanovych, 2019: 00:25:20). In this post-catastrophic wasteland, he meets Katya, who works for the (actually existing) organisation Black Tulip, a non-governmental organisation (NGO) that exhumes and identifies the dead – be they Ukrainian or Russian – of the Russo-Ukrainian war to then bury them in a proper grave. Katya explains to Sergiy that before joining the NGO, she was

> doing a degree in archaeology, so I can say I'm following my profession. It's just that the events took place during our lifetime, and not thousands of years ago. It's like you are digging up your own history. (Vasyanovych, 2019: 00:49:03)

As an archaeologist, Katya had been working on a past so long gone that its remnants had to be dug up and interpreted, a past whose violence did not seem to affect the present anymore, so that even the exhumations did not seem like acts of violence (as Rothberg points out, '[w]ithout a link to the present, historical injustices do not implicate us; they remain of strictly antiquarian interest', Rothberg, 2019: 9). With archaeology, she chose a branch of history for which, according to Hans Ruin, 'the world, and nature as a whole, is a vast grave field that holds the remains and traces of the dead' (Ruin, 2019: 114).[2] However, although its remoteness in time seemed to shield her from too immediate a relation to her subject matter, whose possible violence had had a very long incubation period, it seems nevertheless to have endowed her with an understanding of the relations between past and present and of the importance of actively working on 'your own history' when it is in danger of being suppressed. Katya stresses that to her, her new job has a beauty of its own, as '[w]e let the dead say goodbye to their relatives, finish their life story and their war' (Vasyanovych, 2019: 00:50:22), something that is programmatically excluded in archaeology. As such, she understands the work of Black Tulip as a means of 'integration of death in continuing life' (Ette, 2016: 291, my translation), thus helping to readmit the dead into the circle of the living. Although Sergiy, as a participant in the Russo-Ukrainian War, may have been a perpetrator or even the killer of some of these war dead, he, too, joins the NGO and thus participates in their identification and in giving them a decent burial. Like Mouawad's or Mbougar Sarr's protagonists, he is an implicated subject who seeks to redeem himself through his actions.

The film dedicates two of its longest scenes to the forensic examinations of the exhumed dead (Vasyanovych, 2019: 00:41:45sq. and 01:03:07sq.), some of which are in advanced states of decomposition.[3] The fact that none of those present express the least reaction beyond professional dedication shows how normal it has become for the film's protagonists to deal with death in general and these anonymous dead in particular. Only when confronted with the strong smell of a corpse in a state of utter decay at the site of what seems to be a mass grave do the members of Black Tulip show a reaction, which is, however, quickly contained.

Dominant in nearly all scenes of the film, but most prominently during the autopsies, the almost documentary static camera perspective suggests an objectivity and absence of judgement that emphasises that even a post-mortem might be considered a job like any other. At the same time, the absence of judgement suggested through the static camera is also in tune with the fact that the members of the NGO recover all bodies, regardless of nationality or of which side they were fighting on. The camera perspective helps to restrain emotion by literally keeping us at a distance and allowing us, as Susan Sontag called it, to 'stand [. . .] back from the aggressiveness of the world' (Sontag, 2003: 118). At the same time, this very distance may also illustrate '[t]he frustration of not being able to do anything about what the images show' (Sontag, 2003: 117). The distance and the potential frustration can, however, be seen as the poetic means to 'free [. . .] us for observation and for elective attention' (Sontag, 2003: 118), to produce a reaction that goes beyond mere shock and instead, remains with us, helps us not to forget.

The regulation of emotion is further strengthened by the presence of a precise protocol that is followed: the pathologist proceeds from the meticulous description of the clothes layer by layer to the description of the outer appearance of the body, before continuing to the internal examination which is never shown in the film. The pace with which he advances emphasises how much routine he has already acquired and does not allow much space for an emotional reaction by either the protagonists or the audience. I would propose that it is this protocol that has replaced the religious rituals of burial that are clearly felt to be inadequate for the acknowledgement of violent deaths. By acknowledging every physical detail, by paying close attention to even the seemingly inconsequential, the forensic examination can be read as a very real, stunningly personal eulogy, maybe the only funeral rite suitable for these violent deaths.[4] The repeated occurrence of these scenes in the film oddly serves as a supportive framework that helps the spectator to 'transmute the disruptive, overwhelming feelings into an unthreatening state' (Hindemith and Stöferle, 2018: 1, my translation). At the same time, by providing mourning with a specific frame the ritual also serves as a 'stabiliser[. . .] of memory' (Assmann, 1998, my translation) to prevent these dead from being suppressed and falling into oblivion.[5]

The remains of soldiers of the Ukrainian or Russian army or of members of the Donbass's People Militia are exhumed from one and the same mass grave and treated with the same professional attitude by the members of the NGO (Vasyanovych, 2019: 01:03:07sq.). As spectators we witness that the retrieved corpses are not divided into 'grievable' or 'ungrievable' along their nationality or affiliation during the war but given equal attention. The scene belies 'certain exclusionary conceptions of who is normatively human' (Butler, 2020: 10) and instead emphasises the transcultural character of the wish to know where one's loved ones are buried, so that one can grieve them. The film goes on to show that all bodies are given proper graves in a huge cemetery; it is only the inscription on the crosses that permits a distinction between 'temporarily non-identified defender[s] of the Ukraine' and others (Vasyanovych, 2019: 01:20:57). For the Religions of the Book, both a body and a tomb are prerequisites to allow resurrection – this privilege is unconditionally granted to all dead alike in this film. Unlike Amadou in Mbougar Sarr's novel, these dead have a tomb in an official cemetery and a tombstone, although it does not bear their names. However, the strongest contrast to the way the dead are treated in *De purs hommes* is maybe the number of people who work relentlessly to give the dead an appropriate burial – while it is just the narrator and his friend Angela in Mbougar Sarr's text, it is a complex network of NGOs and official institutions in Vasyanovych's film. It seems that after a war is over, when violent death has gone back from being a sad daily routine to being an exception, the constitution of a community of mourners is more self-evident than in the case of structural violence, which will continue to persist even after the ritual for the individual dead has been performed.

However, it is not only the explicit presentation of rituals of identification and burial that aims to counter the suppression of their violent death and to regulate the admittance of the dead into the circle of the living. Vasyanovych finds a rather more radical image for his argument: while Sergiy had seemed like a walking dead during the first half of the film, it is paradoxically his entry into the polluted Donbass region, the realm of the dead to be retrieved and his daily interaction with them, as well as with Katya, that restores him to a place among the living. At the end of what seems to be a twisted version of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, Sergiy refuses to leave even when the opportunity is offered to him and continues his work in the 'zone' with Katya, whom he has fallen in love with. Towards the end of the film, their truck breaks down and it is in the semi-darkness of the loading space, between several exhumed corpses safely stored away in body bags, that they passionately make love. The static camera yet again bestows a quiet dignity on this otherwise gruesome scene in which the dead are literally brought back to the existential realities of life through their sheer copresence.

The *nochers* of memory – Julie Ruocco, *Furies*

The entry into the realm of the dead and the necessity of returning to rejoin the living also plays a central role in Julie Ruocco's (2021) first novel *Furies*. The author confronts Bérénice, a French archaeologist and art smuggler with Syrian origins, with Asim, a Syrian firefighter who has become a gravedigger and then a forger during the war in Syria. Without ever being named explicitly, the novel's central intertext is indeed the story of Orpheus and Eurydice: Asim's aunt asks him to descend into the mass grave situated in a ravine just outside the Syrian town they live in to look for her son who has disappeared, to at least 'allow his mother to bury him since they have deprived [her] of his life' (Ruocco, 2021: 47; all citations from this text are my translation). While 'descend[ing] into the underworld' (Ruocco, 2021: 48), he finds not only the body of his cousin, but also the headless cadaver of his sister Taym, who had collected proof of war crimes and whom Asim had helped smuggle out of town in a fake wedding, but whose procession had been intercepted by jihadists.

Although he emerges from the mass grave to give his sister a proper burial, a part of him remains there, the weight of the dead bearing down on him. The jihadists who have taken over the Syrian town where Asim and his sister Taym lived introduced a clear dichotomy between those ('infidels') that are not only not granted the right to live, but also denied a proper burial and thus cannot be mourned, as 'they are, ontologically, and from the start, already lost and destroyed, which means that when they are destroyed in war, nothing is destroyed' (Butler, 2016: pos. 196): 'The executions had become public, even the dead were forcibly enlisted for propaganda and put on display in the squares' (Ruocco, 2021: 39).

For a while, Asim finds a certain solace in protesting against this 'necropolitics' (Mbembe, 2019) by giving the dead from the mass grave a proper burial, but the fact that he has gone from saving the living to burying the dead as 'the war was a power of inversion' (Ruocco, 2021: 77) does not durably ease his pain. After having escaped to the Turkish border town of Kilis, he uses the names on the list his sister had established of victims of war crimes to provide false passports to refugees:

> Every application, every passport was an opportunity of making the stone that weighed on his shoulders melt. All the names that he had kept inside him to the point of madness, he gave them back to the living. It was like raising the dead. (Ruocco, 2021: 95)

Asim bestows a twisted kind of resurrection on the war dead: redistributing 'their names' is not a way of 'erasing their existence. On the contrary, it is a way of honouring them, of maintaining a living record of their passage' (Ruocco, 2021: 97). By passing on their names, Asim not only integrates their 'death in continuing life' (Ette, 2016: 291, my translation), they literally serve to save the lives of others, whose escape to safer countries the passports ensure. But even after that is achieved, the names of these dead will live on and will thus carry their memory with them into exile. Producing and handing over the passports serves as a triple ritual: it unburdens Asim of the weight of the dead that bear him down, while granting the refugees a new life they will live as a memory to the defunct. Most of all, however, the transmission of their name and memory is a means of mourning those who had been marked as 'ungrievable'.

However, Asim's forgery enables not only these resurrections but also his own. Since his descent into the mass grave, he had 'remained on the threshold' (Ruocco, 2021: 97) between the world of the living and that of the dead. The fact that he has now found a way of 'making the stone [. . .] melt', of giving new life to those lost in war, alleviates his pain, and allows him to look into the future. He is no longer the 'guardian' of these names and memories, but has become the 'passeur'

(Ruocco, 2021: 94), the *nocher* who, after having turned around to look at his dead sister in the underworld of the mass grave, can finally escape from there by bringing all these dead back among the living.

It is not only his task of passing on the memory of the dead that lets him come to life again, but also his encounter with Bérénice, who continues his sister's task of documenting the war crimes. The daughter of a probably Syrian exile has a degree in archaeology and is thus qualified to 'conduct an autopsy of time' (Ruocco, 2021: 12), although what she does best is 'giving birth to the past, stealing things from nothing' (Ruocco, 2021: 10). At the beginning of the novel, her occupation is much more profane than Katya's in Vasyanovych's film – she smuggles ancient jewellery to France where it is sold on the black market. Drawing profit from the devastation of Syria by the Islamic State, she is an 'accomplice of the massacre' (Ruocco, 2021: 11), participating in the obliteration of history instead of contributing to its conservation, although she sees even this activity as a transmission – 'I do not steal anything, I transmit, Bérénice defended herself' (Ruocco, 2021: 103). As such, she can be seen as an 'implicated subject' in Rothberg's sense:

> Emerging from a densely woven zone of interaction, the implicated subject is a 'support of domination' that cannot simply be identified as a bearer of wickedness or an agent of violence. In this scenario, as in Levi's account of the grey zone proper, ambiguity is productive: it is precisely the difficult-to-locate position between victims and perpetrators that makes implicated subjects useful to power, that makes them, in Forti's words, 'transmission belts' of domination. (Rothberg, 2019: 55)

The fact that Bérénice sees herself as a mere intermediary, that she is unaware of supporting a system of neocolonial domination on one hand and of Islamist jihadism on the other, does not exonerate her from her implication. Only when Asim takes Bérénice at her word and asks her to transmit the stories of the war crimes documented by Taym does she resume her activities as an archaeologist, redeeming herself by continuing Taym's mission. From now on, she is no longer a 'profaner who moves objects from one world to another' (Ruocco, 2021: 14), but becomes a true 'passeuse', a *nocher*, this time not of violence or domination, but of memory, as Wajdi Mouawad would put it:

> The *nocher* is the navigator who, by leading his boat, leads a passenger from one shore to another. He is Charon, the *nocher* of Hades, he is the pilot who takes care of his passenger. The *parole nochère* would therefore be that discourse which links one world to another and carries the memory of those who have left us. (Mouawad, 2022, my translation)

Through the transmission of names and memories, the world of the dead and that of the living are connected and remain so even beyond the actual 'funeral rite' of handing over the forged passports.

Conclusion

The four examples show different, yet in many ways similar, methods of processing violent death and grief. Although coming from several national contexts and covering a wide range of conflict, they show that there is indeed a transcultural poetics of grief, a poetics that at least these four samples share and whose characteristics were established through their analysis.

All of them deal with situations where not only the living, but even the dead are denied their last rituals on the basis of a divisive rhetoric founded not on the common grounds of mourning, but rather on violence and revenge. The displacement of these deaths from the clear place that cultures

allocate to them into a state of latency has the effect of them haunting the present (Assmann, 2011: 317) as the 'ghostly presence' (Barclay, 2011: xx) of the unprocessed past.

As a contrast to a rhetoric that threatens to divide a society, the 'relation to the dead' that these fictions explore through burials and sometimes reburials serves 'as a foundation for sociality as such' (Ruin, 2019: 3) or helps 'to reorder community' (Verdery, 1999: 108). Grief as it is understood in these fictions creates new communities, be they ever so small, through the common mourning and concern for a dead hitherto unknown to most of them.

While all the analysed fictions reflect on the interaction of grief and violence, the protagonists themselves are neither victims nor perpetrators, they rather belong to the somewhat messier category of 'implicated subjects' in the sense of Michael Rothberg (2019: 28). What is more, all the fictions analysed centre on protagonists who act as placeholders for the reader or spectator, who thereby come to realise their own implication.

These fictions do not aim at retaliation or even at the identification of concrete offenders; instead, their focus is on those affected by the deaths. Faced with the sheer inhumane death toll of wars or structural violence, the traditional, religious or spiritual forms of appeasement can offer no suitable ritual. At this point, thanatographical fictions step in to show how new communities of mourners can emerge, who then develop adequate rituals to achieve healing (Ruin, 2019: 54).

The plays and novels as well as the film resort to strategies of emotion control, of a regulation and moderation of emotion. Be it the narrative perspective or the position of a static camera – these shield the audience from what would otherwise be unbearable, allows them to take a step back, observe and reflect.

The achievement common to all thanatographical fiction is to bring back the dead from the state of latency that is destabilising for social cohesion into the collective memory of the present.

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Notes

1. A death that recalls that of the eponymous protagonist of Danilo Kiš' *A tomb for Boris Davidovich*: This fictional victim of the Gulag escapes from his persecutors by jumping into a boiling cauldron of liquid slag, leaving behind only 'a few cigarettes and a toothbrush' (Kiš, 1978: 108; see Ruhe, 2020b: 103sq.).
2. It is noteworthy that the profession of archaeology is very common in francophone fiction dealing with a suppressed past, possibly because it functions as an easy metaphor for the task to be undertaken as a work of cultural memory (see Ruin, 2019: 112sq.): the Canadian palaeontologist Douglas Dupontel in Wajdi Mouawad's *Forêts*, the Corsican archaeologist Aurélie in *Le sermon sur la chute de Rome* by Jérôme Ferrari (see Ruhe, 2020b: 115sq.), the Iraqui archaeologist Mariam in Laurent Gaudé's *Écoutez nos défaites* (see Ruhe, 2020b: 191sq.), the French-Syrian archaeologist Bérénice in Julie Ruocco's *Furies* and the Ukrainian archaeologist Katya all participate in digging up a past that can and should no longer be contained, a past that needs to come to light, to be identified just as the bodies in *Atlantis*, before they can definitely be put to rest.
3. In these scenes, the 'model autopsy protocol and a model protocol for disinterment and the analysis of skeletal remains [. . .] drafted by Advocates for Human Rights' (Ferrándiz and Robben, 2015: 9) is followed approximately, although it seems to have been adapted to the rather basic conditions of the post-war region: no X-rays of the corpses are taken and they are not washed before proceeding to the external examination (see https://www.theadvocatesforhumanrights.org/Res/minnesota_protocol.pdf).
4. Possible references to the tradition of secondary burials have not yet been investigated, but this is planned as part of a follow-up publication.
5. Ferrándiz and Robben point out that exhumations have become a 'transnational practice': taking place in Spain, Bosnia, Argentina, Chile, Peru, Cambodia, Ruanda or Korea, 'the very same globalized processes

that affect the nature of the production, circulation, and consumption of social memory are also transforming contemporary human-rights-related exhumations' (Ferrándiz and Robben, 2015: 30sq.). If the practice has acquired 'a transnational or transcultural dimension, emphasizing an increasing flow, interconnection, and interdependence between countries' (Ferrándiz and Robben, 2015: 30) – in the form Levy and Sznaider called 'cosmopolitan memory' (see Levy and Sznaider, 2011) – this raises the question of what came first: is there a transcultural poetics of grief because there is a 'global cosmopolitan memory' (Ferrándiz and Robben, 2015: 29) even where exhumations or other ways of dealing with those having died a violent death are concerned, did the poetics come first or is it a messier kind of relationship? What seems even more important in this context is the fact that the 'flow of knowledge' (Crossland, 2015: 244) about these practices follows the well-known path of colonial and imperial influences, although important expertise first came and still comes from Latin-American countries (Fondebrider, 2015: 50).

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