

1. Title of the Project

Dutch song texts and changing attitudes towards death

2. Coordinators

Martin Hoondert, Department of Culture Studies

Menno van Zaanen, Department of Communication and Information Sciences

3. Project Summary

Introduction

The past few years Menno van Zaanen and Martin Hoondert have cooperated in three closely related projects regarding music and cremation rituals. In 2014 we concentrated on musical aspects of the music played during cremations, making use of the database of Crematorium Tilburg. In 2015 we focused on the linguistic aspects and we identified the relations between the topics of the lyrics described in words and the cremation ritual. In 2016 we analyzed the relationship between songs being played together during each ritual. The 2014 research resulted in an article, published in the A-journal *Mortality*. The 2015 research resulted in a database of more than 1 million songs; an article about the computational aspects of this research is in preparation. As spin-off of the 2016 research two articles are in preparation. Perhaps the most innovating results of the three years' cooperation are the development of new computational methods to analyze music and lyrics, and the attunement of computational and ethnographic approaches.

Proposal 2017: Research questions and methods

For the 2017 research we aim to use the methods and approaches developed in the past three years, but there is a shift in the research area. Although 'death' is still the main topic, we will leave the ritual domain of the crematorium. In the here proposed research we will address the (dominant but also contested) thesis of shifting views of death over time as stated by the French historian Philippe Ariès. Based on the analysis of images, paintings, literary sources, etc. Ariès distinguished several periods of time in relation to views of death. From the early Middle Ages until about the 18th century the experience of death in Western Europe was described as accepting death (Ariès: 'the tamed death') (Ariès, 1981). Subtle changes in western people's attitudes toward death occurred in the 11th and 12th centuries, which can be characterized as personalization of death ('my death'), in which the individual rather than the act of death itself came to the forefront. From the 18th century onward death was feared, the dead mourned over ('your death'). In the late 19th - early 20th century a 'brutal revolution' took place, according to

Ariès, which resulted in death as being both shameful and forbidden ('denial of death') (Becker, 1973). Ariès published his book in 1977 and contrasted the 'long Middle Ages' as an era of the 'tamed death' with the denial of death in the 70s. Ariès described a new type of dying, especially in the more technologically developed and urban areas. The essence of this 'new' death is invisibility, a desire for death to retreat from the family and to be confined to hospitals and hospices.

For the Netherlands, views of death and afterlife have been summarized and researched by Joanna Wojtkowiak in her dissertation about the post-self and notions of immortality in contemporary Dutch society (Wojtkowiak, 2012). Similar to Ariès, she points at the privatization and professionalization of death in the twentieth century, adding for the Netherlands the individualization of death with more focus on individual wishes and the growing importance of personal meaning in contrast to institutionalized – religious – meanings. This resulted to less focus on transcendent views of immortality with notions such as soul and heaven and more on symbolic or social immortality. This led to ritual embarrassment: the top-down rituals no longer fitted the individual interpretive frameworks and new ritual strategies were not yet available.

The 'invisibility- or taboo-thesis', as expressed by Ariès, has been criticized and nuanced in a 1991 article by the UK death studies scholar Tony Walter (1991). He pointed to "death being highly problematic for the modern *individual*, but not at all problematic for modern society – hence the lack of ritual surrounding it today." (Walter, 1991, p. 307) Now, a few decades later, the ritual embarrassment appears to have been replaced by what we can call 'ritual enthusiasm': people no longer feel embarrassed or unaware about how to shape a funeral ritual, but feel free to shape their own 'personal' funeral.

The shifts in attitudes towards death as described by Ariès and others challenges us. First, for his research Ariès made use of images and literary sources, but not another, more "popular", or less elite, source: song lyrics. As many song lyrics (from the middle ages to the 20th century) are available in the database *Dutch Songs online* (De Nederlandse Liederenbank), we will be able to explore diachronically the views of death as mirrored in song lyrics. The availability and usefulness of other song lyrics databases will be researched, that is part of the project. Second, Ariès published the first edition of his book in the 70s of the 20th century. In the meantime, attitudes towards death have changed and we see both denial of death and creativity in the domain of death rituals (Venbrux, Heessels, & Bolt, 2008). To characterize the view of death in the late 20th and 21st centuries, we have to do fine-grained analysis of cultural expressions. We will elaborate on Ariès' work by analyzing contemporary cultural expressions: contemporary artworks, performances, movies, and especially song lyrics. By analyzing these cultural expressions (multiple and presumably contradictory) views of death will come to the fore.

Collaborative aspects of the project

This research requires both qualitative research (literature review and analysis of artistic expressions; interviews with artists and singer-songwriters) and computational research

(collecting databases, designing methods for content analysis, analyzing the results of the content analysis of song lyrics). Even though the qualitative and quantitative research may be carried out in isolation, the results of both approaches need to be integrated to validate the different approaches. In the first phase of the research, the research assistant from CIW will gather datasets containing lyrics from several time periods. In the meantime, the research assistant from DCU will reread Ariès' work and books and articles by other authors and give an overview of shifting views of death including the approximate related time periods from the middle ages to the 20th century. He/she will also pay attention to the cultural expressions which, according to Ariès and others, mirror the various views of death. In the second phase, both assistants will complete Ariès' work by an analysis of song lyrics by a mixed method approach: both close reading of a selected amount of songs and computational analysis of a large number of songs. As an illustration, searching for just the word "dood" (death) in lyrics contained in the Dutch Song online database results in 3829 songs. In the third phase, there will be a focus on the 20th and 21st centuries by analyzing contemporary pop songs and other cultural expressions, continuing the research where Ariès stopped in the 1970s.

More specific, the research assistants will work on the following tasks.

Research assistant CIW:

- Datasets containing lyrics from several time periods will have to be collected. As a starting point, the Dutch Song online database can be used.
- The in-depth (computational) analysis of lyrics will require specialized computational linguistic tools. Firstly, songs dealing with death will need to be extracted from the Dutch Song online database, secondly an analysis or clustering of the lyrics will need to be performed (to group songs based on topical content), and, finally, these clusters will need to be analyzed and linked to the expected (based on the cultural analysis) topic clusters. Additionally, care has to be taken to deal with historical spelling variation.

Research assistant DCU:

- A review of literature regarding views of death will need to be performed, starting with Ariès' work (diachronically)
- The topic of death in cultural expressions of the 20th and 21st centuries will need to be investigated: literature, artworks, movies, etc. The assistant will analyze catalogues, interview artists and singer-songwriters.

4. Results

1. Datasets of song lyrics on death from the middle ages to the 20th and 21st centuries.
2. One article which reviews, comments on and completes Ariès' pivotal book, adding the diachronic analysis of song lyrics.
3. One article regarding the views of death in the late 20th and the 21st century, with a focus on pop song lyrics.

4. The research assistant will design an online exhibition, showing artworks, literature and music/song lyrics related to views of death. This exhibition is diachronic but with a focus on the 20th and 21st centuries. The online exhibition will be used as a teaching tool in the course 'The Ceremonial Society' (Beck / Hoondert).

5. Project timeline

Phases	Research trainee 1 (DCU)	Research trainee 2 (DCI)	Milestones
1	Review of literature regarding views of death, starting with Ariès	Data (lyrics) collection from the Dutch Song online database of songs related to death. Data cleanup and handling of spelling variation.	Dataset containing lyrics on death from the middle ages to the 20 th century. Summary of literature review.
2	Analysis of song lyrics from the middle ages to the 20 th century through close reading of selected songs. Gathering cultural expressions etc. of the late 20 th and 21 st centuries, planning interviews.	Analysis and clustering of the lyrics based on contents/topic clustering.	1. Clusters of songs based on content, which can be analyzed with respect to time period as well as cultural theories. 2. Article 1
3	Analysis of cultural expressions of the late 20 th and 21 st centuries; designing an online exhibition	Writing up articles, explicitly linking qualitative and quantitative results.	1. Publicly accessible dataset of lyrics including documentation. Article on clustering of lyrics/historical documents. 2. Article 2 3. Online exhibition

5. Research Trainee Profile

The research trainees that participate in this project essentially serve as the driving force behind the project. Even though both coordinators are very keen on further collaboration, the trainees speed up the collaboration greatly by performing practical research, which takes place on the

intersection of the research areas of both coordinators. In practice, the research is supervised by both coordinators, which brings up differences in methodological approaches in the different fields. In particular, trainees will perform research based on methodologies coming from the culture studies background (such as analysis of artistic expressions) as well as a communication and information science background (including computational and experimental research).

Given the interdisciplinary focus of the research, this topic may be interesting to students from a range of tracks, such as:

- Algemene cultuurwetenschappen
- CIW: Human Aspects of Information Technology
- CIW: Data journalism
- CIW: Tekst en Communicatie
- CIW: Interculturele communicatie
- others

The level of the students (bachelor, master, or research master) is less important compared to the drive to learn more about the topic as well as the research techniques from the different disciplines. Given the interdisciplinary nature, it would have our preference to find a student who has a background in the field of culture studies (taking an interest arts in a broad sense) and a student with a background in communication and information sciences (preferably with computational/computational linguistic affinity), who are keen to learn techniques from other fields.

How to apply

Send a curriculum vitae as well as a brief motivation letter to Martin Hoondert (M.J.M.Hoondert@uvt.nl) and Menno van Zaanen (mvzaanen@uvt.nl).

Literature

- Ariès, P. (1981). *The hour of our death* (H. Weaver, Trans.). New York: Knopf.
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