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The performative and ritualised production of mourning in digital art: a formalisation of time

Myriam Watthee-Delmotte

Myriam Watthee-Delmotte is Research Director of the Fund for Scientific Research – FNRS, Professor at the Université catholique de Louvain (UCL), where she founded the Centre de Recherche sur l’Imaginaire. She is a Member of the Royal Academy of Belgium (Literature, Political and Moral Sciences). She has an anthropological and semiotic approach of cultural representations. She is working on the writing modes and auctorial postures of sacralization in Contemporary Literature. Her book on *Littérature et ritualité. Enjeux du rite dans la littérature française contemporaine* (2010) won the Emmanuel Vossaert Price. She led at the UCL the “Literature and Media Innovation” IUAP Program, involving Figura.

Translated by Saskia Brown

Abstract

Literature has always been present in the mourning process, because of the human need of symbolization, specifically with verbal language; nowadays, the hypermedia creations play a role in this. The article analyses what brings the numeric form when it is involved in an aesthetical project, in two works: *Remembering the Dead* by John Barber and *Paroles gelées* by Françoise Chambefort. It observes how both works, which simultaneously play on emotional and notional matters, propose to share a ritual experience. More specifically, it shows how the performativity depends on a particular, chronotopical, formalization of the temporality.

Keywords

chronotope, commemoration, hypermedia, mourning, rite, temporality

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What specific contribution can hypermedia artworks make to dealing with mourning and commemoration of the dead? The human species alone requires a space and a time devoted to the dead, and, inseparably, for reflecting on the meaning of mortality. This has led to various forms of ritual, some of which are institutionalised, and others, unsocialised. Of all living beings, humans alone treat a corpse not as an object, but as a deceased person, and convey this by expressions, images, sounds, and gestures, all of which are invested with symbolic meaning. Literary practices are associated with mourning because of the need to symbolise experience, particularly in verbal language. Hypermedia works have a role in this process, as

evidenced by the 9th issue of *bleuOrange*, published in 2016, which was devoted to violent deaths.¹ We shall refer to the two hypermedia works presented in this issue, John Barber's *Remembering the Dead*, and Françoise Chambeffort's *Paroles gelées*, to analyse how digital formalisation in the context of an aesthetic practice can contribute to symbolisation. We shall examine how these at once emotional and conceptual works generate a ritualised shared experience. More specifically, we shall see how the performative force of these works is rooted in a particular formalisation of time.

Literature, like music an “art of time,” in Lessing's classification, involves the unfolding of an aesthetically worked language along a temporal axis.² In the digital age, hypermedia works add visual and spatial components, as well as interactions between the different media. The temporality of the digital arts is always chronotopic. This semiotic specificity, which is a factor of complexification, emerges in the context of the modern world's overload of visual codes.³ We shall see how these two hypermedia works arrive at a performance of commemoration which is collective and social although based on the mobilisation of individual subjectivities, through a particular treatment of (always chrono-topic) temporality.

“With screen scripts [*écrits d'écran*],” Fiorenza Gamba states, “the activity cuts across the private and the public sphere.”⁴ Two preliminary remarks on this point. First, works in a digital medium respond to a fundamental desire for more personal rituals around the deceased, as opposed to the “standard package” offered by funeral parlours for dealing with a death.⁵ Since time immemorial, the Arts and Letters have been the vehicle for what the institution excludes in its official burial ceremonies or commemorations, which often force individual emotions into a rationalised and bureaucratised straight-jacket around death, partly by imposing a compartmentalisation of time. The interactivity inherent in digital practices increases the mourner's sense of autonomy. As a result, computer technologies were used from the start to compete with institutionalised rituals around death, to create parallel rituals, directly handled by the mourners themselves, using their everyday, familiar world of cyberspace: virtual cemeteries appeared (the first being *The World Wide Cemetery* by Michael Kibbee in 1995, www.cemetery.org), as well as commemorative sites, and dedicated pages on social media.

Second, digital technologies play an essential role in making information public, which typically defines communities today insofar as visibility is a condition for an activity to gain collective momentum.⁶ Digital technologies are distinctive in enabling socialisation to occur bottom-up: individual needs of all sorts manage to generate collective concerns through networked interactions. They start life as individual preoccupations, and then gather strength as virtual communities of shared desires and values, which occupy spaces of digital visibility, and can become real spaces too. For example, making AIDS Memorial Quilts bearing the names of men from the gay community who had died of AIDS was a mode of commemoration which spread thanks to the Internet (www.aidsquilt.org), and can give rise to real exhibitions, on World AIDS Day.

John Barber's *Remembering the Dead*⁷ performs a gesture of commemoration of the dead in its visual and aural presentation of the names of people killed by firearms in America from 2014 to 2016. These victims of intentional killings (not of accidental deaths or suicides) are identified by their name, and the date and place of the crime. The work is a memorial

1. Myriam Watthee-Delmotte, “La création hypermédiatique: des ritualités alternatives pour gérer les morts violentes,” in Ariane Savoie (dir.), *bleuOrange*, no 9, 2016. [online] <http://revuebleuorange.org/oeuvre/09/la-creation-hypermediatique-des-ritualites-alternatives-pour-gerer-les-morts-violentes> [accessed on 25 April 2017].

2. It is no coincidence that the genre of literary epitaphs emerged in the Renaissance at the same time as musical epitaphs. See Myriam Watthee-Delmotte, “Les tombeaux littéraires. Du rite au texte,” in Baudoin Decharneux, Catherine Maignant and Myriam Watthee-Delmotte (dir.), *Esthétique et spiritualité 2. Circulation des modèles européens*, Fernelmont, E.M.E., 2012, p. 289 sqq.

3. Christine Buci-Glucksmann, *La Folie du voir. Une esthétique du virtuel*, Paris, Galilée, 2002.

4. Fiorenza Gamba, “La personnalisation numérique des nouveaux rituels funèbres,” in Denis Jeffrey and Angelo Cardita (dir.), *La Fabrication des rites*, Quebec, Presses de l'Université Laval, 2015, p. 209.

5. Martine Roberge, “Autopsie des rites funéraires contemporains: une tendance à la re-ritualisation,” in Denis Jeffrey and Angelo Cardita (dir.), *La Fabrication des rites*, Quebec, Presses de l'Université Laval, 2015, p. 183.

6. Nathalie Heinrich, *De la visibilité. Excellence et singularité en régime médiatique*, Paris, NRF/Gallimard, 2015.

7. John Barber, *Remembering the Dead*. [Online] <http://dte-wsuv.org/remembering-the-dead/french/> [accessed on 6 June 2018].

which is reactivated every time a surfer visits the site. First, the name of the dead person, with the date and place of the killing, are read out loud, when they appear in white in the centre of the screen. Then the names alone, in grey, are aligned along the screen in the background. Gradually the screen fills up with scores of names, along with the mention of some anonymous individuals whose dead bodies remain unidentified. The list of victims is spoken by an artificial feminine voice without any particular intonation. The names are also presented in a neutral white and grey, on a black background, in a sans serif font. Hence these murders are reported with visual and sound effects which appear disembodied and featureless, and the deceased are singularised only through factual data: their forename, surname, a place and a date.

These aspects remind us of traditional ways of honouring fallen soldiers, such as the ritual of the Last Post, which takes place daily under the Menin Gate in Ypres, on which are carved the names of the soldiers killed there in the First World War; or the Books of Remembrance preserved in the peace tower of the parliament building in Ottawa, which record the names of the 66,655 Canadians who lost their lives during World War One; and the 44,893 victims of the Second World War. Every day one page of these books is turned. One can also think of the Wall of Names in Paris, made of Jerusalem stone, on which are engraved the names of 76,000 Jews deported in the context of the Nazi extermination of the Jews.

Yet this digital artwork has specific characteristics. First, the order of the names is random. It is neither alphabetical nor chronological, nor organised by place, unlike official registers which follow a set order. Also, it changes every time a surfer activates the programme. And it can be replayed indefinitely, because once the screen is full up, a new screen emerges on which the names continue to appear. This gives an impression of a blind and unending automation of killings. Above all, the visitor realises that this is not a list of names already engraved or printed after a massacre has taken place, but that it is open-ended and can continue indefinitely. This quickly becomes oppressive, and since announcing each murder takes five seconds, the rhythm too creates a macabre feeling. The emotional force of *Remembering the Dead* is thus twofold, first in the singularisation of each victim, and second in the cumulative effect of these crimes without any given motive, which occur in different places and times, each time unique, throughout the United States. The recitation gradually constructs the image of a hidden, endemic, irreducible and irremediable violence, a sort of blind, destructive machine which takes over from the individuality of each case.

The element which war memorials, as official commemorations, have in common with Barber's work is their use of a statistical principle to raise awareness of a human disaster. However, the parallel is contrastive in this case because with Barber the deaths are crimes involving private individuals, and they are committed in a civilised country in peace-time, and with no noble cause which could embellish them. It is indeed tragic to realise that in the United States, as official statistics prove, gun deaths, that is, intentional crimes, are as high as road deaths—about 30,000 annually; on Christmas Day 2015 alone (par excellence a day reserved for peaceful celebration), 37 intentional killings took place. The digital work has the effect of mobilising a value system committed to non-violence and to reflection on the unique and sacred character of human life.

Through its use of time, through the unbroken flow of data appearing in the visual field, and through the litany of names pronounced all at the same pitch, *Remembering the Dead* also leads to another issue: how long will the visitor spend on this work of commemoration, which will come to a halt whenever he or she decides, thus leaving thousands of murdered individuals ignored and forgotten? Each visitor is emotionally involved with this question, alongside the awareness of the tedious or even intolerable recitation of the names. As the list of victims gets longer, one loses a sense of measurable time and enters the trying experience of subjective time that Bergson called “duration,” since no “pause” button can be pressed. Yet by putting a stop to this dirge, the visitor contributes personally to obliterating the victims and consigning them to nonexistence. The difference between the official commemorations and the hypermedia work is therefore also the difference between a self-enclosed, framed and institutionalised response, and an intimate, complex and tormenting question. In Blanchot's

words, “The reply is the misfortune of the question,”⁸ and Barber, as an artist, chooses to remain with the question which each visitor asks himself individually in his heart.

Françoise Chambefort’s *Paroles gelées*⁹ likewise broaches the issue of the violent deaths that are part of today’s reality, but in a more interactive and playful way. The starting-point for her work is a reference to an episode in Rabelais’s *Quart Livre*, where at the end of a conflict between the Arimaspians and the Nephelibates, the sounds of battle freeze in the air, only becoming audible with the Spring thaw, when the cries of men and horses are set free. Françoise Chambefort keeps a quotation from Rabelais as a background image in her animation, placed over the outline of a ship and the silhouette of a human being with his hands in the air, over which coloured bubbles float freely, borne by the wind. The visitor can let them pass, or stop them in their flight. If they are touched, they release fragments of sounds from recent wars and attacks: screams, exploding bombs, fired shots, sirens, words of panic and all the sounds of chaos. The place and date of each fatal event appears on the screen: Libya August 2014, Syria July 2015, Burma May 2012, Belgium March 2016, USA December 2015, etc. Once these details have appeared, they remain on the screen in the place where the bubble was burst, accumulating until they gradually take over all the screen space. At the same time, without any action by the visitor, a repetitive tune begins, and carries on throughout, made of high notes sounding in an upbeat and cheerful way, suggesting the banality of video games.

The work drives home the omnipresence of violence in the world today, but through the quotation from Rabelais, it makes the visitor aware of the uninterrupted presence of barbarity across the centuries. And just as Rabelais greeted the upheavals of his time with carnivalesque laughter, so it is, paradoxically, through a kind of game that viewers are summoned to greater awareness of their own role: each visitor is lured by a game of skill (capturing moving bubbles) to the tune of a light-hearted electronic soundtrack, but in so doing he or she is encouraged to make the indelible traces of the massacres which scar the world spread over their own visual (the screen) and aural space, in striking contrast to the motifs of play. The actions implied and conveyed by this banal game are in fact highly significant: the player experiences the sensation of threatened destruction, the frenzy and distress of anonymous people whose reality is anything but playful, and he or she is led to slowly stifle the screen with the visual record of these tragedies occurring in all four corners of the earth. None of the visitor’s gestures can be neutral, since each person is involved in the construction of a commemorative chronotope which with time will become a magma of visual traces and sound signifying only suffocation, which the visitor will feel driven to escape.

Again, this spatio-temporal representation which expands to fill up the whole screen poses the question of how long the visitor can tolerate his own space being invaded and progressively stifled by the bloodshed and tragedies which beset today’s world. As in *Remembering the Dead*, the work raises the issue of how far one can invest oneself in the problem of violence and the remembrance of the dead. In both works, once the game has started, there is no pause possible, and the bubbles keep multiplying just as the names of the assassinated victims keep being intoned and lined up on the screen. But unlike Barber’s work which proceeds in a regular, automated way, giving the viewer only one alternative, that of watching the lengthening sequence of names or exiting the application, in the case of Chambefort the viewer takes an active role in the work, and hence has more responsibility. Will he or she take the grotesque and cynical course of playing the game and ignoring that it involves human tragedies? Or will he play because he knows the game is serious, in order to burst the bubble of his own indifference to the tribulations of his century? Or will he decide not to play, and so condemn the signs of horror to be buried in oblivion? Whatever the viewer’s decision, *Paroles gelées* has implicated him.

Apart from the works’ implicit link to commemorations of war, they also resemble, in the way they date the crimes they enumerate, the news bulletins which pour out their daily stream of violence over the screens of our private and public spaces. In this respect, *Paroles gelées* resembles international news columns which report on major conflicts, while *Remembering the Dead* reminds one rather of the tragedies affecting ordinary individuals.

8. Maurice Blanchot, *L’Entretien infini*, Paris, Gallimard, 1969, p. 15.

9. Françoise Chambefort, *Paroles gelées*. [Online] http://fchambef.fr/paroles_gelees/index.html [accessed on 6 June 2018].

But here, in contrast to the dominant mode of communication in the news media, and in the social networks which relay them, there is no visual representation of horror: the murdered individuals have no body and no image. Attacks are reduced to elements of sound, and the victims are merely linguistic signs which occupy digital space. These semiotic features point up the contrast with the images of violence banalised by their daily accumulation, in our contemporary digital world. They also make the viewer perform a fundamental ritual of *memento mori*, in which human victims appear as pure signs, and then, through the decision to interrupt their flow, disappear as signs and only continue to exist as long as their memory or after-image endures. This process mimes the three traditional stages of mourning, namely: remembering the person, replaying their death symbolically, and separating the realm of the living from that of the dead in order to return to life. The decision to exit the application, with the question it leaves of our psychical and civic involvement in how we treat violent deaths, amounts to a decision to stop brooding on death and to turn consciously towards life.

Unlike the discourse of the media, these works do not seek to contextualise the facts or discover their causes. They focus on the pure factuality of murder, its recurrence and its ubiquity. They do not produce a narrative, but a litany, with no regard for the chronology of the reported deaths, which appear in an evidently random order, leaving a sense of continuous accumulation. The viewer is trapped in the “*timeless time*”¹⁰ of information, as Manuel Castells describes it. The only perceptible arrow of time is the (chronotopical) saturation of the screen space by crime, which itself will infinitely recur, like the torments of Tantalus.

The digital medium’s indefinite openness and automation are well-suited to figuring this infinite recurrence, whether the web user is assigned to passivity, as in *Remembering the Dead*, or, on the contrary, becomes active in the changes on the screen, as in *Paroles gelées*. Any act by the viewer has a strongly symbolic dimension, since the work’s closure is in his or her hands, in a real sense, when leaving the application, and in a symbolic sense when the digital data, orientated by the visitor’s freely chosen path, and by the inevitable interruption of a continuous flow, ultimately calls for a semantic grasp and an axiology.

The surfer’s activity can thus be described in the terms defined by Michel Picard in his analysis of “reading as play”¹¹: the “*lisant*” is positioned as a simple user who can take pleasure in the contrivances which the work sets up; his experience of the commemoration is as a spectator with no other goal than to respond effectively to the audiovisual stimuli which come his way; the “*lu*” is unconsciously implicated by his relation to violent death, and the unjust familiarity of its representations, as Brigit Wiens has stressed;¹² and the “*lectant*” seeks to intellectualise the psychical and cultural importance of the experience contained in this particular form of commemorative rite, in which the viewer is called upon to play the role of celebrant. For each of these three positions, the work’s chronotopical temporality is the essential motor of experience, and the core of the performativity.

In other words, these works ask questions of their web visitors, who give partial, variable and plural answers, in the way they go through the ritualised experience of confronting violent murders. These hypermedia creations are thus clearly different from official ways of commemorating the dead. Unlike institutionalised commemorations, they do not rest on particular values imposed top down, which may exalt the deaths (for example, the heroic aura of the soldier who dies for his country, as a response to the bereaved person’s grief). And they also differ from commemorations in literature, and the tradition of literary epitaphs, because of the active and concrete procedures which the visitor must follow, entering into a work of memory and mourning through the very moves which he or she makes. Indeed, due to the screen, digital works are comparable to some contemporary theatre, where, as Chiel Kattenbelt analyses it, we have “ [a] stage on which the saging of life can be staged in such a way that it can be deconstructed and made visible again.”¹³ However, digital works

10. Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*, Cambridge [MA]/Oxford, Blackwell, 1996.

11. Michel Picard, *La Lecture comme jeu*, Paris, Minuit, 1986.

12. Brigit Wiens, “La danse des fantômes. L’invocation des morts dans la performance contemporaine et les arts médiatiques,” in Jean-Marc Larrue (dir.), *Théâtre et intermédialité*, Villeneuve d’Ascq, Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 2015, p. 309.

13. « [a] stage on which the saging of life can be staged in such a way that it can be deconstructed and made visible again » (Freda Chapel and Chiel Kattenbelt [dir.], *Intermediality in Theatre and Performance*, Amsterdam/New York, Rodopi, 2006, p. 38).

only come into being when activated by the user, who plays a concrete role in developing the work's meaning: through the synaesthetic contributions of sight, hearing and touch; through the emotional involvement in the work experienced in the chronotopes generated; and through an intellectual involvement, since the visitor is confronted with a question of values, and his or her responsibility as a citizen is mobilised. Even if the visitor is alone at his screen, he or she is connected to a virtual community in which he must position himself: what space will he give to the victims of violent deaths? What values does he himself practise in this respect? How does he negotiate leaving the macabre repetition of deaths in favour of a movement towards life?

These symbolically charged works thus help create alternative forms of mourning rituals, and illustrate the novel contribution which digital art can make to the immemorial yet always topical question of the treatment of violent deaths and murder.

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