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The Dialectics of Death in the Civilian Era

Hans van Houwelingen's *Sluipweg*

Napoleon, in his effort to exalt the idealism of the empire and garner support among the military, changed the rules of death.¹ For centuries, most people were consigned to pauper's graves or charnel houses. Only the rich were buried in church lots. The 1804 Imperial Decree on Burials, however, ordered that each person should be buried separately. A coffin was mandatory, and everyone had the right to erect a tombstone over a loved one's grave. Death was democratized and secularized, but it was also put into the embrace of the nation-state. Soldiers became heroes, and their caskets were draped with the national flag. The nation would provide the burial and cemetery free of charge. The ideology of the nation, the principles of citizenship, the thematics of duty, and the structuring of death were thus integrated into a whole, one that came to be best represented at Père Lachaise, a necropolis in the hilly suburbs of Paris that was laid out the same year as the decree. It was envisioned as an Elysian Field, the mythological resting place of heroes and the virtuous. Trees, which were once frowned on since they were thought to restrict the circulation of air, were now introduced to serve "as a somber and religious veil" over the grounds.² Tombstones were no longer decorated with skull and bones indicating the imminent and perhaps not all too pleasant day of reckoning, but adorned with smiling angels or graceful maidens. The parklike atmosphere made it a place to visit, and on Sunday afternoons it was common for families to stretch out the picnic blanket. By 1825 guidebooks had begun to publish maps with itineraries that pointed out the tombs of illustrious personages.³ The following lines, found penciled on the cemetery's terrace wall in 1813, convey the sentiment:

At this peaceful site, amid trees and flowers,
Sorrows and laments come to cry their tears:
Here they can find a sympathetic shade:
Death hides from their eyes its hideous scythe.
As it spreads its subjects throughout a vast garden;
For the home of the dead has become a new Eden.⁴

But there was a Faustian deal. Graves were to last only five years unless relatives of the deceased bought the plot. The body that began its journey to the hereafter as part of the

public sphere was suddenly thrust into the private domain. And worse yet, if no family members showed up to claim the body, it and its grave were unceremoniously made to disappear. With the stroke of a clock, the body changed from a glorious metaphysical proposition to a dusty burden. There were, therefore, two deaths; the first one guaranteed a mixture of public acclaim and heavenly bliss; the second one—five years later—promised, or at least threatened, total obscurity. Eternal dignity, as it turned out, was a short-lived affair.

First at Père Lachaise then across Europe and even the United States, the dual—and one should say bizarre—nature of modern death was slowly put into practice. In some places in Europe, like in France, state-run cemeteries eventually encountered the resistance of the Catholic Church. In the United States, though park cemeteries were popular, they were usually run as private enterprises. The strongest legacy of the Napoleonic model remains in Germany and Holland, where the state still owns and operates most of the cemeteries. In Germany, plots are usually rented for twenty, sometimes thirty, years, with the possibility of an extension. In the Netherlands, the dead are usually buried for ten years. In both cases, when the rent is no longer paid, a backhoe is brought in, the remains removed, and the process starts over again for a new body.

Hans van Houwelingen's *Sluipweg*—a path made up of tombstones laid flat on the ground—is a poignant critique of this phenomenon. The full title of the construction, opened in 2011, is *Sluipweg, waarlangs de dood heeft weten te ontsnappen*, which translates into something like “Secret path, along which death was able to escape.” I will try to unravel the meaning of this enigmatic phrase.

The path is located along the top of an embankment inside a fort about thirteen kilometers to the west of Amsterdam that belongs to the Defense Line of Amsterdam. The stones that make up the *Sluipweg* were all donated by individuals, who had kept the stones of their relatives in a basement or garage once they had been removed from the cemetery. In essence, Houwelingen's piece is a type of preservation project, returning the stones to the public domain. The fortification, after all, is now a park visited by people who make an outing with friends and relatives to enjoy the open views and atmosphere of the former fortifications.

But the fortification system is not just any public space. The Defense Line, which extends 130 kilometers around the city and consists of a series of dykes, canals, and forts, and which was initiated by King William I in 1815 to defend Holland against invasion, became a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1996. It was found to have what UNESCO calls “Outstanding Universal Value,” which means that it has a “cultural and/or



2. *Sluipweg*, aerial view. Courtesy of Mark Jarzombek.

natural significance which is so exceptional as to transcend national boundaries and to be of common importance for present and future generations of all humanity.”⁵ Behind this statement is the history of the indiscriminate and sometimes purposeful destruction of some of Europe’s most precious cathedrals, palaces, and monuments during the Second World War, the shock of which produced a movement that, beginning in the 1950s, culminated in the Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage in 1972. One by one, monuments were proposed that fit the requirements of “Outstanding Universal Value” to create what is now referred to as the World Heritage List. More than nine hundred monuments are currently on the list, which now have a protective bubble around them that all parties to the United Nations are expected to respect. World Heritage Sites are islands of permanence in a sea of global vicissitudes. These sites, in theory at least, represent the only places where the universal ideals of “humanity”—such as they are—can still be championed. Here the universal ideal of humanity is expressed in a piece of military engineering.

Placing the *Sluipweg* within this political and temporal environment is the first step to understanding the logic of the Houwelingen’s design. The ultimate impermanence of modern death—defined by the cruel, state-imposed boundedness of time—is here rectified. The Defense Line delivers what the modern cemetery promised but did not deliver, namely, eternal rest, for UNESCO is bound by its charter to preserve this site forever. What is rendered permanent is not, however, the body, which has long since disappeared, but its semiotic reference,

the tombstone. The body may not have found its final resting place, but its tombstone, laid flat on the ground, has.

There is a *quid pro quo*. In order to be part of UNESCO's metaphysics of permanence, the tombstones had to be stripped, of course, of their memorial status. By laying the stones flat on the ground, the design in essence decommis-sions the stones as grave markers. Thus even though the site is parklike, and a military installation to boot, this is no Elysian-styled cemetery of old with its allusions to mythic heroism; here there are no tears. In the Middle Ages, the tombstones of kings and queens were sometimes laid flat, but always in the sanctified space of a church. Here there is no institutional piety. The re-enactment of death cannot, therefore, be associated with grief, for the stone is detached from both the body and its own semiotic history. The fact that one is supposed to walk on the stones, which are positioned face up, reinforces the ambiguity of this temporal condition, for the more people traverse the path, the more the wear on the surface will erase the names etched in the stones, leaving only the most ghostly of traces. Eventually, memory will be fully dematerialized as the stone turns to dust. This slow erasure of memory stands in contrast to the brutal punctuation of time, when the stones were cast off as just so much excess baggage. It also means that the preservation of the memory is not "forever." It does reach for oblivion.

The irony of this temporal condition lies in the fact that by the time the fortifications came to be completed, they were already obsolete and were in fact never used militarily. This point was lost on the UNESCO committee, which celebrated the defenses as an example of the "Dutch genius" for hydraulic engineering: "The site is of outstanding universal value as it is an exceptional example of an extensive integrated defence system of the modern period which has survived intact and well conserved since it was created in the later 19th century. It is also notable for the unique way in which the Dutch genius for hydraulic engineering has been incorporated into the defences of the nation's capital city."⁶ It would be more accurate to claim that the Defense Line should be preserved as an expensive folly commemorating nationalist pretenses. In that context, as the messages on the tombstones slowly wear away, the Defense Line becomes the perfect place to meditate on the thematics of time. What at first might seem a meditation on death turns out to be the production of deathlessness. A place that was prepared as the site of an anticipated glorious death becomes one where death ultimately disappears.

What is being constructed for the visitor by the *Sluipweg* is, therefore, not a conventional commemoration, with an operative agenda of memory-making and memory-enforcing, but a bringing-into-awareness of the complex processes of

death-making in the modern world. Death is restored *and* evacuated; it is materialized into the form of stone rubbed smooth by passersby *and* dematerialized into a philosophical abstraction; it is returned to the temporal present *and* allowed to point to an otherworldly future—the future of some anonymous “humanity.” But because this is not Dutch ground, but a United Nations demilitarized, international zone preserved in the name of humanity, the tombstones cannot represent Dutch citizens. So what type of person do they represent?

The word civilian came into currency during the English colonial period in the mid-nineteenth century to refer to the English-born administrative personnel generally referred to as “civil servants,” including their families who often lived permanently in India. Even so it was a relatively rare word until the second half of the twentieth century. It was given its modern definition at the Fourth Geneva Convention (1949–50) in the wake, obviously, of the horrors of the Second World War. The implicit hypothesis of the convention was that the military and the civilian world exist in two different planes of reality. The military produces a disruption in the fabric of history, whereas the civilian embodies social continuity and as such needs to be protected during war as much as possible. “Civilians” were viewed as society’s constitutive fabric, existing in a type of natural state of peacefulness. After hostilities are over, civilians are envisioned as the essential component of a return to normalcy. But the civilian relationship to the military is not a simple dualism, for the civilian is defined as a “non-combatant.” In that sense being a civilian is to be a negative—a nameless negative.

This post-World War II concept of a “civilian” is distinct from the traditional concept of “the citizen” that arose after the Napoleonic era, when the rights and obligations of citizenship concomitant with the newly emerging nation-state required that a member of that state take a stance as to wartime participation. Whereas a citizen was by definition a soldier, whether in spirit or reality, a civilian lives within the nation-state but, in theory at least, outside or beneath the reach of its ideological claims.

Whereas the nation-state, as it was understood in the nineteenth century, implicated all its citizens in its activities, the contemporary nation-state, from the point of view of the United Nations, is split between its military and nonmilitary populations. Further, whereas only his or her government protects the citizen, the civilian needs the protection of international law.

There is a direct parallel between the post-World War II creation of “the civilian” and its subsequent protection by international law, and the post-World War II creation of the World Heritage List and the protection of monuments whose

value “transcends national boundaries.” At UNESCO property 759, the official designation of the Amsterdam Defense Line, these two vectors intersect by means of the *Sluipweg*. Just as the people who are memorialized on the stones of the *Sluipweg* are being “protected” within the conceptual enclave of a monument that represents all humanity, they are no longer Dutch citizens, but civilians who have been placed outside the realm of citizenship. In turning the stones flat, the artist is not only “re-turning” the stone from private to public, and from metaphysical to post-metaphysical, but also shifting the political ground on which the stones rest, from national to international.

From that point of view, the new location of the stones in the *Sluipweg* constitutes a refugium from both the tyranny of citizenship (and its enforced erasure of the body’s name) and the dialectic of citizen/civilian, but only for a while. The stone arrives as a citizen-turned-civilian, a noncombatant/non-citizen. But the stone acquires its ultimate civilian status only when it becomes truly nameless, when it gives up its ghost to the abstract figure of humanity. What this artwork does is to force UNESCO to dehumanize history in the name of history.

It is clear that this multifaceted act of constructing—and perhaps one can say deconstructing—the concept of death is both intimate and historically poignant, as it creates a messy exchange between old and new epistemological regimes. Whereas the tendency of some people is to continue to reaffirm the metaphysics and permanence of death, what we have here can be summarized best as a post-metaphysical practice of commemoration. The very concept of “public art” is obliterated, for on this site there is no “public,” at least not in the traditional sense where public equals citizen. Perhaps one can say that *Sluipweg* exemplifies and brings into the open art in the civilian era.

If history for the postmodernists in the 1970s was, generally speaking, associated with a return to cultural depth, history in the twenty-first century is increasingly associated with the insubstantiality that underlies our modern lives. If postmodern history was about our attachments to context and place, the new history is about the ephemerality of our position in the world. This new history, represented so well by the *Sluipweg*, challenges the tendency to put death in the far-off pretend landscape of our garden cemeteries. It also challenges the constructed transitory nature of death in the modern world, where we in essence have to choose between two forms of death-making, that of the citizen or that of the private individual. *Sluipweg* gives us perhaps a both/and as well as, and most convincingly, a neither/nor, for it is a path where death is indeed able to ultimately make its escape.

Biography

Mark Jarzombek is professor of the history and theory of architecture at MIT, and also the associate dean of the School of Architecture and Planning. He has taught at MIT since 1995, and has published on a wide range of historical topics from the Renaissance to the modern. Among his books are *The Psychologizing of Modernity: Art, Architecture, and History* (2000), and *A Global History of Architecture* (2006) with coauthor Vikram Prakash and the noted illustrator Francis D. K. Ching.

Notes

¹ For an elaboration of the themes address in this essay, especially my attempt to theorize art in the civilian era, see "The Civilian and the Crisis of the Utopian Monument," in *City of Refuge: A 9/11 Memorial*, ed. Mark Jarzombek and Mechtild Widrich (London: Black Dog, 2009), 61–66.

² Richard Etlin, *The Architecture of Death: The Transformation of the Cemetery in Eighteenth-Century Paris* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1984), 300.

³ Margaret Fields Denton, "Death in French Arcady: Nicolas Poussin's *The Arcadian Shepherds* and Burial Reform in France c. 1800," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 36, no. 2 (2003): 195–216.

⁴ Etlin, *Architecture of Death*, 303.

⁵ "Outstanding Universal Value," <http://worldheritage-forum.net/en/2006/01/117>.

⁶ From the official report "Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage World Heritage Committee; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization Report WHC-96/CONF.201/CLD.1," twentieth session, Merida, Mexico, March 10, 1997, 71–72; <http://whc.unesco.org/archive/1996/whc-96-conf201-21e.pdf>.