

I was what thou are, and thou shall be what I am

A phenomenological view of narratives in epitaphs

Eu fui o que tu és, e tu serás o que sou¹

Um olhar fenomenológico-das narrativas em epítáfios

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Orders from the dead

*“Die of life, live of death”
- Heraclitus*

This study starts from concerns woven under the diagnosis of Norval Baitello Junior (2012) about the sedated condition that permeates the contemporary humanity, as well as the proposition of a *philosophy of uprising*, by Hakim Bey (2018), as a model of opposition to the logic of domination - and, as such, as a critique of the ideal of revolution, since Bey proposes, instead of a revolution, an uprising, since the ideal of revolution represents a proposal for permanence².

To draw a parallel between sedation and uprising, we seek to observe possible narratives contained in epitaphs of a cemetery in the city of Sorocaba, São Paulo.

¹ An earlier version of this work was presented during the III International Symposium Communication and Culture, promoted by the Municipal University of São Caetano do Sul.

² For Bey (2018), the revolution would be inserted in a dynamic of exchange of power between oppressor and oppressed. Roughly speaking, the revolution would be configured as the search for the oppressed for taking the place of the oppressor permanently. The uprising, in turn, concerns the temporary rupture of this dialectical relationship. Precisely because it is not intended to remain, the uprising enthusiasts would not be corrupted by the possibility of becoming dominant over others.

We understand death by its cultural bias and consider the studies of its narratives pertinent to Communication Studies. According to Morin (1997), death is the culture's grounding. The author states that the awareness of our mortality creates a second life, in which the dead remain in relation to the living: those who died are remembered, worshiped and able to help or even bother those who continue to live. It is also from the awareness of our mortality that gods, myths, rites and taboos are born (MORIN, 1997). We add to Morin's reflection the idea that the human phenomenon of death helps us to weave narratives, which are capable of mediating such experiences.

For Vilém Flusser (2007), the need for communication arises in the face of the awareness of the mortal human condition, an artifice to forget this overwhelming loneliness, contained in the certainty that we are born and will die alone. That said, we understand death's narratives as communicational forms, due to their ability not only to mediate, but to lead us to represent, criticize, interpret and even transform the experience (SILVA; SANTOS, 2015).

Morin (1997) states that, in order to understand human life, it is essential that we understand death. He also states that death is frightening and distressing because it means the end of individuality, since the death of an individual means nothing to the species, but that our individuality perishes in solitary death, whose insignificance for the continuity of life haunts and makes us rethink ways of living. In this way, the narratives of death are responsible for communicating us about life itself and for alerting us about the brevity of existence and the need to celebrate each lived experience.

We are concerned about our contemporary burial rituals. According to Morin (1975), for many people, the ritual of burial was analogous to the ritual of planting, sowing in the land so that (after)life could thrive. We can reflect on the symbolic act of planting the dead as the production of post-mortem narratives, from which stories emerge that will eternalize the dead, making the living remember the stories he lived, even allowing him to remain active, caring, protecting or haunting those who remain alive. However, the act of burying seems to have lost its primordial meaning, replaced by the cultural cement, which perhaps also has no meaning. With the asepsis of cement and the concise information contained on the tombstones, do we continue to sow the narratives of the dead?

We reiterate that looking at death rituals, and their narratives, could provide us with clues for understanding Communication, especially when observed as a cultural phenomenon, related to the gregarious impulse of human beings. If humanity is made in the collective, and it is founded on our need for survival, what happens when death, which we try to avoid when we join in a flock, is neglected, put aside?

“Death is the sanction for everything the narrator can tell. It is from death that he derives his authority”, advises Benjamin (1987, p. 208). Narratives are structures of spatio-temporal thinking whose function is to maintain / transform culture, as well as to interpret the external and internal worlds. It is in the moment and in the memory of death that the whole tradition is passed on from the old to the new generation. The new generation, in turn, absorbs what is pertinent and delegates what is incapable in that new context. If this mortuary relationship were erased, the narrative itself would also have its potency diminished.

In addition, “the experience that passes from person to person is the source that all narrators used” (BENJAMIN, 1987, p. 198). In this context that presents itself, in which the experience that passes from person to person (or from the formerly living to the now living) seems to us to be devoid of meaning, we think it is relevant to bring up the experience of death, recalling our ancestral reason we have become communicational and cultural beings.

To search for possible relations between the sedation of the living and the uprising of the dead, through their epitaphs, we conducted a field research at the Saudade cemetery, in Sorocaba, in the countryside of São Paulo State. The reasons for this option are due to both the geographic issue (since we live in the city) and the historical / cultural issue (the cemetery, founded in 1863, is the oldest in the city). It is located in the central area, so that it is among the usual landmarks, as well as being a *dormitory*³ of important names in the trajectory of the city. Our journey puts our theoretical framework in dialogue, in order to provide the bases that took us to the field. Based on this proposal, our research unfolds in a visit to the cemetery on April 1, 2019, in the morning, carried out by two of the three researchers who collaborate in this paper. The choice of the date, a Monday, was motivated by the search to sip the daily life of the place. We arrived at the cemetery at

³We emphasize that the cemetery originates from the Hellenic *κοιμητήριον* (*koimeterion*), literally dormitory.

approximately 8 am and ended the visit around noon. As result of our impressions of this experience, we developed a phenomenological report.

For the phenomenological method, the singular experience is universalized: researchers and research readers can understand it because they are also participants in the human condition. What is sought, therefore, is a direct, intuitive description of the experience based on observation, yet knowing that it allows various interpretations (MARTINEZ; SILVA, 2014, p. 6).

The reason for adopting such a methodological perspective is none other than our inability⁴ to reach the narratives of the people's lives buried there, leaving us with the reflection before our own epiphanies, caused by the affections of our experiences in such an environment, or, still, from the vestiges, indexes that can tell something about those who lie.

This methodological option is in harmony with our theoretical positioning, since we advocate the importance of recognizing, and bringing out, the subjectivity of researchers in their research. Especially in the humanities, the adoption of a purely objective perspective sounds fallacious. More fruitful, we think, would be to adopt theoretical, methodological and epistemological perspectives that embrace subjectivity, without prejudice to the rigor of the research. In short, we assume that not all rigor needs to be *rigor mortis*. Still, we understand the body as a medium of access to the communicational experience. A body that feels while reasoning. Moving between bodies and their stories, with our own body, is a privileged way to experience the communicational process mediated by the narratives of the epitaphs and the randomic narratives, composed by the environment and the actors encountered during our visit.

Sedation's Uprising

*“My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.”
- Percy Shelley*

⁴We understand that, in fact, there is a possibility of carrying out such a survey, through interviews with family members, research in records, among others. However, pragmatically, since such surveys are not at the heart of our proposal, the effort of such an undertaking sounds incompatible.

Our society pushes us towards sedation, teaching us how to behave. As Baitello Junior (2012) points out, we have learned, since school, to prostrate ourselves close to wooden, metal, plastic or stone seats. Although these seats are often uncomfortable, we remain appeased on the glutes themselves. We spend a good deal of our time in seats. Baitello Junior (2012, p. 15) indicates:

How many years of our lives do we all sit, on school benches, seats in religious temples, chairs at work, in front of a desk or in front of a computer, at the cinema, at the theater or similar, on the bus, on the train, on a bicycle, in the car, on the chairs around a table (oh, and the infamous meetings!) and, finally, on the sofa or an armchair in front of an image machine.

Letting the body be dominated, often remaining inert in a chair, contributes significantly to not only the body entering a state of lethargy, but also for thinking to go through the same process. The seated thinking “is an operation that does not allow surprises, much less jitters” (BAITELLO JUNIOR, 2012, p. 17).

Thus, keeping prostrate on the glutes inhibits the development of active thinking, that is, “the sitting posture is intended to calm the restless and creative animal, a true volcano ready to erupt at any moment” (BAITELLO JUNIOR, 2012, p. 18). This volcano that remains asleep, anesthetized, making impossible the nomadic yearnings that the human species carries within itself, since it descended from the trees and walked towards different horizons.

Both the word sedate and sit are derived from the Latin *sedere*, “which means, at the same time, sit and calm down” (BAITELLO JUNIOR, 2012, p. 21). Those who are converted and / or seduced by sedation would be apathetic towards life. In this way, we can consider that sedentary people represent death in life, because the living being that does not set in motion is doomed to atrophy.

Baitello Junior (2012) also points out that human beings run away from nomadism, disowning their wind gods, when looking for a closed and protected place, because walking means meeting the unknown. Thus, “faced with the dangers and surprises of the perennial journeys, the settlement and the fixed housing represented, at the same time, a protective environment and an oppressive imprisonment” (BAITELLO JUNIOR, 2012, p. 47).

Bey (2018), in turn, points to the need for rupture experiences that are not aimed at permanence. On the contrary: detached from the need to survive in time, it is precisely in ephemerality that Bey bets her chips. Because of this, contrary to the usual definition of an uprising

as an unsuccessful revolution, the author considers the uprising as a condition of pure experience that, precisely because it is not intended to last, does not give opportunity to the betrayal of his ideals.

What Baitello Junior calls sedation, corresponds to apathy, “a healthy boredom in the face of worn-out Spectacle” (BEY, 2018, p. 63). Bey’s uprising calls for “an exercise in thinking in leaps” (BAITELLO JUNIOR, 2012, p. 15). We chose to give such a dialogue the name of sedation’s uprising. An invitation to stand up to sedation, but at the same time, a provocation against criticisms that do nothing (that they propose to raise, although they remain sedated). The uprising presupposes insubordination and rupture.

In this way, it is up to the individual who is concerned with finding / creating such ruptures to become involved with invisibility, given the need for the uprising to go unnoticed in the face of hegemonic structures - an occupation that is made by the gaps, or, as in the semiosphere model by Yuri Lotman, a revolution that starts from the peripheral, in the sense of creating a dynamic of approximation with what is already consolidated (sedated), to operate the transformation. From Lotman, we understand that culture heats up in contact with the new, with the diverse (SILVA, 2010). In the semiosphere, a cosmos in which cultural practices abound, everything that goes to the center and consolidates itself tends to stiffen, whereas, in the periphery, what is outside is incorporated, in a translation process, giving life to the new. It is noteworthy that the idea of center and periphery, in the contemporary, operates at in-between spaces, since there is not a single center, nor a single periphery. It is important to say that culture survives from exchange, from translation processes.

Thus, the resignification of the seemingly insignificant emerges as a tactic for the perception / creation of temporary autonomous zones: zones in which space occupation fits, detached from the need for permanence, so that other / new perspectives apply to the group that proposes to occupy them provisionally. We can add to Bey’s conception the idea of a poetic communication (SILVA, 2010), as it is assumed, in the poetic - considered a quality of language and a distinct model of thought, which provides for openness, the subversion of the conventional, the polysemy and insubordination to the senses already established socially.

Inspired by the notion that “the narrative remains as an effort to overcome death” (SILVA, 2018, p. 15), we think on the epitaph as a synthetic and poetic attempt to narrativize the life of the

dead, so that it is a call to the living to rise before the sedation that permeates our lives, a hypothesis with which we guide our study.

The narrative, supporting us in Flusser (2007), can be seen as an artifice resulting from the awareness of death, a way of survival. It is also a way to understand human phenomena, including death itself, and to organize the experience lived or told by someone in a story, that the more poetic it becomes, the more porous and capable to produce sensations. This seems to be the case with epitaphs, which synthesize, in very short texts, part of the narrative of a life, as a last call from the dead to the living.

Poetic narrative is a particular way of establishing poetic communication. Unlike the forms that are concerned with accuracy, with information, with precision, with evidence, poetic communication seeks to mobilize conversation through the sensitive, the synesthetic experience with the body, the polysemy, the eroticism (hyperbolization of the senses) and the expansion of relations between phenomena and their mediation through images, metaphors (PICHIGUELLI; SILVA, 2017). The poetic narration is supported by the synesthetic effects of language, by the atmosphere, by what causes esthesia.

To narrate death poetically is to enable the living to enhance their thirst for living, to expand their actions in the world. On the other hand, the contemporary world seems to have expelled both poetry and death, relegating it to hospitals, funeral homes, in an asepsis that excludes the human being the opportunity to think about dying in order to reevaluate what it is to be alive (MORIN, 1997). Especially in the more economically developed cities, we feel that there is no time for mourning, as we are even more tied to the chairs of meetings, schools, cars and buses. We stick to concrete constructions that often make it impossible to see the horizon. The work would generate the sedated (or would be killed?) who lives (or dies) to consume the other materials (natural or not), while the elixir of life itself is gone.

Sedation seems to us synonymous with death in life. At the same time, we are troubled by the idea that perhaps the sedated life is the life that is not worthy of an epitaph. After all, could a sedated person bequeath something to the living? Paradoxically, we think so. After all, isn't the absence of a perpetual provocation on the headstone, in itself, an invitation to nomadic life?

Death continues to sustain life

*“While you live, shine
have no grief at all
life exists only for a short while
and Time demands his due”
- Seikilos epitaph*

We chose the report as a way to organize the experience lived through the phenomenological perspective. It is a possible way to mediate the perceptions we have obtained in the field. On April 1, 2019, we visited, in the morning, the cemetery of Saudade, located in the central region of the Sorocaba city (countryside of São Paulo State). Inside the main gate, there was a man delivering pieces of paper with his contact, leafleting his services, which consist of carrying out the maintenance of the tombs. We decided to go to the end of the main street of the cemetery looking, in general, at the epitaphs, to stop at those headstones that called our attention. Along the way, we passed another salesman who was serving customers; his phrase disturbed us: *Put a stone cross. It looks good and no one steals.*

In this regard, the first impact in relation to the place was not linked to the narratives of the dead, but to the presence of those people who, after the death of others, found a way to support their own lives.

The Saudade cemetery is the oldest in Sorocaba and there is a heap of tombs, which requires a certain strategy for the displacement of the visitor. Some tombs are practically inaccessible, while others require tortuous juggling in order to be reached.

Right from the start, it is evident that the hypothesis that we would find some kind of message from the dead to the living, in the form of epitaphs, did not match the reality of the place, since many of the messages were unreadable and most of them were messages from the living for the dead, phrases of regret regarding the loss of the loved one, such as *we will miss you* or *miss you forever*. Scattered throughout the cemetery, we observed similar phrases, denoting that there were ready phrases, which gave the feeling of transmitting generic feelings or, even, of reinforcing the anesthesia of the living in the face of life and death. As if the concise and ready information could account for expressing a life that is gone and its relationship with those that remained. The

information that seems, as discussed by Benjamin (1987), to kill the narrative itself. There was nothing new, surprising or even poetic.

Among all the gravestones we observed, a message caught our attention:

*To be born
To die
To be reborn
Again
And keep progressing
That is the law*

These sayings are the translated version of the message found in the tomb of Allan Kardec (1804-1869), buried in the Père-Lachaise cemetery, in Paris. Among all the epitaphs observed, this seemed to be both a message from the dead to the living, and from the living to the dead. It also seemed like a concrete poem, given the ready phrases observed in the other deposits, denoting the successiveness of life, which is always reborn, again, and progresses, uninterruptedly, transforming itself. It is a finding that cycles are the only possible stay. The law is that of continuity, impermanence and permanent change between states of life and death.

The abandonment of the deposits was evident: many were broken; some were not identified by name, but by number. In other cases, not even that was seen. In one of them, the plaque containing the person's name fell face down, making it impossible to identify it. In this respect, during the journey, we consider that the abandonment of life refers to the abandonment of death. But perhaps it is the opposite, the abandonment of death denotes the abandonment of life. They are indications of a narrative that can be constructed beyond the epitaphs, but as a whole they represent the suggestions offered by the environment and by the living subjects that transit through the cemetery.

When we forget our dead, we forget our past. Who are those people? What did they do? Is the past that built the present important? We consider that the legacy of the dead, in their perpetual dorms, is to cause discomfort to the sedated, a provocation and, ultimately, a call to life or

remembrance, in the wake of Benjamin (1987), by evoking images that traces of the dead can produce. However, who looks at the shadow of death, if it was cemented in deposits that lie forgotten?

We observed a behavior shared by those who were at the cemetery that morning (merchants, customers, employees, a devotee attending to people, alcoholics and elderly men): a low tone of voice in their conversations, or even walking in silence. In view of this perception, we concluded that the people who visited the cemetery that day, while maintaining silence, seemed to ignore the neglect of the maintenance of the tombstones.

During our comings and goings, we found near the main gate a headstone that caught our attention due to the beauty of the sculptures. While we were watching the images, a man approached us. He was not wearing a shirt, holding it in his hands, his face wet, a piece of wood, a bag and a bottle of *cachaça*⁵. Visibly drunk, he asked if the tombstone belonged to someone in our family. When we answered no, and that we were just observing the sculptures, he told us that he also liked to observe the sculptures and the beauty contained in them.

He asked if we knew the other tombstones and if we knew who was buried under the *chapéu de praia* (popular name for a tree). Upon receiving a negative, he explained that it was a *pracinha*⁶ and asked if we knew who it was. After mentioning some other names, he heard another guy (also drunk) calling him and shouted back: *who is calling me? Have you been to take the pass?*; and soon walked away.

The Saudade Cemetery is also the resting place of João de Camargo⁷, a mystic known in Sorocaba for having performed miracles. When we passed by his tomb, which refers to the chapel where he lived, we realized that there was a devotee attending to people, a kind of medium, in perpetuating the life of the mystic and, through his body, putting him in contact with the living. It was there that the men received the pass⁸.

⁵ Sugarcane distilled spirit.

⁶ Term generally used to designate veteran soldiers of World War II, formally known as the Brazilian Expeditionary Force.

⁷ For an in-depth look at João de Camargo, as well as the media representations made from his memory, we recommend reading the thesis *The representation of the mythical narrative structure in real life and film representation: Cafundó* (PROENÇA, 2014).

⁸ In a superficial and synthetic way, the term pass refers to the laying on of hands that aims to promote healing or grant blessing.

The man who approached us seemed to be a kind of memory's guardian of part of the dead of the place, for offering narratives (whether heard from others, learned through the cultural history of the city or even invented by him) of their identities. In addition to our presence, there were tombstone merchants and alcoholic men. In this respect, the one who was sedated by the *cachaça* was the one who apparently knew, remembered or, perhaps, narrated about the history of the eternally sedated.

We considered that epitaphs could enable an epiphany, with the narrative of the dead for those who can still walk. However, if there are narratives, these are the ones we can build from observing the forgetfulness of those who lie among the rubble, who are often denied the most basic record of their existence, their own names. Or, still, of the living that roam the place, perhaps as forgotten as the dead buried there.

Seeds in the wind

*"I am the open mouth
that drags your flesh
and will never rest
until my death is written
in a rock that can not be broken"*
- Diamanda Galás

Our initial hypothesis was that epitaphs would be an attempt to narrate, in just one concise text, the memory of the different experiences that permeate a person's life. However, we are faced with erased and forgotten memories. The messages, when visible, reproduced phrases made, sometimes generic, mainly about the longing that the living would feel for their dead.

Still, the cemetery seemed to invite the emergence of Temporary Autonomous Zones, as it is a visible place in downtown, surrounded by commercial establishments; and, at the same time, unnoticed by passers-by, it houses an autonomous existence, which we perceive as alien to the external daily life.

It is a transitory place for the living who enter it, but who are these people? On April 1, 2019, the living people who crossed their gates were the merchants, some customers, local employees, a devotee attending to people, drunk men, some elderly people and two researchers.

If everyday life promotes sedation and the settlement of thought, walking between the maximum sedation that is death and the transient sedation of alcohol by our interlocutor has caused us jumps.

If we do not find in the epitaphs the narratives of the dead that invite us to live, we find in the experience of walking among the dead an insurrection before the inevitability of human finitude. Finally, narrating seems to continue to be *sobre/viver*⁹.

Although oblivion is an ultimate call for the denial of death in life, the cemetery makes it possible to look at the past that, even if represented by blurs of semi-erased phrases, carries within itself not the power of the flesh, but the power of the bones.

These bones invite us to walk among them, to unravel their mysteries, reminding us that our end will be the same. The call of the bones is a call for uprising, for movement. This call provokes and indicates that we must leave our narratives to the living ones, so that they can register in our epitaphs a small fragment of who we were. We conclude that, even if abandoned, the dead and their tracks have much to communicate about life.

Finally, we ask ourselves: is it up to the living to refuse such orders from the dead?

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⁹ In Portuguese, to survive (*sobreviver*) has the exact same spelling of about living (*sobre viver*).

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Abstract

Supported by Baitello Junior's diagnosis about the sedated condition of the human, we understand that a sedated life presupposes the poverty of experience, consequently, the difficulty in registering/constructing memories. In order to identify the existence of Temporary Autonomous Zones, considered as possible loopholes in the logic of sedation, through the phenomenological

perspective, we visited a cemetery in Sorocaba-SP, in order to experience narratives contained in epitaphs. We start from the premise that epitaphs are an attempt to narrate, concisely, the diverse experiences that made up someone's life. The narratives found exposed the abandonment of the dead, the repetition of jargon and the breaking of expectations in the relation between imagined narratives and narratives found by the authors of the text.

Keywords: Communication. Sedation. Temporary Autonomous Zone. Narrative. Epitaph.

Resumo

Amparados pelo diagnóstico de Baitello Junior sobre a condição sedada do humano, compreendemos que uma vida sedada pressupõe a pobreza da experiência, conseqüentemente, a dificuldade em registrar/construir as memórias. Com a finalidade de identificar a existência de Zonas Autônomas Temporárias, consideradas como eventuais brechas na lógica da sedação, por meio da perspectiva fenomenológica, visitamos um cemitério em Sorocaba-SP, a fim de experimentar narrativas contidas em epitáfios. Partimos da premissa de que os epitáfios são uma tentativa de narrativizar de forma concisa as diversas experiências que compuseram a vida de alguém. As narrativas encontradas expuseram o abandono dos mortos, a repetição de frases feitas e a quebra da expectativa na relação narrativas imaginadas e narrativas encontradas pelos autores do texto.

Palavras-chave: Comunicação. Sedação. Zona Autônoma Temporária. Narrativa. Epitáfio.

Resumen

Con el apoyo del diagnóstico de Baitello Junior acerca de la condición sedada del ser humano, entendemos que una vida sedada presupone la pobreza de experiencia, en consecuencia, la dificultad para registrar/construir recuerdos. Para identificar la existencia de Zonas Autónomas Temporales, consideradas como posibles lagunas en la lógica de la sedación, a través de la perspectiva fenomenológica, visitamos un cementerio en Sorocaba-SP, para experimentar narrativas contenidas en epitafios. Partimos de la premisa de que los epitafios son un intento de narrar de manera concisa las diversas experiencias que conformaron la vida de alguien. Las narraciones encontradas expusieron el abandono de los muertos, la repetición de frases hechas y la ruptura de expectativas en la relación entre narraciones imaginarias y narrativas encontradas por los autores del texto.

Palabras clave: Comunicación. Sedación. Zona temporalmente autónoma. Narrativa. Epitafio.