



THE DISPLAYS OF DEATH IN PÓVOA DE VARZIM

The title here displayed could be linked to yet another eccentric chapter in contemporary urban routines. However, even though there may be some breathtaking episodes in Póvoa de Varzim when it comes to death, I might frustrate readers looking for a narrative with some tabloid flavour. At the same time, I dare say that the theme herein discussed may be seen by many as curious, or even eccentric.

To deal with death is an occasional exercise for most people, but some professionals follow this practice in their routine, even working in environments that revolve around death. However, it is common for this shadow of life to be hidden from our gaze. An understandable dynamic when we think of the different strategies created by human beings to deny this certain destiny (Morin, 1970). When death knocks at the door, the more reflective can question it with the support of philosophers, perceiving different maxims in the face of the (un)paths that death imposes on us (Critchley, 2020). The fields of history and art also offer us sources to reflect on our finitude and even comic books, more specifically the character “*Dona Morte*”, by Maurício de Sousa (Araújo, 2022), present the subject to children in a playful way.

Although we have a collective of examples that brings us closer to death, as the historian Philippe Ariès (2000) has pointed out, in the middle of the 20th century in the United States and northwestern Europe, a taboo was created around the subject, given the aim of preserving happiness in industrialized western societies. It was up to only a few people, such as anthropologists, doctors and psychologists, for example, to disrupt this taboo. In turn, the echoes of a great health — inflated by a utopian hygienist’s perfect health, supported by biotechnology (Sfez, 1996) —, seek to cover up and take away this most natural manifestation of life and its end.

However, death is ingrained in cultural expressions and permeates the urban universe. In turn, it is present in the world of images. In addition to the scenes expressed on [mobile] screens, we should think about how perishable our senses have become given the privilege of sight and fingertips. Seen through this dynamic, death has also acted incessantly and insanely by taking away our greatest value, time, which is strictly linked to the finiteness of our lives. These premises inspire us to reflect on the iconophagic process advocated by Norval Baytello (Serva & Guimarães, 2022), because it is noticeable how our lives are being devoured by images.

In addition to this plethora of indicators that point to death and how it becomes entangled in our lives, I will point out other corners where we can find it. To do so, we’ll head to the streets of Póvoa de Varzim, where photographs of deceased people are printed on white sheets and attached to different storefronts throughout the city. It should be noted that these images illustrating the deceased, selected by their family, are records taken during the deceased’s lifetime. It is worth highlighting this fact because, unlike our contemporary conduct, portraying the dead is naturalized and adopted in other times and places (Hermosilla & Krause, 2022).



Figure 1. Different types of Passages (or “Passage to touristic paradises with a focus on well-being for walking”)

As far as shop windows are concerned, there are different aspects to them, as there are different commercial segments that provide this space for sheets to be attached. In addition to inactive establishments, there are cafés, bakeries, beauty salons, grocery stores and flower shops, among others, that allow such advertising. In the case of window displays, transparency leads to peculiar scenes because, as Baudrillard (1997) points out, the state of the glass allows us to isolate an environment and, at the same time, introduces us to the inner world. As a result, depending on the commercial segment linked to each shop window, the printed sheets related to the deaths take on different contours, creating a plethora of signs that demand our gaze. Based on Floch (1997), we infer that the optical games mentioned by the author are created there, a phenomenon in which different compositions are perceived in relation to what is shown and what is looked at.



Figures 2 and 3: Between the inside and outside of cafés, rules are expressed and death is reintegrated by Catholic events

The set of sheets that are displayed occupies a limited part of the storefronts, as the space is determined by the shopkeeper. The owner of one of the city’s funeral homes explains that this provision is linked to a cordial relationship between the parties, with no economic involvement. However, the businessman recognizes that some establishments, such as flower shops, show a particular interest in maintaining this disclosure, as the information becomes an attraction for the public to consume their products.



Figure 4: Mrs. Florinda brings life to the space that bears her name

Given this limit, some funeral homes must follow certain logistics. Information about the death is expressed in A4 format and in a horizontal position, for example, so that the deceased’s face is more prominent when printed; and for other dates, such as church masses and annual celebrations, the information is framed in A5 format. Looking at the storefronts around the city, you can see that this model is not always followed.



Figures 5 and 6. Between business and death: Saints, household appliances, addictions and meals

The funeral home manager points out that this publicity is an extra service to be paid for by the relatives of the deceased and that this publicity system is linked to the town’s tradition, pointing out that it is a fishing community. Although social media is already playing the role of messenger for deaths that occur in the city, and is even more efficient because it reaches a larger audience more quickly, Póvoa de Varzim’s storefronts keep these funeral announcements in their windows.

Of course, there is a lot to explore about death from here, including how to better understand the life and death of these enunciated faces and learn what and who they left behind and where they took them. In turn, cemeteries become a space worth visiting for those who want to better understand a community and its culture. There are places where they become tourist attractions or cultural centers, helping to show other frames around the passage into death.

Text and images: [Cynthia Luderer](#) (CECS/Universidade do Minho)

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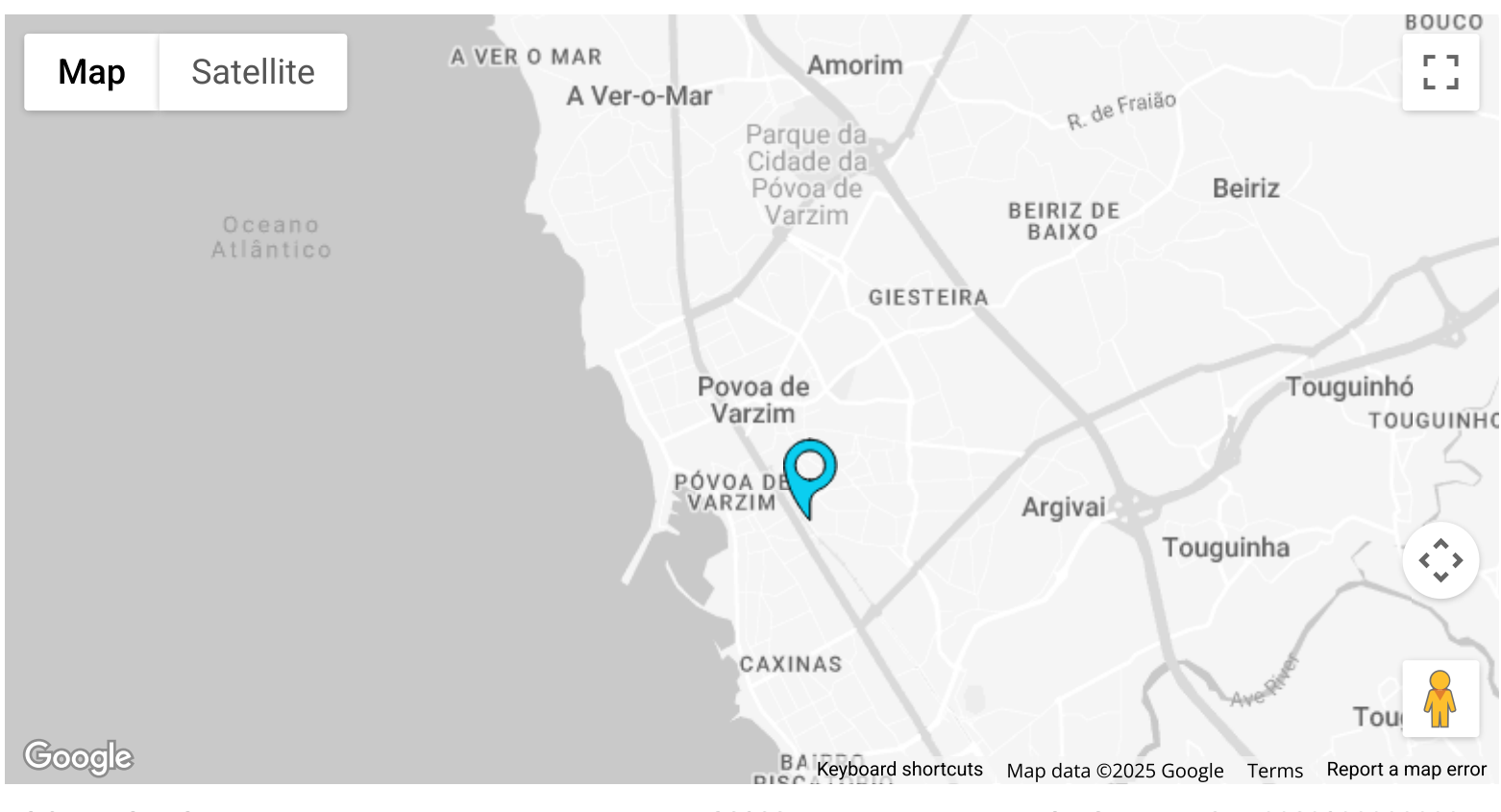
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