

CORPSES IN TRAINING: BLANCHOT AND THE INTERNATIONAL NECRONAUTICAL SOCIETY'S EXPERIMENTAL EXPEDITIONS BEYOND LIFE

SAMI SJÖBERG

Associate Professor of Creative Writing, University of Jyväskylä

sami.t.sjoberg@jyu.fi

KEYWORDS

thanatology, experimental practices, avant-garde, International Necronautical Society, Maurice Blanchot

DOI

[10.54916/rae.129246](https://doi.org/10.54916/rae.129246)

DATE OF PUBLICATION

29/09/2023

ABSTRACT

The commentary discusses Blanchodian theorization on death and its experimental application in the International Necronautical Society (1999–2010). Maurice Blanchot and Emmanuel Levinas regarded life as suspended living overshadowed by one's death that was unknowable. Challenging such utter unknowability, the INS took cues from twentieth-century avant-garde discourses (revolving around the mélange of life and art) where death imbued perceptions of temporal stasis, finality, and journeying into the unknown. Their experimentalism conceptualized death as a "space" to be explored through artistic means. The INS sought to unravel the unassailable binaries between life and the absoluteness of death through art.

And while he was digging [his own grave], the hole, as if it had been filled by dozens of hands, then by arms and finally by the whole body, offered a resistance to his work which soon became insurmountable. The tomb was full of being whose work it absorbed. An immovable corpse was lodged there, finding in this absence of shape the perfect shape of its presence. (Blanchot, 1988, p. 35)

Thomas, the main character of the writer and philosopher Maurice Blanchot's (1907–2003) book *Thomas l'Obscur* (1941; *Thomas the Obscure*, 1988), becomes faced with the impossibility of experiencing his own death. That death, like each individual death, is an unknowable singularity. The existence of Thomas himself as an agent with being—though only in his “dead” textual realm, since he is a fictional character—cancels out the potential of his being dead. He could be *dying*, but do we all not begin dying the moment we are born, as thinkers as varied as Gautama Buddha, Jean Cocteau, and Martin Heidegger have suggested?

Another noteworthy feature is the morbidly laden *spatial* Gestalt that Thomas undergoes: the absence of death is intensively present in the tomb, which testifies both to Thomas's “existence” and to his being being limited and defined by death. Indeed, one of the central ideas that Blanchot explored was the concept of death as space. His writings suggest that death is not simply an event that occurs at the end of life but rather a space or realm in which we exist throughout our lives (death-to-come).

A grave is a spatial site for a corpse, but what if death was ontologically not only temporal but also spatial, as Blanchot suggested? What if death could somehow be experienced? This was advocated by the International Necronautical Society (1999–2010, henceforth INS), an interdisciplinary art movement that recycled much of the aesthetics, strategies, and rhetorics of twentieth-century avant-garde movements as well as Blanchot's ruminations on death.¹ One evident example of its avant-gardist pedigree was the hierarchical, mock-institutional structure of councils and committees.

The opening claim of the INS debut manifesto states that “death is a type of space, which we intend to map, enter, colonize and, eventually, inhabit” (International Necronautical Society, 1999).² Such a space was a metaphor, a utopian ontological postulation of “something” to be experienced behind the limit that death involves. For the INS, death was not simply an event that occurs at the end of life, but rather a space or realm that is both ontological and linguistic, which shapes our understanding of the world we inhabit. Although the group intentionally adopted late-1990s business lingo and terminology from decolonization discourse, even to a humorous degree, their claim has existential-ontological implications that are relevant in light of the history of the avant-garde. Namely, many avant-garde theories suggest that a utopian mélange of (the rather ephemeral categories of) art and life was the main aim of all avant-garde movements.³ What these theories note less often is that “life” also implies its limits—that is, death. As Blanchot noted, death opens a space where we exist.

When it comes to death, necronauts seemed to consider themselves akin to astronauts who travel spatiotemporally. The term “necronaut” derives from Greek roots: namely, *nekros*, denoting a dead body, corpse, or dead person and *nautēs*, meaning a sailor and connoting a traveler. Hence, a necronaut is quite literally a “death traveler.” The notion suggests that necronauts did not relinquish agency regarding death, implying that death could potentially be “experienced” even though it would not be the personal and biological

death of the subject, that is, the necronaut. The necronaut would venture on an expedition into death and return to tell the tale. In addition to cultural accounts of death in art and literature, near-death experiences were a key area of exploration for the INS.

The following musing will investigate the INS's claims regarding death and their implications from the Blanchodian existential-ontological point of view, which the INS engaged with at length. How did the temporal aspect of dying (the personal death-to-come) inform the INS's spatial investigations, and what role did language and literature play here?

Death as Limit Experience and Space

Following the investigations of Continental philosophers, the INS was aware that no information about death was attainable in temporal terms. Therefore, the movement focused on spatiality in Blanchot's understanding of death and as a metaphor for a "limit experience." Death should be regarded as both an experience of a limit (between existence and nonexistence) and a limit to experience itself. Thanks to thinkers like Blanchot, we *know* that death cannot be subjectively known as an experience of the self or its end. There is only the space of dying.

As Head Secretary Tom McCarthy noted, the INS "is massively indebted to Blanchot, [because] his work [...] conceives of death as a space and literature as a space" (McCarthy, 2001). However, this view is deliberately restricted and overlooks the temporal aspects of dying.⁴ The peculiar statement should be read with another source in mind. In addition to Blanchot, the INS drew upon the avant-garde movements' (such as dada and surrealism) strategies that were critical of rationalism, positivism, and conceptions of knowledge therein; especially the idea proposed by positivism that knowledge of everything, including all aspects of life and death, could be attained. Therefore, it is a problem for and a potent criticism of positivism's optimism.

Death increasingly became the topic of existential-ontological inquiries following Hegel's nineteenth-century theorization about being and its limits. In Blanchot's thinking, death was seen to function as "life-giving." To unearth his anti-Hegelian logic, we must launch our death studies from the man himself. Hegel's thinking propelled later Continental thought in conceptual and existential-ontological terms. For Hegel, being—and life—meant the aggregation of knowledge, such that the project would end with absolute knowledge, a god-like omnipotence (Hegel, 1807). Simon Critchley, the Chief Philosopher of the INS, maintains:

Death for Hegel is a conceptual process. [...] Hegel's notion of death would be that to conceptualize something is to kill it. So if I name this thing, this orange, that's on the table here in front of us 'an orange', in so far as I name it and it becomes separate I deaden it. (McCarthy, 2001, para. 19)

The Hegelian negation suggests that death arrives in this world through language. For Hegel (and Heidegger), language had emerged as a response to our experience of mortality, and humans "extend their existence linguistic-ontologically" (Oberst, 2009, p. 3). This Hegelian idea of conceptualization and language was further developed by Blanchot, to which I will return.

In Hegelian thought, the existential-ontological understanding of death meant that one's self-awareness as a subject (and, thus, subjectivity) resulted from the realization of one's limited existence. Yet, he did not consider dying as a space in the vein of Blanchot. According to Hegel (1807), animals lack this capability, while humans possess a distinct quality due to our comprehension of the limitedness of our being. Hegel conveniently passed over the fact that human children also lack the capability. It suggests that subjectivity is not a biological but a culturally defined fact. This applies to the death of the subject as well. The INS went even further and referred to death as a "cultural artefact" (King, 2000.). Hence the focus on the cultural significance of death in art and literature.

Expanding on Hegel, Heidegger's influential concept *Sein-zum-Tode* (being-toward-death) refers to an understanding of life in subjective and temporal terms. Accordingly, death can be seen as casting a shadow on life as an inevitable biological fact. In Heidegger's (1927) view, life is determined by one's death, the final "experience" and limit of being. This is to say that Heidegger included death in his notion of *Dasein*, which roughly translates as the spatiotemporal "being in the world." Such a death-incorporating *Dasein*, which would have included the limit experience, would have rendered the INS's aims fruitless as they sought to transgress the limit experience.

The French criticism towards Hegel and Heidegger proved essential to the INS as this criticism redefined the limit experience. Emmanuel Levinas was one of the first critics of Heidegger and maintained a communitarian point of view on death, together with Georges Bataille. Namely, Levinas (1961) contested that death could be part of being, as Heidegger had suggested, because no one will know their own death. We *know* about death only through the deaths of others, which is the sole experience of death. For Levinas, death was unattainable due to the limit experience. Therefore, all religious and philosophical musings on death necessitate the existence of a community—that is, the living, who can tell the tale of a particular someone's death. As a cultural fact, interpersonal experience, or "artifact," death manifests through interpersonal relationships as the severed link between the living and the dying other.

Our indirect knowledge of death, the radical otherness of death, points to the limit experience. This limit experience further raises the idea of the impossibility of possibility in both Blanchot's and Levinas's thought.⁵ It refers to a paradoxical condition in which something is both impossible and yet remains possible in some sense. Blanchot (1995) maintained that this paradoxical state arises when an individual or a group is faced with an event or experience that exceeds their capacity to understand or control it—such as death. In such situations, the possibility of what might happen becomes impossible to grasp, yet it remains a haunting presence that continues to shape their actions and thoughts.

In Critchley's words, "Blanchot and Levinas . . . talk about death as the impossibility of possibility: so death is what halts my power of projection, my power to do things" (McCarthy, 2001, para. 69). This halting renders death "life-giving": without death, the ultimate limit, there would be no life. Indeed, life and death seem to form (in a temporal sense) an absolute yet necessary binary, which opens life as a space of death-to-come. As death remains unknowable, the experiences circulated by the community about death socialize its members in the realization that they will someday perish. This results in a space characterized by a mode of suspended living that

is overshadowed by a process of gradual dying, which is more commonly known as “life.”

Language of Death, Language of Literature

Blanchot did not stop at the existentialist and agonistic realization of dying. For him, the essence of death is its incompleteness, and here language comes into play. Namely, death could not become part of any Hegelian attempt at total knowledge; that is, death can never be a concept proper. Blanchot’s ideas on death as space are rooted in his understanding of language and literature. He held that language can create new worlds and realities and that literature is a means of exploring these worlds (Blanchot, 1995, p. 317). According to Blanchot, death is a space created by language and literature.

The INS held that for Blanchot, “literature and death are kind of equivalent spaces because they’re spaces of meaning, which somehow can’t be found in life any more” (McCarthy, 2001, para. 42). Indeed, in Blanchotian thought, death becomes transposed into the realm of writing. Echoing Hegel’s ideas on the processes of conceptualization and the implicit thanatology that naming the object erases its particularity, Blanchot (1971, p. 114) noted that writing means transferring oneself into a space governed by the “sign of death.” The act of writing consigns us to a time without a present and, as Blanchot insists, makes the process of dying endless and the instant of death unattainable. In this space of writing and death, meaning becomes undermined as one moves toward it through language. Moreover, Blanchot claims that the success of writing lies in its failure in relation to death: in order to write you have to continually die. In other words, you “have to deal with your vanishing, continued vanishing, the impossibility of your own meaning, the complete rendering valueless of all values...” (Bain, 2001).

Blanchot’s ideas on death and literature are closely intertwined. He believed that literature could reveal the true nature of death and offer us a glimpse of what lies beyond it. In this sense, literature is a means of encountering death and exploring the unknown. It allows us to confront the limits of our existence by approaching these ideas in a way impossible through everyday language. In Blanchot’s view, literature creates a space of “non-knowledge” where the reader can confront the ambiguity and uncertainty of existence.⁶ In essence, literature becomes a means of exploring the boundaries of life and the human condition, and Blanchot saw this exploration as central to writing.

Critchley explains the relation between language and death: “Language is murder. Language, as conceptuality, is the murder of things by making them approximate to us. . . . If language is murder, if creation is murder, then what does one then do, aesthetically?” (McCarthy, 2001). Blanchot’s answer was to outline two “slopes” of literature: “there’s literature as sadism and there’s literature as letting things thing” (McCarthy, 2001). The first connotes a conceptual death in the vein of Hegel, while the other is a way of attending to the space of dying as something that cannot be appropriated or controlled by the subject. Critchley notes that for Blanchot, literature “is the exemplary way in which that space is to be attended to” (McCarthy, 2001). In other words, literature attends to the space formed by the unknowable, the radical otherness of death; thus, much of the INS’s activity revolved around cultural representations of death.

Experimental Death Studies

Replacing the exhaustive unknowability of death with intrigue, the INS took cues from avant-garde discourses where death signified finality and journeying into the unknown.⁷ Most INS work on death was theoretical but not without jests. This work regarded death as a “cultural artefact” and traced its manifestations in various branches of societal life, including art, philosophy, and politics. Yet, beyond the metaphysical implications of conceiving death metaphorically as a “space,” the INS also aspired to investigate a *spatial mobility* of sorts in the form of imaginary “expeditions” into death. In their utter disregard for the limits of being, these aims best exemplify the INS as an initiative harking back to the heyday of the avant-garde.

Two of the explicit utopian aims of the INS were the construction of a “craft” and the development of Thanadrine, a drug inducing near-death experiences (NDEs)—if not temporary death. Reaching beyond the limit experience was crucial. The craft was not conceived of merely as a space-craft but as a *mélange* of “artistic and critical techniques,” which would “convey us into death in such a way that we may, if not live, then at least persist” (International Necronautical Society, 1999). The projected “craft” should be seen as denoting “skill” instead of a mere vehicle. As an INS statement clarifies:

The aim announced in the First Manifesto of exploring, mapping and colonizing the space of death does not suggest a ‘beyond’ of which we have knowledge, nor, emphatically, the spurious tales and consoling fictions reproduced by culture. The space of death is traced in the boundaries, horizons and faults within art, literature and language; lines, moreover, which are not transgressed but are woven into the texture of our craft. *Necronautical materialism has no message from the ‘other side’* but is a technique for subjecting event, performance, text and map to rigorous examination and transformation. (“Briefing notes,” n.d.)⁸

Such materialism of death as a cultural artifact anchors the group firmly amongst the living while affirming the limit experience as *limiting*. The “skill” lay in navigating the space of dying by investigating art and literature, which, in turn, defied death.

Another attempt at venturing into death eventually unfolded more as a celebration of life. Echoing the (sometimes outlandish) experimentation of the avant-garde was the “research” on Thanadrine. In the initial report, Jamie King, the Head of INS Techno-Chemical Division, accounted for the quest for near-death experiences induced by chemical substances:

Ketamine was chosen as a likely starting point for its ability to reproduce all features of the NDE, including the buzzing/ringing/whistling sounds common to the beginning of experiences, travel through a dark tunnel into light at high speed, the conviction that one is dead, ‘telepathic communion with God’, intense visions, life reviews, out-of-body experiences, mystical states and transpersonal phenomena. (King, 2000)

Such experiments and accounts investigate cultural and culture-specific experiences about death, with the idea of allowing a “taster” of death in the form of NDEs, even though the test subjects are far from undergoing clinical death. King embarked on a volunteer group experiment. An anonymous quote summarises the results, providing a rather lyric history: “Scratch

beneath those flat EKG lines, however, and the stories are a veritable twilight zone of inconsistencies. Some near-death voyagers claim to have met God—but a few saw Elvis or Groucho Marx, researchers say. Others get to heaven not through the famous ‘tunnel’ but aboard ghostly taxicabs, ferries that cross the River Styx, or spangled cows” (quoted in King, 2000). King was later expelled from the group for failing to produce Thanadrine, with allegations of his becoming addicted to “Marxist mannerism that is the opiate of the hypocritical bourgeoisie” (Auerbach, 2003).

In these voyages, the cessation of life was simulated and explored in a creative manner, which can be seen as a life-affirming practice.⁹ Indeed, it seems that the INS’s activity focused particularly on the life-giving aspects of death, as any attempt to venture beyond the limit experience unveils.

Blanchodian Death in the INS

Blanchot’s ideas on death as space are multifaceted and were rather eclectically appropriated by the INS. For Blanchot, literature is a form of resistance against death, a way of pushing back against the void that threatens to engulf us. However, the INS never forgot its deadpan attitude to death, which also echoes the avant-garde, at least rhetorically. In 2009, for instance, the group decided:

[T]o reinstate Matt Parker to the post of INS Experimental Volunteer. Expelled in the 2003 Purges for the crime of ‘not being dead’, he replied, with impeccable integrity, by contracting cancer. Learning that he wouldn’t be cured, he demanded restitution to his post, then died. The Executive Council has approved this request, cum laude. Every angel is terrifying. Welcome back. (International Necronautical Society, 2009)

As noted in the INS debut manifesto, Parker’s reinstatement is due to everyone “always already” being a necronaut—a delightfully macabre way of expressing that we will all die. This is to say that the very first organism was also the first necronaut.

In the context of the INS, death became an aporetic underpinning of life through artistic activity. Their artistic practices revolved around the social aspects of dying instead of death per se. Such activity draws attention to the quite apophatic definition of death: if regarded as “cessation of life,” death conceptually borrows from the very thing it limits and nullifies. Blanchot crystallized this unbreakable bond between life and death:

Just as the man who is hanging himself, after kicking away the stool on which he stood, heading for the final shore, rather than feeling the leap which he is making into the void feels only the rope which holds him, held to the end, held more than ever, bound as he had never been before to the existence he would like to leave. (Blanchot as cited in Critchley 1993, p. 81)

The End but not the end

References

- Auerbach, A. (2003). *INS announces a purge of its First Committee*. Vargas Organisation. http://www.vargas.org.uk/press/ins/purge_first_committee.html
- Bain, C. (2001). *Interview with Tom McCarthy, the General Secretary of the International Necronautical Society, 18/5/01*. <https://physicsroom.org.nz/archive/log/archive/14/mccarthy/>
- Blanchot, M. (1971). *Le pas au-delà*. Gallimard.
- Blanchot, M. (1988). *Thomas the obscure* (R. Lamberton, Trans.). Station Hill Press.
- Blanchot, M. (1995). *The Work of fire* (A. Smock, Trans.). The University of Nebraska Press.
- Becker, E. (1973). *The Denial of death*. Free Press.
- Bürger, P. (1974). *Theorie der Avantgarde*. Suhrkamp Verlag.
- Critchley, S. (1993). Il y a — A dying stronger than death (Blanchot with Levinas). *Oxford Literary Review*, 15(1/2), 81–131. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44113882>
- Einstein, C. (1912). *Bebuquin oder Die dilettanten des wunders*. Die Aktion.
- Gallix, A. (2014, December 8). *Writing outside philosophy. An interview with Simon Critchley*. Andrew Gallix. <https://andrewgallix.com/tag/international-necronautical-society/>
- Hegel, G. W. F. (2012, November 9). *Phänomenologie des Geistes*. Project Gutenberg. <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/6698/pg6698.txt> [Original work published 1807]
- Heidegger, M. (1927). *Sein und Zeit*. Niemeyer.
- Hill, L. (2001). *Bataille, Klossowski, Blanchot: Writing at the limit*. Oxford University Press.
- International Necronautical Society. (n.d.). *Briefing notes*. http://necronauts.net/pdf/ins_key_events.pdf
- International Necronautical Society. (1999). *The INS Founding Manifesto*. http://necronauts.net/manifestos/1999_times_manifesto.html [Originally published in NS Founding Manifesto, published 14 December 1999: The Times, London, p. 1]
- International Necronautical Society. (2009). INS at 10. http://necronauts.net/bulletin/ins_at_ten.html
- Kaushal, S. (2022). Language, time, and death. An e-philosophical perspective following Hegel, Heidegger, Lévinas, and Blanchot. *Ethics in Progress*, 13(2), 11–24. <https://doi.org/10.14746/eip.2022.2.2>
- King, J. (2000). *Deposition*. International Necronautical Society. <http://www.necronauts.org/jamdep.htm>
- Levinas, E. (1961). *Totalité et infini: essai sur l'extériorité*. M. Nijhoff.
- McCarthy, T. (2001, March 29). *Interview with Simon Critchley, Senior Lecturer in Philosophy, University of Essex*. International Necronautical Society. http://www.necronauts.org/interviews_simon.htm
- McCarthy, T., Critchley, S., et al. (2012). *The Mattering of matter. Documents from the archive of the International Necronautical Society*. Sternberg Press.
- Oberst, J. L. (2009). *Heidegger on language and death. The intrinsic connection in human existence*. Continuum.
- Sjöberg, S. (2011). Rien, rien rien. The Alternate nothing in French letters and language-centred philosophy. *Sprachkunst*, 41(2), 299–312. https://doi.org/10.1553/spk41_2s299

Endnotes

1 The INS's familiarity with the avant-garde is explicit in their references to the groups formed around the journals *Documents* and *Acéphale* (see "Briefing notes"). Also, Simon Critchley, the group's appointed philosopher, noted that "much of what I do is committed to the idea of the aesthetic particularly as art practice as it was embodied in various avant-garde groups" (Gallix, 2014).

2 Many INS documents have been (re)printed in McCarthy, Critchley et al., 2012.

3 This conception was argued for by Peter Bürger (1974) and since then has been iterated by most avant-garde theories and studies.

4 I wish to thank Dr Juuso Tervo for drawing my attention to the multiplicity of spaces and kinds of death in Blanchot's *œuvre*. For an overview and discussion on these, see Hill, 2001.

5 For a further discussion on this stance in relation to Hegel and Heidegger, see Kaushal, 2022.

6 For a further discussion on non-knowledge and nothingness in Blanchot and his contemporaries, see Sjöberg, 2011.

7 A prime instance of this was Carl Einstein's book *Bebuquin oder des dilettantes des Wunders* (1908/1912; *Bebuquin*), where the title character paradoxically attends his own funeral. The book highlights that Bebuquin is a textual formation lacking existence; hence, he may act in ways outside of conventional logic.

8 Emphasis mine.

9 For instance, Ernest Becker (1973) theorized that all creative activity was an attempt to deny the meaninglessness of life overshadowed by eventual death.

Funding Acknowledgment

This article has been written with financial support from the Academy of Finland (SA 316372).