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Research note

Dark tourism and 'spectacular death': Towards a conceptual framework

Philip R. Stone

Institute for Dark Tourism Research (iDTR), University of Central Lancashire, Lancashire School of Business & Enterprise, Preston PR1 2HE, UK

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Introduction

The dead are immortal guardians of the living. As such, the significant Other dead preserve our cultural and social order, and dwell in perpetual remembrance of our fights, failures, and misfortunes. Indeed, our dead are provided with a commemorative future and, in turn, we are given an honoured past. Maintaining this death-life relationship through spiritual or secular interventions, the notable dead inhabit contemporary deathscapes and, subsequently, occupy our memory. Deathscapes today are located within a milieu of memorial spaces, including touristic places associated with acts of fatality. Branded under an appellation of 'dark tourism', these deathscapes often comprise locales of calamity and difficult heritage. Moreover, dark tourism is where significant deaths are now produced as *spectacles* within visitor economies and consumed as tourist experiences. Thus, deathscapes have become *spectacular* and, importantly, as part of a 'spectacularization of death', dark tourism mediates visual signifiers of own mortality and brings us into a new death mentality.

The purpose of my essay, therefore, is to augment my earlier work (Stone, 2018) whereby I draw upon Jacobsen (2016) and his outstanding review of Philippe Ariès' seminal history of death mentalities. Consequently, I argue the spectacle of dark tourism is an evident component of a new 'spectacular death' mentality in our cosmopolitan secular age. My aim here is to contribute an original theoretical blueprint for exploring dark tourism within a thanatological paradigm (that is, sociology of death). In so doing, I propose dark tourism scholarship, which has largely adopted reductivist dialogues, converse with constructivist discourses of thanatology and, accordingly, engage with post-disciplinary research approaches (Chapple, 2017; Stone, 2011). In short, we need to locate and identify the spectacular dead within socio-secular deathscapes and the role dark tourism potentially plays. Firstly, however, I briefly outline the spectacularization of death as bedrock for the emergent conceptual framework.

The 'spectacularization' of death

In his three major works on the Western social history of death, French historian Philippe Ariès describes how the deathbed has changed over the past millennium (Ariès, 1974, 1981, 1985). As such, Ariès provides an oft-cited, if not criticised series of influential works in which a history of death is portrayed by epochal stages and socio-cultural mentalities. Yet, by outlining his work and even going beyond Ariès (Jacobsen, 2016), contemporary deathscapes such as dark tourism can be examined within the thanatological condition of present-day society. The final stage of Ariès' framework – the 20th century *forbidden or invisible death* – in which scientific progress and a decline in religious faith marks modernity, is my starting point for a new death mentality in the 21st century. Importantly, it is within the 'forbidden/invisible death' that a present/absent death paradox is evident – in that death comes to us all,

E-mail address: pstone@uclan.ac.uk.

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yet dying is removed to institutionalised realms. In other words, death is universal but modern dying is not. Arguably, we have become socially divorced from realities of secular deathbeds as mortality of the Self is sequestered under a professional gaze yet, paradoxically, mortality of the Other is very much present in contemporary deathscapes – including within dark tourism. Therefore, Jacobsen (2016) argues Ariès' 'forbidden/ invisible death' thesis is now redundant to describe properly death today. Jacobsen goes on to state that contemporary death "is challenged by a death that is gradually coming out of the closet, as it were, and now confronts us in ways unimaginable to our grandparents' generation" (Jacobsen, 2016: 10).

It is here that Jacobsen (2016) takes his thanatological cue and proposes death shall have a new dominion. Specifically, Jacobsen advocates a contemporary death mentality in Western society be labelled 'spectacular death', where the dead have increasingly become 'spectacles' and de-sequestered back to public realms. Drawing upon Debord (1977) and his semiotic notions of a 'society of the spectacle', Jacobsen (2016: 10, original emphasis) states "*spectacular death* is a death that has for all practical intents and purposes been transformed into a *spectacle*". In short, Jacobsen applies the soubriquet of *spectacular death* to designate death today as it is experienced, constructed and performed. Hence, for Jacobsen, spectacular death is an extension of the death mentalities first proposed by Ariès: where (post)modern death is now returned to communal domains, including through the allegoric spectacle of tourist sites, attractions and exhibitions interpreting momentous acts of fatality. As Jacobsen (2016: 10) notes:

> Spectacular death thus inaugurates an obsessive interest in appearance that simultaneously draws death near and keeps it at arm's length – it is something that we witness at a safe distance with equal amounts of fascination and abhorrence, we wallow in it and want to know more about it without getting too close to it.

Dark tourism as spectacular death: a theoretical blueprint

If Jacobsen's 'spectacular death' as a new de-sequestered death mentality is to have traction, then dimensions of 'death as spectacle' require revelation, particularly within dark tourism. Crucially, these revelations are imperative to future dark tourism scholarship, where the intersection of dark tourism research now collides with thanatological studies. While de-sequestration of death within dark tourism is explored elsewhere (Stone, 2012; Stone & Sharpley, 2008); how such de-sequestration occurs has thus far been neglected by scholars. It is this latter point that I wish to focus upon for the remainder of my essay. Of course, there are numerous thanatological dimensions *of* and socio-cultural facets *to* spectacular death – but three notable aspects are worthy of contribution here. Namely, the spectacularization of death includes (i) a new mediated/mediatized visibility of death, (ii) the commercialization of death, and (iii) the re-ritualization of death.

Firstly, there is a *new mediated/mediatized visibility of death* (Jacobsen, 2016) where extraordinary deaths of largely ordinary people are (re)presented in dark tourism deathscapes. In turn, the secular Self is exposed to mortality moments where "ghosts are returning to the feast and are resurfacing and multiplying in a multitude of dark tourism sites across the world" (Stone, 2018: 202). These public mediatized deaths, either because of historic or recent trauma, are safely displayed as spectacles in new socially sanctioned tourism environments. Consequently, dark tourism mediates a symbolic *memento mori that* can make death existential through a process of spectacularization. Despite complexities of memorialisation, dark tourism selects the politicized or eminent dead through difficult heritage development and its inherent dissonance. That said, however, mediated/mediatized visibility of death within dark tourism might suggest that death is everywhere yet nowhere in Western culture. Indeed, significant death of the extraordinary other is publically present though dark tourism despite it being privately absence for the ordinary Self. For instance, dark tourism at Ground Zero mediates the tragic departing of the 9/11 dead, yet the deceased are turned into memorialised spectacles and an outlet for cultural and religious fears. Ground Zero shows us death that we dread – an untimely and violent 'bad death' resultant from disaster or atrocity – rather than a 'good death' inherent in romanticised notions of dying. Consequently, we may mediate our own sense of mortality and ontological security through the fatality of others, where visibility of death in dark tourism helps fuel a new cultural fascination with death.

Secondly, the *commercialization of death* as a defining feature of the spectacular death suggests a consumerism of death exists (Jacobsen, 2016). Indeed, deaths in contemporary dark tourism are not only produced into spectacles through mediatized visibility, but they are also part of a broader entrepreneurial enterprise. The spectacular dead are 'packaged-up' as commodities for consumption and tragic memories sold as souvenirs. For example, Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum – a space that haunts contemporary imagination as well as a place of mass tourism – now 'market' the Holocaust dead as memory managers strive to commemorate human tragedy in a mercantile world. Auschwitz has become a place of postcards, trinkets and kitsch fridge magnates, as tourists sightsee in the mansions of the genocide dead. Consequently, dark tourism commercialises places of secular pilgrimage and trades on ever-increasing spectacles of death and atrocity. Hence, the significant other dead are revived and promoted within visitor economies, whereby neoliberal marketization retail the spectacular dead for tourist consumption. In doing so, dark tourism (re)frame contemporary deathscapes and, subsequently, secular morality is redefined and ethical demarcations between commemoration and commercialism become increasingly blurred.

A third dimension of spectacular death is the *re-ritualization of death* (Jacobsen, 2016). Where personal and religious meaning-making rituals of death arguably diminished in the invisible/forbidden death era, a new counterculture of death ritualization is now emerging. Certainly, within dark tourism, a re-ritualization of death may be seen in a global exertion to commemorate (and commercialise) acts of fatality. This has resulted in a remarkable growth of new kinds of mortality capital and plurality of difficult heritages. Consequently, deathscapes in dark tourism ritualistically enact collective remembrance, as well as political and cultural forgetting. Indeed, dark tourism offers designation and sanctification of certain deathscapes where noteworthy death is (re)constructed and recalled. Rather than being expunged from memory and eroded from landscapes, these ritualised 'black spots' of dark

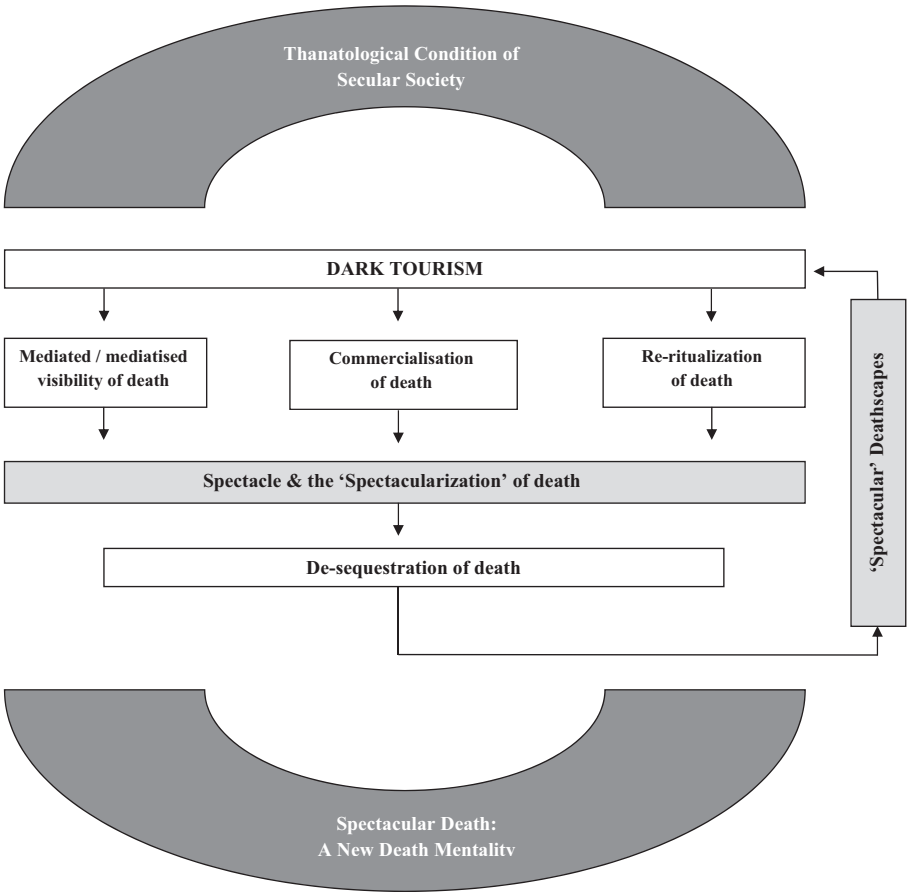

Fig. 1. Dark tourism and the 'spectacularization of death': a theoretical blueprint.

tourism invoke a new kind of memorial complex in consuming death (and lives). For instance, increasing number of permanent memorials and temporary shrines to deceased celebrities or political figures, such as Princess Diana, George Michael, Michael Jackson, Elvis Presley, or JFK, often attract mass visitation and ritualistic consumer behaviour. Modern proliferation of this memorializing and its public consumption means that affect and sentiment are elevated, whereby dark tourism creates new repositories of feeling and emotion. Thus, memorial mania and a desire to publically mark the significant deceased invokes a re-ritualization of death as spectacle in dark tourism. It is here where death is de-sequestered to the public arena and, subsequently, ritually revived through touristic production and ephemeral consumption.

In summary, while recognising remaining attributes of Philippe Ariès' invisible/forbidden death thesis, Michael Jacobsen suggests that we are now witnessing something heretofore unseen in the representation and consumption of death and the dead. I argue that death mentalities in our contemporary age reveal dark tourism as representing a new spectacular kind of death. Indeed, dark tourism is an integral part of this new spectacular deathscape in secular society. To that end, I offer a summative theoretical blueprint that visualises fundamental interrelationships between dark tourism and the 'spectacularization of death' (Fig. 1). Consequently, the scholarly conversation between thanatology and dark tourism is engaged and fresh research avenues are now open, particularly those that scrutinize how societies treat and dispense with their significant Other dead. Ultimately, my essay is a call to scholars to reconnoitre those research avenues. Moreover, this critical intersection of thanatology and dark tourism research should now focus on *mediated/mediatized death* within visitor economies, consequences of *death commercialisation*, as well as *death re-ritualization* through difficult heritage. Indeed, cross-cultural research of how death and fatality is (re)presented, how death is commoditized, and how significant death is ritually redefined by tourism, all warrant future scholarly spotlights. By illuminating dark tourism through a 'spectacular death' lens, we not only help usher in a new death mentality, but the dead as our immortal custodians are revived and reinvented in contemporary forms.

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