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## **Confronting mortality moments: death, dying and the consumption of dark tourism**

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### **Abstract**

Dark tourism is the act of travel and visitation to sites, attractions and exhibitions that (re)present death, disaster or the seemingly macabre. The phenomenon has received increasing media and academic attention, especially within the context of consumer behaviour at such 'dark sites', and the potential relationship of dark tourism with wider notions of death and dying. This paper examines the relationship between dark tourism consumption and mortality within contemporary society. Adopting a conceptual framework as proposed by Stone and Sharpley (2008), dark tourism and its relationship with contemporary mortality are explored, and in doing so, particular consequences for individuals' ontological security and personal meaningfulness are highlighted. The role of education and the notion of memorial, as well as media influences, are considered within dark tourism consumption. Moreover, the paper suggests particular motivators may exist for 'dark tourists', including, but not limited to, mortality contemplation. Ultimately, however, the paper suggests that wider ontological and thanatological themes may be consequential to a 'dark tourism' visit, rather than being a primary motivating factor.

**Key words:** Dark Tourism, Thanatourism, Death, Society, Thanatology, Ontological Security.

The twentieth-century battlefields of Europe, sites of genocide at Auschwitz-Birkenau, the Killing Fields of Cambodia or the ruins of New York's Ground Zero; each are locations that have become infamous for their association with death and tragedy. However, within contemporary society, those visitors who actively seek out these macabre sites and attractions have received increasing academic and media scrutiny. Indeed, the rather superficial label of "dark tourism", or its academic namesake "thanatourism", has been applied in order to both identify and analyse this phenomenon of visiting sites of death, disaster and tragedy (Foley & Lennon 1996; Lennon & Foley 2000; Seaton 1996). Consequently, whilst the media are said to have elevated the subject of dark tourism to that of myth or even meta-myth (Seaton & Lennon, 2004), academic discourse is now attempting to understand the motives of these dark tourists and the implications of such visits (Stone 2005a). Dark tourism, a term first coined by Foley and Lennon (1996, 198) typifies "the presentation and consumption (by visitors) of real and commodified death and disaster sites". In doing so, the subject area, in research terms at least, has become validated and popularised and, as such, death related tourist activity has been scrutinised under its various manifestations and "shades" (Stone 2006). Additionally, Rojeck's concept of "Black Spots" (1993), Dann's "milking the macabre" (1994), or Blom's morbid tourism (2000), have all contributed to the wider dark tourism debate. Nevertheless, whatever term used to describe this death related tourist activity within contemporary society, for "industry practitioners" at least, labelling such activity may imply certain negative connotations because of wider morality and mortality subtexts (Stone 2006).

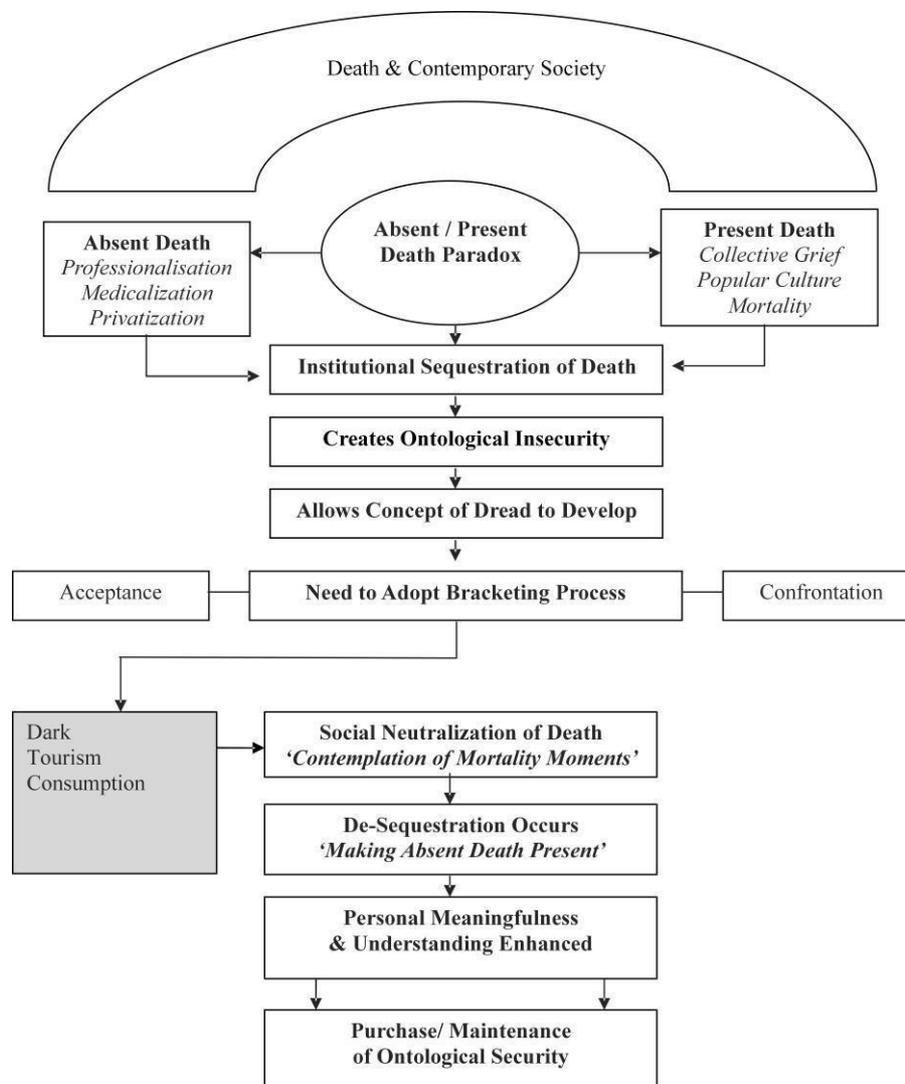
Nevertheless, despite various attempts to categorise dark tourism, Lennon and Foley's analysis of dark tourism (2000) suggests the activity is a uniquely post-modern phenomenon, and in particular, advocates that chronological distance must frame dark tourist experiences and that the "dark event" must take place "within the memories of those still alive to validate them" (Lennon & Foley 2000,12). Conversely, this chronological distance argument has attracted a certain amount of criticism within the academic literature, with suggestions that dark tourism is more historically rooted. In particular, parallels are cited with the Roman gladiatorial games, early pilgrimages to sites of martyrdom, public spectacles of medieval executions, or the attraction of Waterloo which became one of the first "mass tourism battlefields" (Seaton 1996; Seaton 1999; Stone 2006). Indeed, as Seaton notes, "death is the one heritage that everyone shares and it has been an element of tourism longer than any other form of heritage" (1996, 234). That said, Tarlow takes a more holistic view in defining dark tourism as:

...visitations to places where tragedies or historically noteworthy death has occurred and that continue to impact on our lives. (2005, 48)

Indeed, definitional debate aside, Marcel (2003) describes dark tourism as “the dirty little secret of the tourism industry” and goes on to suggest that the commercialisation of the macabre and tragedy is distasteful and full of moral ambiguities. Not least, according to Marcel, the sale of tacky souvenirs at the site of Kennedy’s assassination in Dallas, or places of celebrity burial, or holocaust museums and the (re)packaged death camps of Auschwitz, all contribute to wider morality debates (Stone forthcoming). Indeed, the notion that the commodification of such places, combined with the perception that tourism has trivialized them to the extent that they now fundamentally contradict what they initially sought to commemorate, is another pervasive theme of the literature surrounding many dark tourist and heritage attractions (e.g. Shackley 2001; Ashworth & Hartmann 2005). Nonetheless, and returning to Marcel’s criticism, one is prompted to ask whether it is justifiable to classify a cemetery alongside the actual site of celebrity death, or a museum alongside the actual site of genocide. Are they all the same “dirty little secrets”?

Accordingly, Miles proposes a clear distinction between “sites *associated with* death, disaster, and depravity and sites *of* death, disaster, and depravity” (2002:1175). Specifically, Miles highlights the US Holocaust Memorial Museum and the Auschwitz concentration camp, and argues that “if visitation to the former is rightfully characterized as dark tourism, then journey/excursion/pilgrimage to the latter constitutes a further degree of empathetic travel: darker tourism.” To this end, Stone (2006) suggests a conceptual framework of supply, namely a “dark tourism spectrum”, which locates “dark sites” according to their perceived ideological, temporal and spatial product features - from “lightest” through to the ‘darkest’. A typology of “Seven Dark Suppliers” emerges from Stone’s (2006) work to include: dark fun factories, dark exhibitions, dark dungeons, dark resting places, dark shrines, dark conflict sites and dark camps of genocide. Thus, within Stone’s “Spectrum of Supply” - the cemetery as a “Dark Resting Place” is somewhat lighter than a “Dark Shrine”, such as the murder site at 25 Cromwell Street, the site of serial murder in Gloucester (UK) by Fred and Rosemary West, as an actual place of death. Additionally, the US Holocaust Memorial Museum as a “Dark Exhibition” in Washington DC may be deemed “lighter” than the “Dark Camps of Genocide” at Auschwitz-Birkenau, where the actual atrocities took place. Essentially, Stone (2006) suggests that developing a typological foundation allows not only an understanding of dark tourism supply, but also, and perhaps more importantly, a frame of reference which allows the identity and subsequent extraction and interrogation of dark tourism demand and, of course, the consequent motivations, behaviour and experiences.

It is this latter point (of attempting to examine dark tourism demand), which led Stone and Sharpley (2008) to develop a model of dark tourism consumption within a thanatological framework (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Dark Tourism Consumption within a Thanatological Framework  
(Source: Stone & Sharpley 2008)

Certainly, as tourism consumption is both socially influenced and culturally framed (Sharpley 1999), the model in Figure 1 emerges from a thanatopic tradition of death and its contemplation by the living. Whilst the theoretical model, by drawing upon sociology of death, can augment debates regarding dark tourism consumption, it is argued that other additional consumption factors (not least issues of memorial, education and media influence), are key to understanding wider dark tourism meanings. The remainder of this paper, therefore, attempts to build upon Stone and Sharpley's (2008) conceptual framework and examine whether mortality confrontation should remain a prime factor through which to interrogate dark tourism consumption, or whether the "mortality moments", which Stone and Sharpley (2008) propose, may, just as easily be consequential to the dark tourism encounter.

Essentially, Stone and Sharpley's (2008) conceptual framework rests upon the notion that death is, paradoxically, absent and present within contemporary (Western) society. In the absent sense, death and dying is suggested to be no longer "visible" in the Western world (Aiken 2000). Certainly, as traditional and community-based deathbed rituals and mourning no longer take place within secular society, for some at least, and as death has moved from the parlour to the hospital, mortality has become institutionalised and sequestered to health care professionals (Seale 1998). Hence, at the collective level at least, as a society we have become "death-denying", and contemporary death has become abstract and distant to everyday living (Zimmermann 2007). In contrast, Walter (2002) asks if we are witnessing a present revival of death. In particular, he highlights a number of high profile fundraising campaigns for children's hospices, in addition to the now common public grieving and the prevalence of emotional and personal stories of tragedy that dominate the media. Furthermore, Durkin (2003) suggests that whilst we may now be death denying at the collective level, this denial causes us to crave some insight into death at the individual level, often through consuming thanatological themed popular culture, such as movies, novels, computer games, and gallows humour. Thus, it appears a "paradox of death" occurs, whereby death is absent, through a professionalisation and medicalization of the dying process. On the other hand, death is present in society through the consumption of popular culture, in addition to an increasing notion of public grieving and, of course, because finitude of the human being is the single most common factor of life (Stone & Sharpley 2008).

It is here where the issue of meaningfulness of living and the need to keep a sense of death and dying in perspective occurs, which Giddens (1990, 1991) suggests was an individual's notion of personal "ontological security". Giddens also suggests that ontological security provides the self with a sense of order and continuity with regard to their individual experiences and lifespan. He further argues that ontological security is reliant upon a person's ability to give meaning to his/her own life. With regard to mortality, Mellor adds that death causes an individual to "question the meaningfulness and reality of the social frameworks in which they participate, shattering their ontological security" (1993,13). For the individual self therefore, death and the prospect of dying continue to raise the Kierkegaardian notion of dread, the anxiety of which one must "bracket out" (Giddens 1991). Essentially, this bracketing process is facilitated by the social neutralisation of death, enabling death and dying to be contextualised and made real for the living. Consequently, Durkin (2003) proposes that television, film or gallows humour allow us, in part at least, to confront and neutralise the "dread of death". Likewise, Stone and Sharpley (2008) advocate that dark tourism performs a similar function as well as allowing the individual to "purchase ontological security". They go on to suggest:

within dark tourism, death becomes real (again) for the individual ... real actual death is (re)presented and commodified within dark tourism sites in order for it to become existentially valid and therefore inevitable for the individual who wishes to gaze upon this “Other” death (Stone and Sharpley 2008, 588).

However, whilst Stone and Sharpley (2008) examine dark tourism consumption from a thanatological perspective, one must acknowledge that not all visitations to dark sites are necessarily motivated by a desire to gaze upon the macabre. Indeed, it is to this point that this paper now turns, in particular highlighting alternative motivators for dark tourism consumption. For instance, visitors to dark sites may just as easily be motivated by a sense of belonging to a particular community, or conduct visits for educational purposes. In Europe, for example, educational trips to concentration camps and battlefields are often encouraged to teach us about our collective history, however distressing that history might be (Smith 2003). Similarly, Clark (2007) identifies an increasing interest in Second World War history, and by way of example, points to the German generation who wish to explore and validate their parents’ wartime actions.

This historical interest also manifests itself within acts of remembrance. However, whilst visits to the Flanders battlefields, or the laying of wreathes at war cemeteries, might suggest a thanatopic interest, these are essentially acts of memorialisation, for events that exist in our collective memory (Keil, 2005). Seaton perhaps summarises many of these examples succinctly, by suggesting that dark tourism “commonly exists alongside other motivations, for example, an interest in military history or other interest of a personal, nationalistic or humanitarian reason – rather than purely macabre feelings or, a fascination with death per se” (1996, 243).

The concept of *schadenfreude* is also said to have a bearing on visitor motivations to consume dark tourist sites (Seaton & Lennon 2004). A word of German origin with no literal translation, “*schadenfreude*” essentially means “to take delight in another person’s misfortune” (Wordnet, n. d.). Here, the role of the media might be identified. For example, novelist Ian McEwen confessed to a “voyeuristic *schadenfreude*” in his continued viewing of the TV footage of the collapse of the Twin Towers on 9/11, mirrored perhaps by the later erection of a viewing platform for the general public (Seaton & Lennon, 2004). Tarlow goes on to suggest that “the site of the world trade centre is visited, while the tragedies of Africa are ignored. Due to the television’s selectivity we can say that while all life is precious not all life is remembered” (2005, 57). Moreover, Breitbart and Ebner (2004) note what they deem to be a most extreme example of *schadenfreude*, that is, in the form of internet based “celebrity death pools”. In particular, Breitbart and Ebner comment upon “web sites like

www.stiffs.com where the public predicts batches of potential celebrity deaths and gain points upon their correct choices. At the end of the year the person with the most points draws winnings from a cash pool” (2004, 341). Indeed, the role of the media and the internet and its relationship with dark tourism consumption is complex and multi-faceted and, as such, beyond the scope of this paper (but see Seaton & Lennon 2004; Walter 2005; Sturken 2007).

Nevertheless, visitor interest in death, disaster or macabre related sites perhaps illustrates Rojeck’s assertion that within the “landscape of postmodernism, meaning has been replaced by spectacle and sensation dominates value” (1993, 136). That said, within the dark tourism cultural landscape, death and demise is interpreted and presented as spectacle upon which the contemporary visitor may morbidly gaze. Hence, given that the self is provided with a spatial opportunity within dark tourism to “gaze” upon “Other” death, often from a safe distance and within a socially sanctioned environment, the contemplation of mortality may indeed be consequential to any particular dark tourism visit. To illustrate this conceptual point, Walter (2004) considered visitor responses when they were exposed to the Körperwelten/Body Worlds exhibition in London in 2002. The exhibition, which utilizes cadavers preserved through a process called plastination, offers particular insight into “dark consumer” behaviour and experiences. Walter highlights visitor comments to the exhibition:

It left me feeling that we are so much more than our physical self. I think my visit has changed how I perceive life, for ever.

The most fascinating way to learn about the body – makes you feel very mortal! (2004, 472)

Whilst these visitor comments appear to ratify dark tourism consumption within a thanatological framework, an opposing reaction by another visitor queries the basis of the model: “I like the way it’s just meat, nameless meat” (Walter 2004, 478).

It is here, perhaps, that limited or no contemplation of one’s own mortality occurs. This may be because of a lack of emotion or empathy on behalf of the individual visitor. Indeed, this may not be uncommon. For example, upon entry to the US Holocaust Memorial Museum, visitors are provided with an identity card showing details of a Jewish citizen of the Third Reich, with age and gender to match their own. The fate of this person can be traced throughout the exhibition, but in seeking to personalise the subject in this way, commentators are perturbed by how many “citizen identity cards” are later discarded outside the museum (Smith 2003).

In summary, this paper has sought to highlight that the consumption of dark tourism may not rest solely upon issues of mortality. Instead, aspects of schadenfreude, education, historical interest or memorial may indeed be alternative motivators. It is also acknowledged that other factors may have prevalence, such as how issues of gender influence dark tourism consumption (Seaton & Lennon 2004), or why travellers possess a “curiosity to witness” disaster scenes, such as the tsunami sites in Thailand (Rittichainuwat 2008); or, alternatively, the importance of “conspicuous compassion” and how and why grieving in public may have a relationship with dark tourism consumption (West 2004). Admittedly, Stone and Sharpley (2008) do not propose that the consumption of dark tourism rests entirely on personal contemplations of death and mortality and do acknowledge a wider “consumption jigsaw”.

Ultimately, this paper concludes that whilst the consumption model offered by Stone and Sharpley (2008) provides a valid framework in which to explore this subject (and certainly advances what has previously been a limited and mainly descriptive academic discussion to date), any number of key motivators exist for dark visits, including, but not limited to, mortality confrontation. Essentially, the consumption jigsaw remains diverse with respect to dark tourism and as Stone (2005a) notes, “the dark tourism concept revolves around death, therefore, it is right that death and issues of mortality are central to further investigation of dark tourism consumption”. It remains an interesting proposition and an intriguing hypothesis (which the wider ontological and thanatological themes previously identified), that contemplation of mortality may be consequential to a dark tourism visit, rather than being a primary motivating factor.

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