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Dark Tourism Experiences: mediating between life and death

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Section 1

Dark tourism experiences: mediating between life and death

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Cheap holiday in other peoples misery
I don't wanna holiday in the sun
I wanna go to the new Belsen
I wanna see some history
Cause now I got a reasonable economy
(Sex Pistols, 1977)

On 14 October 1977, the British punk rock band the Sex Pistols, famous for their anarchist views on social conformity, released their fourth single 'Holidays in the Sun'. The band's vacation to the Channel Island of Jersey inspired the lyrics of the song, with John Lydon (also known as Johnny Rotten) saying:

We tried our holiday in the sun on the Isle of Jersey and it didn't work. They threw us out. Being in London at the time made us feel like we were trapped in a prison camp environment. There was hatred and constant threats of violence. The best thing we could do was to go set up in a prison camp somewhere else. Berlin and its decadence was a good idea. The song came about from that. I loved Berlin. I loved the Wall and the insanity of the place. (cited in Savage 2005)

Whilst hedonistic and pleasure-seeking experiences in the sun are considered staple ingredients of (mass) tourism, for the Sex Pistols at least, the search for a non-conformist tourist experience took them to 1970's Berlin. Divided by the Berlin Wall into liminal places, the juxtaposition of profligacy in capitalist West Berlin with the asceticism of Communist-controlled East Berlin, together with remnants of Nazi Germany's attempt to exterminate Jews during the Holocaust – hence, the song's reference to Belsen – provided the Sex Pistols with an 'alternative tourism experience'. Of course, the Holocaust,

as a period of history that still symbolically haunts contemporary imagination for the scale of atrocity committed against Jews and others, and the concept of tourism may appear an anomalous conjunction. However, a combination of memorial narratives, political imperatives and touristic (re)presentations and infrastructure have ensured the Holocaust and its dead are now mediated through heritage tourism experiences where murder and mortality are unique selling points. Consequently, John Lennon and Malcom Foley in 2000 published their theoretically fragile yet inspiring book of ‘death-related’ tourism cases, including but not limited to the Holocaust, bringing their previously defined concept of ‘dark tourism’ (Foley and Lennon 1996) to mainstream academic and media attention. Yet, in fact, the Sex Pistols were singing about the nihilism of modern touristic travel to sites of death almost two decades before.

Hence, the purpose of this introductory essay is to reveal, albeit briefly, dark tourism within the context of contemporary approaches to mortality and to signpost empirical research that examines dark tourism as a (new) mediating institution between the dead and the living. The section also introduces subsequent chapters that address both the conceptual framing of dark tourism, as well as the commodification of ‘death spaces’. First, however, the concept of dark tourism – that is, ‘the act of travel to sites associated with death, suffering and the seemingly macabre’ (Stone 2006: 146) – has a long historical pedigree. Even before the Sex Pistols musico-logical immortalisation of ‘cheap holidays in other people’s misery’, visitors have long travelled to places or events associated one way or another with death, disaster and suffering (Sharpley and Stone 2009). Whilst Lennon and Foley (2000) suggest dark tourism is an intimation of post-modernity, they draw upon Rojek’s (1993) earlier work of ‘Black Spots’ tourism – death sites which are commercialised postmodern spectacles dependent upon (re)constructed simulacrum (after Baudrillard: see Poster 1988). Meanwhile, Seaton (2009) offers an alternative view of dark tourism development. He suggests the origins and transformation of dark tourism, or what he terms ‘thanatourism’, was traditional travel that has evolved and been shaped by profound shifts in the history of European culture – and which still impacts today. Consequently, Seaton argues three key historical epochs have defined thanatourism in its current Western tradition. In particular:

- *Christianity*, as it evolved between the fourth and sixteenth centuries, and its unique, doctrinal emphasis on fatality – specifically, Seaton points out with reference to the Cross as Christianity’s identifying symbol, ‘Christianity was the first, and only, world religion to make an instrument of torture and death its corporate logo’ (ibid.: 527);
- *Antiquarianism* and its related *secular-sacred* ideology of national heritage that first emerged in sixteenth-century Europe, and which included the recording and subsequent promotion of significant deaths of cultural

figures, politicians, artists, and so on, as well as memorials, epitaphs, effigies and ancient burial grounds;

- and, *Romanticism* and its complex nexus of literary, artistic and philosophical ideas that were founded in Britain, France and Germany in the last half of the eighteenth century and through the nineteenth century, and which added to the propensity for secular, death-related travel and which continues today.

A full critique of Seaton's developmental sketch of thanatourism is beyond the scope of this essay. However, Seaton's synthesis of Romanticism with dark tourism evolution may shine light on the construction of meaning of present-day dark tourism experiences. In particular, it is the Romantic portrayal of mortality that is important, as well as its influences upon perceptions of death today. Mortality was a major subject of Romantic art, literature and travel which 'turned death into sensibility – not so much a religious and moral mediation in the medieval, *memento mori* tradition, [but] as an imaginative dwelling on fatality for aesthetic gratification' (Seaton 2009: 531). Hence, the *Romantic death* of the nineteenth century, termed by Aries (1981[2008]) as 'Thy Death' (or 'The Death of the Other'), evolved through a waning of eternal damnation messages prescribed by priests with advancements in medicines prescribed by doctors. Moreover, with the emergence of the modern family and its new structures of feeling (Porter 1999a), attention became fixed not on the decedent, but on those who continued to live. Influenced through Romanticism, including the quixotic depiction of death in art, literature and poetry, the rituals of death became much more sentimental (if not morbid), and mourning became a family concern which perpetuated the memory of the deceased. The Romantic death became a death-with-dignity, a *good death* where calmness prevailed in readiness for a dignified departure from the mortal world. The good death was an illustration of how man paid respectful deference to the laws of nature, and how the time of passing became an opportunity to put 'things in order'. Indeed, the Romantic death was signified by the writing of wills with final bequests bestowed, sanctimonious instructions given to survivors, forgiveness sought both from companions and God, promises of reunions made, and final words spoken. As Tercier (2005: 12) notes, 'the business of the [Romantic] deathbed became just that: the tidying and tying up of unfinished business'. Thus, the Romantic reconstruction of the deathbed was nothing more distressing than a final, peaceful sleep. With a darkened room, family and loved ones at the bedside, affairs in order, peace made with both survivors and God, and with a few gentle and quiet farewells, the decedent would dignifiedly drift off into an eternal slumber. Of course, this Romantic death was an ideal, in the mindscape of a Victorian society who came to think of death as simply as a way of 'expiring consumption' (Jalland 1996). In its ideal form, the Romantic good death appeared to be a perfect coincidence of both social and biological death, which did not rely (solely) upon ontological continuity. However, whilst

spiritual aspects were still important to the *good death* and religious forms of the death-with-dignity still embraced the hope of an eternal existence, deathbeds that were increasingly secular found solace in relief from pain and discomfort. In short, Romanticism (re)created death and the dead for (re)evaluation and contemplation for the living. In turn, tourism of the day reflected these contemplative aspects and thus involved visits to sites of fatality depicted in Romantic art and literature, and included trips to graveyards, mausoleums, historical battlefields, as well as traumas and disaster sites (e.g., Howitt 1840; Hall 1853).

However, the deathbed has undergone a metamorphosis during the twentieth century which continues to the present day. According to Aries (1981[2008]), in his seminal historical overview of death, the period saw the emergence of the *invisible death* or *forbidden death*. It is within this phase that Aries reveals his revulsion for modern developments and suggests modernity is marked by a waning of faith, especially for an (eternal) afterlife. Kellehear (2007) later characterised the invisible death as the *shameful death* for the lack of overt social exchanges between dying individuals and those who (institutionally) care for them. Hence, with the full onset of secularisation, the invisible death is signified by the role of institutions, especially the medical establishment where increasing bureaucratisation and hospitalisation, as Aries alleges, ‘robbed the dead and dying of all dignity’ (1981: 559). Therefore, the invisible or forbidden death, where deaths ‘disappeared’ from the community gaze, is largely as a result of the process of medicalisation. Certainly, the position of the physician at the nineteenth century (Romantic) deathbed became entrenched and consolidated through advancements in therapeutic techniques and pathophysiology, as well as an expanding pharmacopoeia (Porter, 1999b). Augmenting the position of the physician as an ‘authority over death’ were technical advances and acceleration of the bureaucratic superstructure that became the foundation of the modern state. With increasing hospitals (and later hospices) and dispensaries, combined with the professionalisation of disposal of the dying through regularisation of death certificates, post-mortems and the storage of dead bodies, the invisible death became almost just that: concealed and obscured behind the facade and machinery of the (new) death, dying and disposal industry. Consequently, with increasingly industrialisation being applied to the deathbed, in terms of both processes and procedures, Porter (1999a: 84) notes, ‘rather as the *philosophes* rationalised death, modern man has in effect denied his own mortality, and death has become taboo’ [original emphasis]. Hence, as the twentieth century progressed, the physicians’ control over the process of dying increased, and death was moved out of the familiar environs of the family and community to become institutionalised under a medical gaze. Thus, the shift of power and emphasis from priest to doctor is now almost complete, as secularising processes have made the world (post)modern. Notwithstanding, the care of the soul and body has moved realms from post-mortem religious ritual to ante-mortem medical protocol. As Tercier (2005: 13) notes: ‘In the ideal

modern death, biological, social and ontological death not only coincide but are meant to occur in such an instant that, perhaps, the whole business [of mortality] can be ignored, allowed to slip past unnoticed. Hence the invisibility of death.'

However, to suggest that death is invisible within contemporary society ignores the popular cultural and media depictions of death; including those represented by dark tourism. Thus, it is here where an absent/present death paradox lies. Indeed, *real death* of the Self has been sequestered from the public gaze during the past 60 years or so (e.g., Mellor 1993; Mellor and Shilling 1993; Willmott 2000). However, in its place is *(re)created death*, where the Significant Other dead cohabit the living world through a plethora of mediating channels, including literature, architecture, monuments, the media and popular culture images (e.g., Harrison 2003). Stone and Sharpley (2008) augment this sequestration thesis, advocating real death has been relocated to a back region of medics and death industry professionals, and where modern-day mortality, or at least its depiction, is revived through a substitute of recreated situations and memorialisation, including those found within dark tourism *(re)presentations* (also see Stone 2009a, 2009b). It is these representations and their consequent meanings that potentially provide dark tourism as a mediating experience that links the dead with the living (also see Walter 2009). Harrison (2003: 158) notes this linkage and outlines the role of the Significant Other dead:

The contract between the living and the dead has traditionally been one of indebtedness... The dead depend on the living to preserve their authority, heed their concerns, and keep them going in their afterlives. In return, they help us to know ourselves, give form to our lives, organise our social relations, and restrain our destructive impulses. They provide us with the counsel needed to maintain the institutional order, of which they remain authors...

Furthermore, Stone (2010) empirically illustrates this linkage through research at a range of dark tourism sites, attractions and exhibitions. Particularly, Stone demonstrates, albeit to varying degrees, that dark tourism provides an opportunity to contemplate death of the Self through gazing upon the Significant Other dead. Consequently, he suggests visitors to a range of dark tourism sites hope for a good *Romantic* death for themselves yet, in a paradoxical age of death sequestration dominated by medicalisation, the likelihood is for a 'hi-tech' death staged-managed by medics and professionals. Hence, where the *invisible* deathbed has been recreated, rather than denied, dark tourism experiences provide a contemporary mediating channel of mortality reflection for the Self through the Other dead. Ultimately, therefore, dark tourism is a (new) mediating institution, which not only provides a physical place of mediation but, also, allows the Self to construct ontological meaning and to reflect and contemplate both life and death through a mortality lens.

Drawing upon the work of Walter (2008), Stone (2010) suggests four key reasons why dark tourism is a mediating institution:

- Dark tourism mediates mortality by representing and communicating death.
- Dark tourism mediates mortality by providing the visitor an opportunity to accumulate ‘death capital’ upon which individuals may draw upon to aid reflection and contemplation.
- Dark tourism mediates the complexity of death whereby contemporary mortality is reconfigured and revitalised through dark tourism spaces.
- Dark tourism mediates rapid social change through symbolically displaying the Significant Other dead.

Of course, the relationship between dark tourism sites and dark tourist experiences is one of continued research inquiry. As Walter (2009: 52) notes, ‘dark tourism confronts us not with human suffering and mortality, but with *certain kinds* of human suffering and mortality’ [emphasis added]. Therefore, future research agendas need to address the type, level and consequent of dark tourism as a mediating institution. Particular questions need asking as to the nature of dark tourism experiences, including, what is the meaning/perception of ‘dark’ in relation to dark tourism? How intentional are dark tourists in their consumption of sites of death? What is the role of dark tourists as semioticians? Moreover, how is suffering and death commodified for contemporary consumption? The task of interrogating these questions begins in subsequent chapters. Indeed, Tazim Jamal and Linda Lelo in Chapter 2 explore the conceptual and analytical framing of dark tourism. In particular, they scrutinise African American slavery heritage, under the guise of performative experiences and intentionality, and evaluate what constitutes ‘dark’ in dark tourism. They ultimately suggest the notion of *darkness* is a socially constructed one rather than objective fact. Meanwhile, Tony Johnston in Chapter 3 explores the social and commercial construction of death space, particularly within the context of post-war Croatia and Bosnia. Specifically, he notes the blurring of memory and imagination of post-war Sarajevo and the inherent tensions of war space commodification with place of private (tourist) enterprise.

Generally, however, the theme of dark tourism, under various pretexts, is growing within the tourism literature. Indeed, the subject was the most popular at the Tourist Experiences: Meanings, Motivations, Behaviours International Conference at the University of Central Lancashire in April 2009, from which this book derives its content – a reflection, perhaps, that research spotlights are now beginning to shine upon the complexities of dark tourism. Thus, regardless of whether dark tourism is an imitation of postmodernity; or has its origins in the fatality that was central to the development of Christianity; or developed through Antiquarianism and the discovery of heritage; or whether Romantic ideals still pervade a contemporary

consciousness of death – at the philosophical core of dark tourism is the concept of mortality. In a contemporary age where real, ordinary and normal death is hidden behind medical and professional facades, yet abnormal, extraordinary death is recreated for popular consumption, dark tourism plays a potential mediating role between life and death, linking the living with the dead. As such, the dead have always been guardians of the living, either through religious rituals or by secular myth making. Therefore, through dark tourism mediation we give the dead a future in order that they may give us a past. Ultimately, dark tourism helps the dead to live on in memory so that they may help the living go forward.