



# DARK TOURISM AND SIGNIFICANT OTHER DEATH

## Towards a Model of Mortality Mediation

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**Abstract:** Dark tourism and the commodification of death has become a pervasive feature within the contemporary visitor economy. Drawing upon the thanatological condition of society and a structural analysis of modern-day mortality, this paper establishes theoretical foundations for exploring dark tourism experiences. The study argues that in Western secular society where ordinary death is sequestered behind medical and professional façades, yet extraordinary death is recreated for popular consumption, dark tourism mediates a potential social filter between life and death. Ultimately, the research suggests that dark tourism is a modern mediating institution, which not only provides a physical place to link the living with the dead, but also allows a cognitive space for the Self to construct contemporary ontological meanings of mortality. **Keywords:** dark tourism, death, mortality, thanatology, mediation. © 2012 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

“People do not die for us immediately, but remain bathed in a sort of aura of life which bears no relation to true immortality but through which they continue to occupy our thoughts in the same way as when they were alive. It is as though they were travelling abroad.”

*Marcel Proust 1871-1922*

### INTRODUCTION

The touristic packaging of death has long been a theme of the morbid gaze. For instance, visits to morgues in nineteenth century Paris is without parallel in the Victorian imagination. It is in this early example of what is now referred to as dark tourism (Lennon & Foley, 2000) that tourists were provided with an ostensible invitation to identify unknown corpses, which gave way to a macabre *mise-en-scène*. Yet, arguably, nineteenth century ‘dark tourism’, consumed within the confines of Romanticism added to the propensity for secular death-related travel and, which continues today. In short, quixotic depictions of death

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and dying in Romantic art and literature provided for a thanatopic mediation of death and, subsequently, (re)created death and the dead for (re)evaluation and contemplation for the living (Seaton, 1999). In turn, tourism of the day reflected these contemplative aspects and involved visits to sites of fatality depicted by the Romantic Movement (Seaton, 2010).

Importantly, however, modern-day dark tourism does *not* present death *per se*, but rather represents *certain kinds* of death (Walter, 2009). Thus, within Western secular societies that are often labelled death denying—a term rooted in life-prolonging medicinal techniques and pharmacopoeia, as well as disposal of the dead management—ordinary death has largely been removed from the public realm and replaced with media inspired cultural representations of Significant Other Death (Stone, 2011a). Pagliari (2004) laments that while the collective Self has been *death-denying* due to attitudes towards medicine and mortality, society has subtly transgressed to a *death-defying* era, where emphasis on health education carry promises of corporeal extension. Pagliari also argues contemporary society is now entering a *death-deriding* age, where death is mocked, commercialised and sold for the sake of art and entertainment. Moreover, religious institutions, which once formed sacred canopies of mortality guidance, have largely been negated for the secular Self.

Dark tourism as a cultural representation of particular death has been referred to as a contemporary mediating institution between the living and the dead (Walter, 2009), whilst Stone (2011a, p. 25) suggests, “dark tourism provides an opportunity to contemplate death of the Self through gazing upon the Significant Other Dead”. Stone (2011b, 2012) also argues that dark tourism experiences, at least for some people for some of the time at some sites, is not so much about consuming narratives of death, but, rather, of contemplating life and living in the face of inevitable mortality. Nevertheless, whilst dark tourism and the thanatopic contemplation of death has been examined (Seaton, 1996, 1999, 2010; Stone & Sharpley, 2008; Stone, 2009a, 2011a, 2011b, 2012), a comprehensive conceptual framework to locate and interrogate dark tourism as a mediating institution of mortality remains elusive. Questions remain as to the type and extent of interrelationships dark tourism has with the broader cultural condition of society. Specifically, how is contemporary death and dying manifested in secularised society? What potential role does dark tourism play in the mediation of contemporary death and dying? In addition, what are the potential consequences of consuming dark tourism within contemporary society?

The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to address these questions. Focusing upon the thanatological condition of society—that is, society’s reactions to and perceptions of death—this study examines dark tourism within a structural analysis of mortality. Drawing on previous work of dark tourism consumption within a thanatological framework (Stone, 2009a; Stone & Sharpley, 2008), and adopting a post-disciplinary approach to dark tourism research of increased reasonableness, flexibility and inclusivity (Stone, 2011c), this research seeks to augment

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