

## Chapter 2

# **Making Absent Death Present: Consuming Dark Tourism in Contemporary Society<sup>1</sup>**

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*'Memento Mori' – Remember that you must die ...*

### **Introduction**

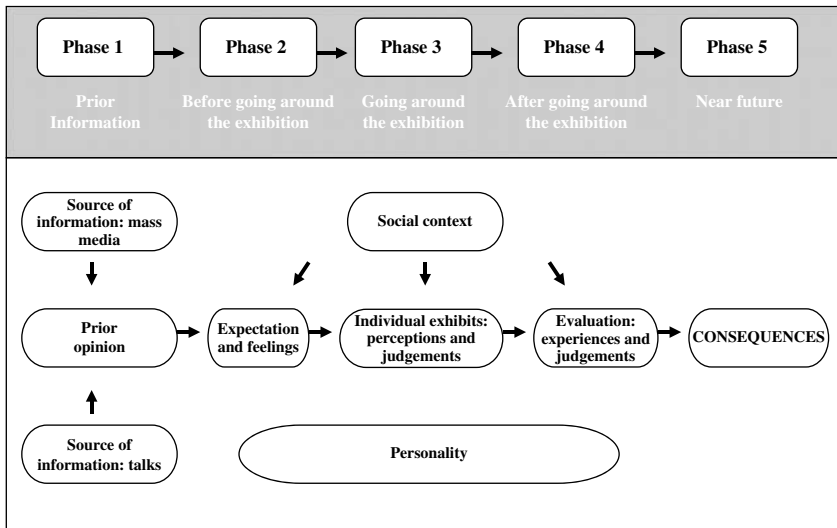
In May 2008, the 25th million visitor was welcomed by Gunther von Hagens' 'Body Worlds', a travelling show of anatomical donor bodies which has exhibited in 47 cities across the globe since 1996 (Institute for Plastination, 2008). Using a method for preserving putrefiable biological specimens called Plastination, whereby structural elements of cadavers are fixated, dehydrated and then, under vacuum conditions, saturated with reactive polymers such as silicone rubber, the end result is the human corpse essentially becoming *cured* for public display. A divisive exhibition experience that has inserted the post-mortal body into the cultural landscape and contemporary consciousness, Body Worlds has forever changed our notions about conception and death by provoking philosophical and religious reflection in visitors. As a modern-day Leonardo da Vinci, Gunther von Hagens positions himself as rediscovering the Renaissance mission to educate the layperson by dissecting cadavers and then adopting anatomical artistic license to exhibit preserved corpses in a variety of playful poses.

Anatomy, once the preserve of medics and health professionals, is now sold to the masses as visitors gaze at plastinated anatomical cadavers, ensuring that millions of lay people now have the opportunity to view death (and the dead body) close up. Indeed, Body Worlds and its show of anatomical awe is marketed with the strap-line '*The Original Exhibition of Real Human Bodies*', an acknowledgement by von Hagens, perhaps, that other copycat exhibitions are tapping into the commercial value of 'death displays'. Nevertheless, despite the ethical, legal and religious concerns

surrounding this 'dark exhibition' (after Stone, 2006a), diverse cultural attitudes to the event have been noted. For instance, Schulte-Sasse (2006) suggests that the intense legal, ethical and cultural controversy which surrounds the European experience of Body Worlds has not informed American discourse of the same event. Consequently, an affirmative American response to Body Worlds has conferred a new respectability on the exhibition and suppressed a critical engagement with its ethical, aesthetic, ideological and economic implications (Schulte-Sasse, 2006).

All the same, critics have been forthcoming with regard to the dignity of the body donors who now rest in plastic rather than in peace. Most notably, Burns (2007) argues that the educational objectives of the exhibition are ambiguous and that the presentation of the cadavers strips the donors of dignity. Likewise, more outspoken opponents include the Bishop of Manchester in the UK, who called the display a 'body snatch show in which exhibitions such as Body Worlds have their origins in the now long banned Victorian freak shows' (Ottewell, 2008). Additionally, debate and controversy have surrounded the source of body donors, allegedly many of them Chinese, and the potential illegal trafficking in bodies and body parts which 'supply' the various Body Worlds exhibitions across the globe (Barboza, 2006). However, despite the controversy which surrounds this dark tourism attraction, a particular reason why Body Worlds is successful – in visitor footfall at least – is because it touches upon the taboo of death. As Kriz (2007: 6) notes in the official Body Worlds catalogue, visitors 'overcome the taboos that surround human corpses ... and this transition from expecting revulsion to looking at the specimens freely and uninhibitedly amounts to a personal break with these taboos'. Similarly, where in most societies dead bodies are deemed problematic objects that are dealt with through ritual (Metcalfe & Huntington, 1991), Walter (2004) suggests that Body Worlds has become a contemporary ritual which allows the dead to be transformed, taboos confronted, and for the lay person to become somewhat emotionally detached from an otherwise clinical gaze.

Similarly, Whalley (2007), who conducted empirical research at Body Worlds and explored various individuals' personal consequences of visiting the exhibition, suggests the actual exhibition had a somewhat positive effect on visitors. Indeed, Whalley notes a 'substantial proportion of visitors stated that they had been affected by the Body Worlds exhibition on fundamental questions in conjunction with their own death' (2007: 303). Likewise, the allegedly positive aspect of visiting Body Worlds is also explored by Lantermann (2007), who suggests that visitors had an enriching experience in which they became more contemplative about their own life and death and more concerned with the vulnerability of their own human body. More importantly, however, Lantermann outlines a five-phase model of a visit to the Body Worlds exhibition (see Figure 2.1), in



**Figure 2.1** The five-phase model of a visit to a Body Worlds exhibition  
 Source: Lantermann (2007: 305)

which he highlights broad conditions, factors and processes that are involved in this particular dark tourism experience. Accordingly, the model which formulates visitor opinion not only presents itself as a heuristic strategy for planning and implementing a dark tourism survey but also for managing experiences and evaluations of various visitor groups.

While the exploration of specific push and pull motivating factors is beyond the scope of this chapter, the consequential aspects of the visit as suggested in Phase Five of Lantermann’s model are important. In short, he proposes that the consequences of a ‘dark tourism’ visit, such as that to the Body Worlds exhibition, have profound implications for the visitor soon after the actual visit. In particular, Lantermann (2007) suggests that, following a visit to Body Worlds, people are likely to experience greater interest in and concerns about health and the vulnerability of the body, especially as a result of the exhibition awakening a greater interest in the juxtaposition between life and death and the ultimate demise of the human being.

Of course, while the Body Worlds exhibition is a somewhat specialist or niche example of dark tourism, it nevertheless illustrates key thanatological aspects of the wider dark tourism phenomenon. That is, it exemplifies a number of fundamental issues that revolve around mortality within western-centric societies, including the apparent taboos that surround modern-day mortality, and the consequential aspects of confronting and contemplating these ‘death taboos’ in the public domain. Thus, drawing upon work elsewhere by Stone and Sharpley (2008), it is these aspects of

death and the confrontation of so-called 'mortality moments' and the consequential role which dark tourism may potentially play that this chapter now turns to.

## **Death and Contemporary Society**

The establishment and evolution of sociology has been concerned almost exclusively with the problems of life rather than with the subject of death (Mellor & Shilling, 1993). However, Berger's (1967) seminal text suggested death was an essential feature of the human condition, requiring individuals to develop mechanisms to cope with their ultimate demise. He went on to suggest that to neglect death is to ignore one of the few universal parameters in which both the collective and individual self is constructed (Berger, 1967). Hence, where death and the discussion of death within the public realm was once considered taboo (Mannino, 1997; DeSpelder & Strickland, 2002; Leming & Dickinson, 2002), or at least proclaimed to be taboo (Walter, 1991), commentators are now challenging death taboos, exploring contexts where the dead share the world with the living. In particular, Harrison (2003) examines how the dead are absorbed into the living world by graves, images, literature, architecture and monuments. Similarly, Lee (2002) reviews the disenchantment of death in modernity and concludes that death is making its way back into social consciousness, suggesting the time has come to dissect death without prejudice. He goes on to advocate that death is 'coming out of the closet to redefine our assumptions of life' (Lee, 2004: 155), thus breaking the modern silence (and taboo) on death which itself, perhaps, comprises a defence mechanism for individuals against their inevitable passing. Therefore, although the inevitability of death continues to be disavowed, particularly in contemporary society, it can never be completely denied (Tercier, 2005). Indeed, contemporary society increasingly consumes, willingly or unwillingly, both real and commodified death and suffering through audiovisual representations, popular culture and the media.

Of course, 'contemporary society', the cultural framework within which (western) individuals construct coping mechanisms to deal with human finitude, is itself a contested term, particularly within sociological discourse relating to modernity and postmodernity. According to Giddens (1990, 1991), however, it is misleading to interpret contemporary societies as evidence of a radically new type of social world, whereby the characteristics of modernity have been left behind. He suggests that social life is still being forged by essentially modern concerns, even though it is only now that the implications of these are becoming apparent. Similarly, Best and Kellner (2001: 6) note that present-day society 'is in the midst of a tempestuous period of transition and metamorphosis, propelled principally by transmutations in science, technology, and capitalism' and, perhaps more

recently, by geopolitical turmoil in a post 9/11 world. Consequently, Lee (2006) suggests that contestation remains over what is meant by contemporary society, as new terms such as reflexive modernisation, liquid modernity and multiple modernities add to the diverse and often contradictory views on social theory within sociological discourse. With this in mind, the author does not seek to enter into the philosophical debate over the use of the term *contemporary society* but simply aims to acknowledge significant features of sociological discourse which relate to modernism and postmodernism theory.

Even so, a Giddensian perspective points to a significant characteristic of contemporary society that can be correlated with death and mortality, namely an individual's perceived erosion of personal meaningfulness and rational order which, in turn, is often propelled by the privatisation of meaning and sequestration of death within public space. At the same time, when discussing mortality and its contemplation, a critical feature of (western) society may be seen in the extensive desecralisation of social life which has failed to replace religious certainties with scientific certainties (Giddens, 1991). Instead, while the negation of religion and an increased belief in science may have provided people with the possibility of exerting a perceived sense of control over their lives (though, crucially, it has not conquered death), it fails to provide values to guide lives (see Weber, 1948), leaving individuals vulnerable to feelings of isolation, especially when ruminating the prospect of death and an end to life projects. Hence, that the 'secularisation of life should be accompanied by the secularisation of death should come as no surprise: to live in the modern is to die in it also' (Tercier, 2005: 13). Further to this, Giddens (1991) suggests a privatisation of meaning in contemporary society, where both experience and meaning have been relocated from public space to the privatised realms of an individual's life (see also Chapter 4). Consequently, this has served both to reduce massively the scope of the sacred and to leave increasing numbers of individuals alone with the task of establishing and maintaining values to guide them and make sense of their daily lives. Ultimately, therefore, people require a sense of order and continuity in relation to their daily social lives, which Giddens (1990, 1991) refers to as 'ontological security'.

### **Ontological security: Meaning and mortality**

A distinctive feature of contemporary society, Giddens (1991: 156) argues, is the 'purchasing of ontological security' through various institutions and experiences that protect the individual from direct contact with madness, criminality, sexuality, nature and death. Giddens, who associates contemporary society with an 'exclusion of social life from fundamental existential issues which raise central moral dilemmas for human beings' (1991: 25), suggests that ontological security is anchored, both

emotionally and cognitively, in a 'practical consciousness of the meaningfulness' of our day-to-day actions (1991: 36). However, this sense of meaningfulness is consistently threatened by the angst of disorder or chaos. As Mellor (1993: 12) notes, 'this chaos signals the irreality of everyday conventions, since a person's sense of what is real is intimately associated with their sense of what is meaningful.' Giddens, drawing upon Kierkegaard's (1944) concept of dread, argues that individuals are faced with a seemingly ubiquitous danger of being besieged by anxieties concerning the ultimate reality and meaningfulness of daily life. Hence, contemporary society strives to address this sense of dread by 'bracketing out of everyday life those questions which might be raised about the social frameworks which contain human existence' (Giddens, 1991: 37–38).

Death is clearly one such issue that raises uncertainties and anxieties and hence becomes a major issue to bracket out of everyday consciousness. It could be argued, of course, that this bracketing-out process has resulted in the contemplation of death becoming taboo; nevertheless, as Mellor (1993) notes, the bracketing process is not always successful. Indeed, bracketing is continual as it is contingent upon societies to be able to control factors which offer pertinent threats to ontological security. This level of control will, naturally, vary from society to society, but regardless of the cultural condition of society, death is a potent challenge to the bracketing process in *all* societies (Mellor & Shilling, 1993). Therefore, the existential confrontation of the human demise has the potential to expose the individual to dread, the inevitability of death causing individuals to question the social frameworks in which they live and participate. As Giddens (1991: 162) notes:

Death remains the great extrinsic factor of human existence; it cannot as such be brought within the internally referential systems of modernity ... death becomes the point zero: it is nothing more or less than the moment at which human control over human existence finds an outer limit.

Therefore, death becomes a psychological and problematic issue for both the collective and individual self. People must face up to their inevitable demise, yet the social systems in which they reside must allow them to live day-to-day with some sort of commitment and thus to a certain extent deny death (Dumont & Foss, 1972). Consequently, modern ideology espouses a celebration of life and living, amplified by a postmodern focus on youth, beauty and the body. As a result, thoughts of death as an inevitable event are repressed (Lee, 2004). It is perhaps for this reason that both Giddens (1991) and, previously, Berger (1967) associate death with those 'fateful moments' and 'marginal situations' whereby individuals have to confront problems which society has attempted to conceal from public consciousness. As Berger (1967: 23) suggests, 'death is the most significant

factor individuals can encounter in marginal situations'. This is because death has the potential to radically undermine an individual's sense of meaningfulness and reality of social life, thus calling into question ontological security and even the most fundamental assumptions upon which social life is constructed (Mellor, 1993). Indeed, for Berger, death is an unavoidable characteristic of the human condition and one which all societies, contemporary or otherwise, inevitably have to address. Hence, if death and mortality are not dealt with by adequate confrontation mechanisms, not only will the individual have to face up to challenges of personal meaninglessness and a significant loss of ontological security, but the social framework as a whole becomes vulnerable to collapse into chaos. However, in a contemporary age defined by rapid technological, economic and scientific progress, a cultural milieu remains that challenges the maintenance of ontological security. In this context, death is difficult to deal with, especially when values and meanings are constantly reappraised and reflected upon, thus aiding a sequestration of death from the public realm. It is to this latter point that this chapter now turns.

### The Sequestration of Death: An Absent–Present Paradox

One of the fundamental discontinuist impulses of the contemporary age is expressed by Giddens in the pervasiveness of 'reflexivity' – that is, the systematic and critical examination, monitoring and revision of all beliefs and practices in the light of changing circumstances. Similar to Schelsky's (1965) notion of *Dauerreflexion* or 'permanent reflection', contemporary societies continuously examine and re-examine meaning and values. This continual process of systematic and potentially radical reappraisals of contemporary life can sentence the individual to a pervasive 'radical doubt' (Giddens, 1991: 21) and a perceived reduction in their sense of ontological security. While this constant re-evaluation of social life may be profound and liberating for some, especially those with a 'narcissistic personality type' (see, e.g. Lasch, 1991), it is unclear how reflexivity can ultimately help individuals deal with the phenomenon of death. More specifically, death 'is a universal parameter within which reflexivity occurs, rather than an object to which reflexivity can be convincingly applied' (Mellor, 1993: 18). Nonetheless, it can be argued that contemporary societies are sufficiently culturally diverse and flexible to permit individuals to draw and reflect upon a variety of cultural resources to deal with death, thus creating multiple mechanisms to confront mortality.

Even so, this diversity may compound the difficulties that individuals may experience when death (and dying) is encountered. As Mellor (1993: 19) argues, 'reflexivity may be increasingly *applied* to death in a multitude of ways, but this multiplicity of *particular* approaches to death accentuates the reality-threatening potential of death in general'. In other words, the

more diverse (and reflexive) the approaches to death in contemporary societies, the more difficult it becomes to contain death within social frameworks and thus limit existential anxiety and the level of ontological security it potentially offers to the individual. This apparent cultural diversity, reflexivity and flexibility in contemporary approaches to death, Mellor argues, 'can therefore be [partly] explained as being consistent with the sequestration of death from public space into the realm of the personal' (Mellor, 1993: 19). Further to this, Mellor and Shilling (1993) conclude that public legitimisations of death are becoming increasingly *absent*, thus ensuring the challenge of death to an individual's sense of reality, personal meaningfulness and, ultimately, ontological security. This ostensible absence of death from the public realm may help explain the 'intense confusion, anxiety, and even terror which are frequently experienced by individuals before signs of their own mortality' (Giddens, 1991: 160). Thus, reviews of contributions to the sociology of death and dying have drawn attention to the (institutional) sequestration of death in contemporary society. Most notably, these contributions concentrate on the privatisation and medicalisation of death (e.g. Mellor, 1993; Mellor & Shilling, 1993; Shilling, 1993; Willmott, 2000; Winkel, 2001) whereby death, rather than being an open, communal event, is now a relatively private experience marked by an 'increased uneasiness over the boundaries between the corporeal bodies of the living and dead' (Turner, 1991: 229; Howarth, 2000, 2007a).

While a full analysis of death sequestration from public space is beyond the scope of this chapter, it is worth noting fundamental changes within contemporary society towards mortality. As Mellor and Shilling (1993: 414) point out:

... these changes have themselves been affected by a gradual privatisation of the organisation of death (or a decrease in the public space afforded to death); a shrinkage in the scope of the sacred in terms of the experience of death; and a fundamental shift in the corporeal boundaries, symbolic and actual, associated with the dead and living.

Hence, it is argued that the absent death thesis is conspicuous by the demise of communal and social events which, when combined into a series of ritual actions, contained death by ensuring it was open or public, yet subject to religious and social control. Nevertheless, the romanticised 'good death' of pre-contemporary society was just as or even more unpleasant than it is now (Ariès, 1974). Conversely, Ariès goes on to note that the omnipresent religious order that encompassed human finiteness appeared to ensure mortality was meaningful, thus aiding a sense of ontological security for the bereaved who would inevitably evolve into the deceased. However, it is suggested that death and the prospect of dying is now unprecedentedly alarming because contemporary society has deprived



increasing numbers of people of an overarching, existentially meaningful ritual structure. Indeed, in relation to mortality, it can be argued that contemporary society has 'not just emptied the sky of angels, but has emptied tradition, ritual and, increasingly, virtually all overarching normative meaning structures of much of their content' (Mellor & Shilling, 1993: 428). Thus, the reflexive deconstruction of religious orders that promised post-corporeal life after death and the lack of stable replacement meaningful systems has tended to leave contemporary individuals isolated and vulnerable in the face of their inevitable end.

Augmenting this perceived sense of individualisation and privatisation of death is the increased medicalisation of the dying process. In other words, the medical professional and the hospice movement have helped relocate death away from the community and into a closed private world of doctors, nurses and specialists (Byock, 2002). As Elias (1985: 85) notes, 'never before have people died as noiselessly and hygienically as today, and never in social conditions fostering so much solitude'. Indeed, medical parlance often represents death in terms of its causes (e.g. lung cancer, cardiac arrest), so that we no longer hear or perhaps think of people 'dying of mortality' (Bauman, 1993: 5). Combined with the professionalisation of the death industry, whereby dedicated organisations provide 'à la carte' menus of funeral services, death and the management of disposal is largely relocated away from a 'front region' of the community gaze and safely into a 'back region' of death industry professionals (Mellor & Shilling, 1993). However, the cumulative effect of this institutional sequestration of death is not to resolve the problem of death by neutralising its implicit threat and sense of dread but, ironically, to leave many people uncertain and socially unsupported when it comes to dealing with mortality, as a transpersonal, existential phenomenon (Shilling, 1993; Willmott, 2000). For this reason, Walter (1991: 307) suggests that the meaning of mortality in contemporary societies 'points to death being highly problematic for the modern individual, but not at all problematic for modern society – hence the lack of ritual surrounding it today'.

Despite this, to suggest death is totally absent from the contemporary public domain is to deny the pervasiveness of death within popular culture and media output (Walter *et al.*, 1995; Durkin, 2003). Indeed, death has long been *present* within wider popular culture and the media, so much so that Geoffrey Gorer first brought society's apparent fascination with the 'pornography of death' to academic attention in the 1950s (see Gorer, 1955, 1965). He asserted that the demise of social and religious rituals surrounding death and dying resulted in mortality resurfacing in society through the seemingly obsessive 'pornographic' media coverage of death, whereby 'death became removed, abstracted, intellectualised, and depersonalised' (Walter, 1991: 295). Similarly, Tercier (2005: 234) notes that 'the televised pornography of death, with its slippages of reality and representation, is

no more likely to replace the experience of the deathbed than the dirty movie is likely to replace sex'. Nevertheless, as Bryant and Shoemaker (1997: 2) observe, 'thanatological themed entertainment has been and remains a traditional pervasive cultural pattern, and has become very much a prominent and integral part of contemporary popular culture'. This is no more so than within the realms of dark tourism, but thanatological themes are also evident in television news and programming (Walter *et al.*, 1995; Merrin, 1999; McIlwain, 2005), cinema production (Mortimer, 2001), music (Wass *et al.*, 1991), print media (Trend, 2003), the arts (Davies, 1996), and through jokes often referred to as 'gallows humour' (Thorson, 1993; Sayre, 2001). Indeed, death can be traced back through popular culture to folklore, in which folklorists have maintained an interest in the cultural aspects of death for many years (Bennett & Round, 1997).

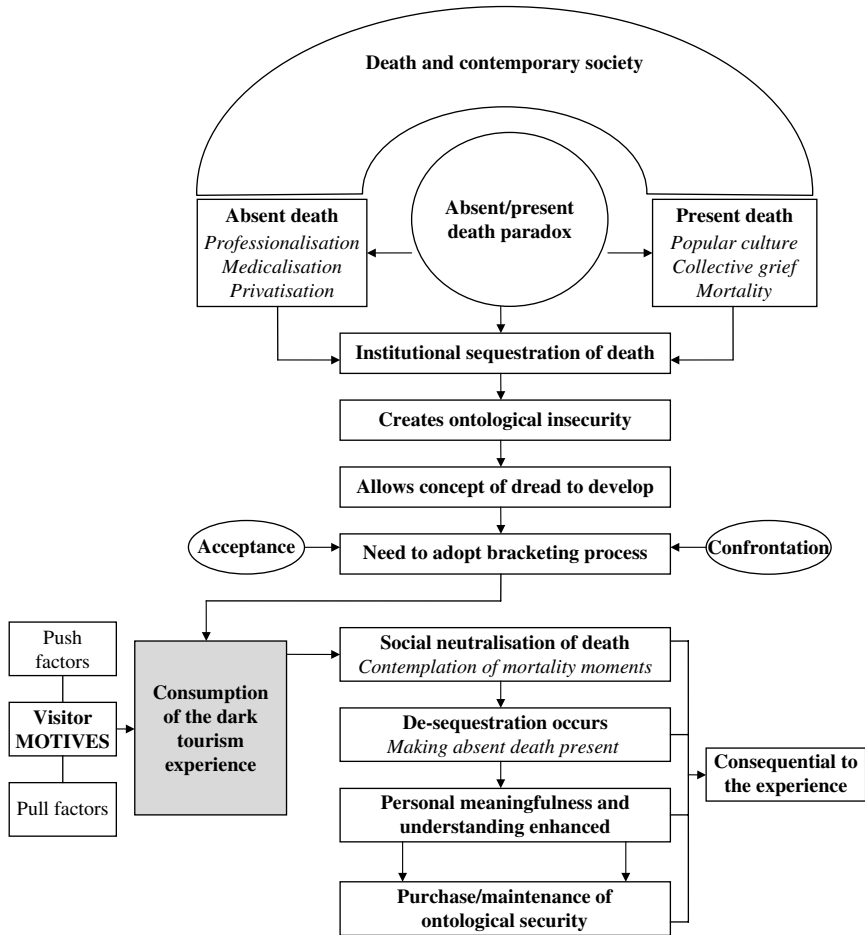
It is here that the apparent paradox of death sequestration lies. On the one hand, *absent* death through privatisation of meaning and a reduction in the scope of the sacred, the medicalisation of dying and the professionalisation of the death process is evident, yet, on the other hand, death is very much *present* within popular culture, and of course *very present* since death is the single most common factor of life. It is, perhaps, because of this paradoxical position that death appears (institutionally) hidden rather than forbidden, invisible rather than denied. Durkin (2003) offers two salient explanations of this absent–present paradox. First, he suggests that while contemporary society brackets out and insulates the individual from death, it is this very insulation that leads us to crave some degree of information and insight concerning death. Secondly, he suggests the presence of death themes in popular culture and the treatment of mortality as an entertainment commodity is simply a way of bringing death back into the social consciousness. As Durkin (2003: 47) notes, 'by rendering death into humour and entertainment, we effectively neutralise it; it becomes innocuous, and thus less threatening, through its conversion and ephemerality' in popular culture and the media. Further to this, Bryant (1989: 9) suggests that 'death, dying and the dead are traumatic and anxiety producing topics, and can be better confronted if they are socially neutralised'. It is this social neutralisation of death and the role dark tourism potentially plays that this chapter now evaluates.

### **Making Absent Death Present: Dark Tourism, Neutralisation and De-sequestration**

The social neutralisation of death, which itself may be considered a form of bracketing dread, thus boosting personal meaningfulness and ontological security, can help to assuage the disruptive impact of death for the individual. Dark tourism, with central product features of death and dying as outlined in the Body Worlds example earlier in this chapter, is an

increasingly pervasive feature in the popular cultural landscape (e.g. Atkinson, 2005; Express India, 2005; Friends of Scotland, 2006; Lonely Planet, 2007). Indeed, the dark tourism phenomenon may be considered fascinating, educational and even humorous, depending upon the social, cultural and political context (Stone, 2006a). However, while the consumption of death appears to be in inverse ratio to our declining direct experience of death itself, dark tourism, within a thanatological framework, may help explain contemporary approaches to mortality and its contemplation and vice versa.

The manner in which this may occur is summarised in the conceptual model in Figure 2.2. Drawing on the preceding death sequestration and ontological security debates, it demonstrates how dark tourism may generally provide a consequential means for confronting the inevitability of one's own death and that of others. More specifically, dark tourism allows the reconceptualisation of death and mortality into forms that stimulate something other than primordial terror and dread. Despite modern society's diminishing experience with death as a result of institutional sequestration, Tercier (2005: 22) suggests that, although people are now spectators to more deaths than any prior generation, driven by both real and represented images, 'we see death, but we do not "touch" it'. With this in mind, it is argued that individuals are left isolated in the face of death and thus have to call upon their own resources when searching for meanings to cope with the limits of individual existence (see Chapter 4). Therefore, dark tourism, in its various manifestations as outlined in Chapter 1, and with its camouflaged and repackaged 'other' death, allows individuals to (un)comfortably indulge their curiosity and fascination with thanatological concerns in a socially acceptable and indeed often sanctioned environment, thus providing them with an opportunity to construct their own contemplations of mortality. With a degree of infrastructure and normality that surround the supply of dark tourism, albeit on varying scales (Stone, 2006a), the increasingly socially acceptable gaze upon death and its reconceptualisation either for entertainment, education or memorial purposes offers both the individual and collective self a pragmatic confrontational mechanism to begin the process of neutralising the impact of mortality. This can help minimise the intrinsic threat that the inevitability of death brings. The neutralising effect is aided by dark touristic exposures to death, where the process of continued sensitisation of dying ultimately results in a sanitisation of the subject area, creating a perceived immunity from death in addition to a growing acceptance that death will ultimately arrive. Thus, both sensitising and sanitising death allows individuals to view their own death as distant, unrelated to the dark tourism product which they consume, and with a hope that their own death will be a 'good' death (see Littlewood, 1993; Hart *et al.*, 1998; Tercier, 2005).



**Figure 2.2** Dark tourism consumption within a thanatological framework  
 Source: Adapted from Stone and Sharpley (2008)

Furthermore, it can be argued that dark tourism further individualises and thus fragments the meaning of death. Indeed, while consuming the dark tourism product, people are generally exposed to the causes of death and suffering of individual people, in individual circumstances, thus perhaps encouraging the view of death as avoidable and contingent. As Bauman (1993: 6) points out, these kinds of death are 'therefore reassuring rather than threatening, since they orient people towards strategies of survival rather than making them aware of the futility of all [life] strategies in the face of mortality'.

Of course, given the enormous diversity both of dark tourism places and of the needs, experience and expectations of visitors, in addition to various socio-cultural circumstances of individuals, the potential effectiveness of dark tourism consumption as a mechanism for confronting, understanding and accepting death will vary almost infinitely. It may be argued, for example, that war cemeteries, sites of mass disasters, memorials to individual or multiple deaths/acts of personal sacrifice and so on may be a more powerful and positive means of confronting death than more 'playful' attractions, such as 'houses of horror'. Certainly, a visit to Gallipoli, where the mass graves of the fallen (including that of a young British soldier who died before reaching his 17th birthday) lie above the beaches and cliffs, is an inevitably emotive and meaningful experience, perhaps verifying the cultural and popularised representations (both visual – the Mel Gibson movie *Gallipoli* – and musical) of that tragic event. Subsequently, Hede (2008) suggests that, while Gallipoli and its commemoration through Anzac Day may have taken on quasi-religious overtones from years of Anzac myth making, the staged commemorative ceremony on the Gallipoli Peninsula does raise issues of mortality and death contemplation, especially for young participants (see also Chapter 8). Similarly, the proposed Tsunami 'Mountains of Remembrance' memorial in Khao Lak-Lam Ru National Park in Thailand may provide a focus for contemplation, mourning, hope and survival (Gerfen, 2006).

Conversely, contemporary visitors to places such as Auschwitz and other Nazi death camps, perhaps the epitome of a dark tourism destination, may come simply 'out of curiosity or because it is the thing to do' (Tarlow, 2005: 48) rather than for more meaningful purposes (but see Marcuse, 2001). Fundamentally, this latter point may result in any potential meaning of mortality within contemporary society being *consequential* to the individual. In other words, and supporting Lantermann's notion of consequence as outlined earlier in this chapter, so-called 'dark tourists' may implicitly take away meanings of mortality from their visit and subsequent experience, rather than explicitly seeking to contemplate death and dying as a primary motivation to visit any dark tourism site. That said, a diverse range of primary push and pull motivating factors will no doubt be at work with regard to 'thanatouristic demand', and these require identification and clarification (but see Rittichainuwat, 2008). Furthermore, the level of mortality meaning to the individual will no doubt depend upon their own socio-cultural background and, of course, to the varying 'intensities of darkness' perceived in any given dark tourism product and/or experience (Sharpley, 2005; Stone, 2006a).

Nevertheless, as this chapter has already suggested, the present cultural condition of contemporary (western) society calls for a reevaluation of meaning systems which, in general, permit individuals to confront mortality. Hence, the reconceptualisation of death through dark tourism allows

for the reconstruction of a replacement meaning system, whereby the reflexive deconstruction of religious orders are being relocated and reconstructed by the consumption of image and the pseudo. Accordingly, dark tourism may offer a revival of death within the public domain, thus de-sequestering mortality and ensuring *absent* death is made *present*, in which (private) death is turned into public discourse and a communal commodity upon which to gaze. For this reason, dark tourism may offer a new social institution whereby the functional value of death and mortality is acknowledged, its precariousness is appreciated, and efforts to assure ontological wellbeing and security become a source of not only playfulness, humour and entertainment but also education and memorial. Indeed, consuming dark tourism may allow the individual a sense of meaning and understanding of past disaster and macabre events that have perturbed life projects. This new understanding may in turn help shore up the fragility of the self's survival strategy. Thus, dark tourism can potentially transform the seemingly meaningless into the meaningful, by commodification, explanations and representations of darkness that have impacted upon the collective self. This, in turn, allows individuals to confront and contemplate their own mortality through some kind of thanatopsis by gazing upon macabre illusions and images (Seaton, 1996). Subsequently, confrontation with death and contemplation of mortality, within a socially acceptable dark tourism environment, may potentially bracket out some of the sense of dread death inevitably brings, by insulating the individual with information and potential understanding and meaning. Of course, it may be also the case where particular dark sites do not provide the sense of 'meaning' that a particular visitor may be seeking, for whatever reason, thus negating the effectiveness of the overall bracketing process and the ability to keep any 'dread threats' at bay. Nonetheless, within dark tourism, death becomes real (again) for the individual. Consequently, the real is represented so that the represented might become real. In other words, 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.

## Conclusion

Despite increasing academic attention paid to the subject, the analysis of dark tourism has to date adopted a largely descriptive, parochial perspective while questions surrounding the consumption of dark touristic experiences have for the most part been avoided. This chapter, drawing upon work elsewhere by Stone and Sharples (2008), set out to enhance the theoretical foundations of dark tourism by considering the phenomenon within a broader thanatological perspective, exploring in particular the consequential relationship between dark tourism consumption and

contemporary social responses to death and mortality. In linking the concept of dark tourism with the sociology of death, the chapter has not only developed a model that provides a conceptual basis for the further empirical study of the consumption of dark tourism, but has also contributed to a wider social scientific understanding of mechanisms for confronting death in contemporary societies.

A number of key points have emerged from the preceding discussion. Firstly, dark tourism allows death to be brought back into the public realm and discourse, thus acting as a de-sequester that allows absent death to be made present. Secondly, the consumption of dark tourism may aid the social neutralisation of death for the individual, either implicitly or explicitly, thereby reducing the potential sense of dread that death inevitably brings and permitting a search for, and a purchase of, ontological security through a new social institution. Finally, this new social institution (dark tourism) facilitates the reconstruction of a meaning system for individuals in the face of reflexivity, desecralisation and institutional sequestration, thus creating an opportunity to confront and contemplate 'mortality moments' from a perceived safe distance and environment. This in turn allows for some immunity and reassurance from the actual death or macabre event which has been (re)produced through dark tourism.

In conclusion, however, it would be naïve to suggest that the consumption of dark tourism rests solely upon a theoretical notion of providing individuals an opportunity to contemplate death and mortality. While there is some evidence that dark tourism does provide particular opportunities to confront and contemplate mortality, as outlined by the Body Worlds case earlier in the chapter, the concepts outlined by the author will, in general, require operationalisation and empirical testing in future research. This is especially so within a variety of social and cultural environments and, of course, within varying dark tourism 'products'.

Additionally, other conceptual issues undoubtedly deserve consideration, especially as dark tourism is multi-faceted, multi-tiered and exists in a variety of social, cultural, geographical and political contexts (Stone, 2006a). Thus, the demand for such products and the consequences of those experiences will no doubt be equally as diverse and fragmented, pointing to the need for further targeted empirical and theoretical analysis. In addition, dark tourists' motives will probably have varying types and intensities of meanings for various individuals within various social networks. Indeed, an awareness of mortality and the anticipation of death will differ among various social and cultural groups. It is also highly likely that dark tourism consumption will rest on numerous disparate factors, including, but not limited to, the contemplative aspects of death and dying. In particular, other aspects of the 'consumption jigsaw' may lie within grief and therapeutic discourse (Davies, 1997), conspicuous compassion and narcissism (West, 2004), media-induced emotional invigilation

(Walter *et al.*, 1995) and *schadenfreude* (Seaton & Lennon, 2004). Additionally, ethical discourse and metamorality and its impact upon dark tourism supply and demand is also suggested for consideration, as some (western) societies are propelled from a 'conventional' to a 'post-conventional' stage, where potential moral lessons are sought (and provided) from sites of (intentional) death (see Chapter 4; also Habermas, 1990). In short, the consumption of dark tourism, largely justified on the basis of untested assumptions in the extant literature, is a complex process.

Nevertheless, this chapter has commenced the interrogation of dark tourism consumption and located it within a thanatological framework for further study. In so doing, it has suggested that consuming dark tourism can help individuals within a social framework to address issues of personal meaningfulness – a key to reality, thus to life and sustaining social order, and ultimately to the maintenance and continuity of ontological security and overall wellbeing. It is with this latter point in mind that dark tourism may have more to do with life and living, rather than the dead and dying. Consequently, it is on this premise of contemporary living that the next chapter begins the task of evaluating dark tourism as a potential mediating institution between the living and the dead.

### **Note**

1. An earlier version of part of this chapter can be found in *Annals of Tourism Research* 35 (2).