Dark Tourism and the Cadaveric Carnival: Mediating Life and Death Narratives at Gunter von Hagens' Body Worlds

Philip Stone, Dr, University of Central Lancashire
Dark tourism and the cadaveric carnival: mediating life and death narratives at Gunther von Hagens' Body Worlds

Philip R. Stone*

*Faculty of Management, School of Sport, Tourism & The Outdoors, University of Central Lancashire (UCLan), Preston, UK

First published on: 01 April 2011

To cite this Article Stone, Philip R.(2011) 'Dark tourism and the cadaveric carnival: mediating life and death narratives at Gunther von Hagens' Body Worlds', Current Issues in Tourism, First published on: 01 April 2011 (iFirst)

To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/13683500.2011.563839
URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13683500.2011.563839

Full terms and conditions of use: http://www.informaworld.com/terms-and-conditions-of-access.pdf

This article may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.
Dark tourism and the cadaveric carnival: mediating life and death narratives at Gunther von Hagens’ Body Worlds

Philip R. Stone*

Faculty of Management, School of Sport, Tourism & The Outdoors, University of Central Lancashire (UCLan), Preston, UK

(Received 20 December 2010; final version received 8 February 2011)

Death is universal, yet dying is not. Consequently, within contemporary secularised society, the process of dying has largely been relocated from the familiar environs of the family and community to a back region of medical and death industry professionals. It is argued that this institutional sequestration of death has made modern dying ‘bad’ against a romantic portrayal of a death with dignity, or a ‘good’ death. Moreover, the structural analysis of death reveals issues of ontological security and mortality meaning for the Self. This paper, therefore, adds to that analysis, and specifically examines the construction of mortality meaning within the context of dark tourism – that is, the act of travel to sites of death, disaster or the seemingly macabre. Particularly, the research interrogates the Body Worlds exhibition – a touring attraction of real human corpses – as a reflective space to mediate mortality. In doing so, this paper concludes that dark tourism is a new mediating institution that allows the Self to construct contemporary ontological meanings of mortality and to contemplate both life and death through consumption of the Significant Other Dead.

Keywords: dark tourism; death; mediation; Body Worlds; thanatology; mortality

He drew near, and whispered hoarsely, ‘I’ve got a couple of skulls down in the crypt’, he said; ‘come and see those. Oh, do come and see the skulls! You are a young man out for a holiday, and you want to enjoy yourself. Come and see the skulls!’

Then I turned and fled, and as I sped, I heard him calling to me:

‘Oh, come and see the skulls; come back and see the skulls!’

(From Three Men in a Boat by Jerome, 1889)

Introduction

In 1889, the writer and humorist Jerome Klapka Jerome published an account of a boating holiday on the River Thames between Kingston and Oxford, England. Intended as a serious travelogue, Jerome’s Three Men in a Boat became a humorous yarn depicting the intricacies of Victorian life and death for three male friends. As part of their trip, the three men are propositioned to view real human skulls in a church crypt located on the banks of the River Thames. The central character and narrator – ‘J’ – flies from the scene, as noted

*Email: pstone@uclan.ac.uk

ISSN 1368-3500 print/ISSN 1747-7603 online
© 2011 Taylor & Francis
DOI: 10.1080/13683500.2011.563839
http://www.informaworld.com
above, appalled by the fact that human remains are used to entice visitors. Nevertheless, ‘J’ goes on to state that his friend Harris was quite enthralled by the prospect of gazing upon the dead:

‘Harris, however, revels in tombs, and graves, and epitaphs, and monumental inscriptions, and the thought of not seeing Mrs Thomas’s grave made him crazy. He said he had looked forward to seeing Mrs Thomas’s grave from the first moment that the trip was proposed – said he wouldn’t have joined if it hadn’t been for the idea of seeing Mrs Thomas’s tomb’. (Jerome, 1889, Chapter vii)

Even though Jerome was writing about the ‘attraction’ of death over 120 years ago, deaths in touristic form are becoming an increasingly pervasive feature within the contemporary visitor economy (Foley & Lennon, 1996; Stone, 2005). Arguably, therefore, it could be suggested that a melancholic fascination exists within post-conventional society, for some individuals at least, to witness the work of the Grim Reaper up close and personal, but within the apparent safe confines of tourism. Consequently, for the individual who wishes to journey and gaze upon real or recreated death, a plethora of sites, attractions and exhibitions are now emerging across the world to cater to the ‘darker side of travel’ (Sharpley & Stone, 2009). As a result, the rather emotive label of dark tourism, and its scholarly sister term of thanatourism, has entered academic discourse and media parlance (Lennon & Foley, 2000; Seaton, 1996), and may simply be defined as ‘the act of travel to sites associated with death, suffering or the seemingly macabre’ (Stone, 2006, p. 146). Generally, though, the concept of dark tourism in its various manifestations or ‘shades’ has generated a significant amount of attention over the past decade or so (Stone, 2006). Certainly, the increasing weight of coverage with regard to dark tourism over the past few years from both press and broadcast media, including news, travel features and guidebooks, has been striking (Adfero Ltd, 2005; Press Trust, 2005; Stone, 2008). Subsequently, Seaton and Lennon (2004, p. 63) propose dark tourism as a contemporary ‘leisure activity’ that has been aggrandised by the popular press from the status of myth to meta-myth, allowing the media to ‘depict it, not just as a genre of travel motivation and attraction, but as a social pathology sufficiently new and threatening to create moral panic’ (Stone, 2009a).

However, the point to be emphasised here is that, prior to the mid-1990s, dark tourism, as a generic term for travel associated with death, atrocity or disaster, had not previously featured in the academic literature as a specific element of consumption in periodic typologies of tourism. An encyclopaedia entry by Seaton (2000) elaborated the range of sites and places which may be included as dark tourism. Therefore, the rapid acceptance of dark tourism as an academic field of study and a distinct area to scrutinise tourist motivations and meanings is, according to Seaton and Lennon (2004, p. 63), ‘rather akin to astronomers agreeing to recognise the existence of a new planet in a solar system, thought to have been pretty comprehensively mapped and delineated’. Meanwhile, Ryan (2005) suggests that a significant level of research interest has been expressed in dark tourism, while Preece and Price (2005, p. 191) observe that ‘dark tourism is a relatively new area of research and many aspects still require further investigation to reveal the intricacies of the phenomenon’. Sharpley and Stone (2009) also recognise the complexity and multifaceted nature of dark tourism. They argue that dark tourism research within a broader socio-cultural and political framework has remained limited; hence, the literature continues to be eclectic, theoretically fragile and thus inconclusive. Similarly, Seaton and Lennon (2004, p. 81) note that there are more questions than answers in relation to dark tourism, and ‘its extent and motivations, and above all the identities of its pursuants, have yet to be revealed’. They go on to suggest that
there is clearly a need for a much fuller exploration of the consequences of dark tourism in both general and micro-populations. Likewise, Reader (2003, p. 2), while noting the distinction between dark tourism and the processes of pilgrimage, suggests ‘the dynamics through which people are drawn to sites redolent with images of death . . . and the manner in which they are induced to behave there . . . [means] that the topic calls out for discussion’.

As part of that discussion, and despite the diversity of sites, dark tourism has been suggested as not presenting death per se, but representing certain kinds of death (Walter, 2009). Accordingly, dark tourism has been referred to as a contemporary mediating institution between the living and the dead (Stone, 2011; Walter, 2009). Moreover, Stone (2011, p. 25) proposes, within a thesis of death sequestration, that ‘dark tourism provides an opportunity to contemplate death of the Self through gazing upon the Significant Other Dead’. While this hypothesis may form an integral part of a complex consumptive jigsaw, there is a lack of empirical evidence to support such a claim. The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to address this gap in the literature. Focusing upon the thanatological condition of society, that is, society’s reactions to and perceptions of mortality, this research examines dark tourism experiences within the confines of a specific ‘dark exhibition’ (Stone, 2006). In particular, the research highlights the Body Worlds exhibition – a touring visitor attraction displaying real human corpses – as a spatial, if not temporal, vehicle for the Self to explore contemporary death and dying. Drawing upon extant concepts within the literature, this study sets out empirical evidence to suggest that dark tourism consumption, albeit to varying degrees, provides for contemplative experiences of modern-day mortality. First, an overview of Body Worlds provides a context for this study.

**The Body Worlds exhibition: ‘from plastination to fascination’**

With 30 million visitors to date, Body Worlds is the world’s most popular touring attraction (Body Worlds, 2010). The exhibition displays real human corpses and organs in a variety of artistic arrangements that depict anatomical intricacies of the human body, disease or specific causes of biological death. Using a process to preserve corpses called plastination, polymer chemistry is used to replace water in human cells with plastic material, which makes it possible to lend rigidity to soft body parts, including individual muscles and organs such as the lungs, or even single nerve tissue. Consequently, whole bodies of both humans and animals can be inherently stabilised and posed standing upright – a feature that was formerly restricted to skeletons. Although first exhibited in 1995 at the National Science Museum in Tokyo as part of a centenary celebration for the Japanese Anatomical Society, Body Worlds’ first commercial exhibition was in 1997 in Mannheim, Germany, at the Museum for Technology and Labour. The exhibition is characterised by a combination of flouting social conventions, enthusiastic acceptance by some parts of the public, media and medical practitioners and a vehement rejection by similar groups. Indeed, forceful condemnations by religious organisations and an often highly charged ‘moral conversation’ about the merits and rationale of displaying real human corpses have been conducted throughout the media, as well as in internet chat-rooms, blogs and forums. Interestingly though, during a Body Worlds tour of Asia in 2004, there was apparently ‘no public criticism whatsoever, and to the contrary, the exhibition in Asia was even officially supported by science and education departments’ (Whalley, 2007, p. 27). Meanwhile, Moore and Brown (2007), while examining Western experiences of Body Worlds within a framework of voyeurism, education and enlightenment, optimistically suggest
that dialectic cultural and philosophical issues inherent within the exhibition can promote a sense of community and a unity of races.

Even so, despite potential different cultural experiences of Body Worlds, the official aim of the exhibition is ‘to inform visitors and to open up the opportunity particularly to medical laymen to better understand their body and its function’ (Body Worlds, 2010). Clearly, this aim emphasises health education, and is further evidenced by Body Worlds official marketing, which endorses a message of the ‘naturalness of our bodies and recognition of the individuality and anatomical beauty inside’ (Body Worlds, 2010). However, subsequent treatment of human corpses, which are voluntarily donated by the deceased through a scheme set up and run by the Institute for Plastination, an organisation located in Germany and created by Professor Gunther von Hagens – the inventor of the exhibits – has attracted a great deal of controversy. Much of this controversy is focused upon the origins of donated cadavers, many of them allegedly of executed prisoners from China and Kyrgyzstan, in addition to von Hagens’ refusal for the public to access donation documentation (Blackler, 2008; Jacobs, 2005; Jeffries, 2002). Moreover, the technique of plastination to preserve corpses, pioneered by von Hagens in the 1970s at the Institute for Anatomy and Cellular Biology at the University of Heidelberg, has also attracted controversy. However, von Hagens, who has performed public autopsies for live television as well as crucified a plastinated corpse on a British television programme to illustrate the death of Christ (Wilson, 2006), suggests ‘it is an honour to cause this controversy’ (von Hagens in Jeffries, 2002, p. 2). A recognition, perhaps, of the commercial appeal that controversy can bring to such an exhibition enterprise. Nevertheless, von Hagens goes on to justify the exhibition as ‘demystifying the post-mortem examination’ and likened the modern medical profession to ‘medieval priests who would not allow ordinary people to read the Bible’ (von Hagens in CNN.com, 2009). Thus, Body Worlds, as the original exhibition of real human bodies, and copied by others – including BODIES Revealed and BODIES: The Exhibition – continues to exhibit across the world. As a result, the exhibition continues to attract negative press. For example, when the exhibition was held at the O2 arena in London during 2009, the focus of this study, a British newspaper pointed out:

... [Gunther von Hagens] is part shaman and part showman; at once an anatomical scientist bent on shaking up a western society that he regards as living in denial of its corporeality and of death, and a PT Barnum basking in the media hoopla of his British reception, aware that part of the appeal of Body Worlds is the same as that which drew our ancestors to public executions and freak shows. (The Telegraph, 2008)

Indeed, Tettenborn (2005) suggests that Body Worlds is an imitation of a post-modern freak show, where exhibited corpses possess transgressive ‘freakish’ qualities of challenging conventional boundaries between reality and illusion, experience and fantasy, and fact and myth. Consequently, Body Worlds as a cadaveric carnival constitutes an ambiguous form of post-mortem existence, whereby human corpses are arranged in ‘real-life’ situations. These include the Horseman, a rider with his skull sliced and his body flayed to show the underlying musculature. As Jeffries (2002, p. 1) notes, ‘the Horseman sits with his brain in one hand and a whip in the other, astride the posed and flayed cadaver of a horse, frozen forever in its leap’.

Other exhibits include cadavers posturing as sportsmen, a couple dancing, a parent and child walking, and corpses with skin left on or with intricate blood vessels revealed. A particular criticism has not only been levied at the artistic positioning of the cadavers, but also at the seemingly gender inequality between corpses. Specifically, Davidson et al. (2009)
note the dominant masculinity of the cadaver exhibits, while Stern (2003) accuses Body Worlds of perpetuating conservative gender representations. Furthermore, Stern suggests that male cadaver plastinates, or what Body Worlds refers to, in neutral terms, as ‘anatomical specimens’, are presented in ‘heroic manly’ situations. These include exhibits such as the aforementioned Horseman, but also other masculine and intellectual poses such as The Chess Player, The Muscleman and his Skeleton, The Fencer, The Runner and The Footballer. As Berkowitz (2006) starkly suggests to potential visitors – ‘be prepared to see a lot of penises; most of the full-body plastinates are male!’

Meanwhile, Stern (2003) points out that female cadaver plastinates are portrayed in terms of beauty, passivity or reproduction, such as the Reclining Pregnant Woman, a cadaver whose womb is exposed to show her (dead) unborn child in a ‘pose taken straight from pornographic cliché’ (p. 1). Furthermore, Body Worlds opened an exhibition in Berlin in May 2009 that shows plastinated corpses having sexual intercourse (Playboy, 2009), von Hagens has defended the exhibition by suggesting that the ‘exhibit combines the two greatest taboos of sex and death’ (von Hagens in Connolly, 2009, p. 1). However, the exhibition has attracted protests from politicians and religious groups suggesting that it was pornographic and an insult to the dead (CNN.com, 2009; Connolly, 2009). Even so, and while beyond the scope of this paper, these sexualised cadavers represent, perhaps, an ideology that is neither scientific nor of religiosity, but of secular corporeality which simultaneously illustrates, anatomically at least, the act of life-creation as well as life-end.

Generally, though, von Hagens’ philosophy of Body Worlds appears to derive from how contemporary society, through an anatomical gaze, addresses not only death, but also how people may view their own life in the face of inevitable mortality. Indeed, von Hagens states:

I want to bring the life back to anatomy. I am making the dead lifeful again. This exhibition is a place where the dead and the living mix. Yes, some of the specimens are difficult to look at. To see a mutilated body is hard because we have fears about our own integrity. We have a deep-rooted anxiety about when we see the body opened up because in this way we have feelings about ourselves. (Gunther von Hagens cited in Jeffries, 2002, p. 1)

Stephens (2007) contextualises this anatomised vision of the body and mortality within the Renaissance tradition of écorché (or flayed body). Stephens argues that von Hagens and the Renaissance anatomists before him distinguish anatomical significance of the body by removing the skin and exposing the interior. She goes on to argue that such exposure of bodily interiority is connected to a wider reconceptualisation of the body as individual and self-contained. However, despite the public debate about Body Worlds, there has been relatively little academic research undertaken with regard to visitor experiences at the exhibition, and implications thereof. Of course, there are important studies by Wetz and Tag (2000) and van Dijk (2001) that focus upon the origin and aesthetics of Body Worlds, as well as by Stern (2006), which examines the meaning of the exhibition within a framework of dystopian anxieties and utopian ideals. Furthermore, Walter (2004a) suggests that plastination for display represents a new form of ‘mummification for eternity’, whereby Body Worlds becomes a modern method of disposing of the dead. Arguably, therefore, the exhibition has morphed into sites of secularised burial, where the dead rest in plastic rather than in peace. Even so, Walter (2004b) compares the manner in which people observe the plastinated cadavers with a ‘clinically detached gaze’, where visitors ‘obstinately connect bodies with persons’ and mix emotion with clinical detachment’. Similarly, vom Lehn (2006) reveals how people anatomise the exhibits and consider them in the light of
their knowledge and experience of ‘real’ human bodies. Hirschauer (2006) also recognises how individuals reintegrate the exhibits into personal narratives. Particularly, Hirschauer identifies the exhibition as a communicational mechanism, since the body is the archetypal medium of the self-representation of people. Therefore, this paper augments previous studies that use visitor experiences of Body Worlds as a ‘mediating resource’. In doing so, this study interrogates how people view and make sense of plastinated cadavers and the communicational relationship between life and death. It is to a specific Body Worlds exhibition where the dead and living intermingle that this paper now turns.

Research methodology
This research arises from a simple, yet fundamental interest in the social reality of death, and how mortality is not only manufactured within contemporary society but also how modern death and dying are contemplated. Thus, this study adopts an inductive phenomenological research philosophy with the overall aim of better understanding the consumption of dark tourism within contemporary perspectives of death. Using ethnographic methods of (covert) participant observations and semi-structured interviews in a progressive and sequential manner, this research was conducted at the Body Worlds and Mirror of Time exhibition at the O2 arena in London between 20 and 22 April 2009. Participant observation is an ethnographic method that seeks to understand the context of everyday life, and proved particularly effective for this research by highlighting visitors in relatively unstructured social interactions. Additionally, by directly, and covertly, experiencing the activities under observation – what Scott and Usher (1999) identify as ‘direct experiential value’ – the participant observations provided opportunities to inductively build or guide explanations on the behaviour of people within a specific dark tourism environment. Meanwhile, the second stage of the research utilised semi-structured interviews, which drew from a convenience sample of 17 adult respondents, all of whom were visitors to Body Worlds. Respondents were from the UK, the USA, France and Poland, with a ratio of eight males to nine females. Interviews were conducted within the spirit of ‘co-authored narratives’ and characterised by an appreciation for the interviewees’ responses as a ‘joint social creation’ (Kvale, 1996). In short, interviews were conducted within a context of narrative conception and flexibility, which sought to understand key informants within a complex social and cultural situation.

Of course, this research has particular limitations, not least those that revolve around a relatively limited sample size, as well as issues of respondent life stage, health status or religious/cultural nuances. Moreover, because of issues of research design, this study does not generalise its findings to all dark tourism experiences. Rather, the research suggests that emergent findings be used as a context to frame future phenomenological research, within a variety of socio-cultural environments, and to illustrate the level of support of dark tourism as a contemporary mediating institution of mortality.

Body Worlds: an ethnographic discussion
Tourism occurs within liminal time and space (Sharpley, 1999) and, as such, locates the activity within constructivist realms of meaning and meaning making. Therefore, tourism, in general, and dark tourism, in particular, provide a lens through which life and death may be glimpsed, thus revealing relationships and consequences of the processes involved that mediate between the Self and the Other. In particular, the research at Body Worlds highlighted a number of significant issues that have been translated under two broad themes.
Promoting life narratives (through death)

Promoting life narratives (through death) as the first emergent research theme refers to how Body Worlds promotes healthy life by displaying the diseased dead. The exhibition conveys a discourse of healthy living to individuals on how they might potentially extend their lives biologically as well as fulfill them ontologically. Indeed, as previously discussed, von Hagens has explicitly stated that the exhibition is intended to promote the cycle of life, from birth to death, and in doing so, to create an awareness among visitors of how a wholesome lifestyle can be beneficial. Interestingly though, while religion may manipulate a message of spirituality to promote ‘healthy living’, Body Worlds promotes healthy living to assure spiritual well-being. Moreover, Body Worlds utilises philosophy to promote a narrative of a meaningful life and ontologically secure living (Obs, 2009). With philosophical quotations strategically positioned within the overall textual interpretation of the exhibition, including those by Kant, Ameil and Plato, the visitor is greeted with not only a sense of visual awe of the cadavers, but also a sense of philosophical wonderment (Obs, 2009). Accordingly, this exhibition takes on a reverend perspective, propelling the exhibition back to its museological origins and away from the touristic connotations that seemingly surround Body Worlds as a commercial entity. Indeed, by way of illustration, a statement by the Swiss philosopher, Henri Ameil, about the psychological difficulties of ageing is displayed prominently next to a plastinated corpse that has been posed as a chess player; a deliberate reference, perhaps, to how ageing is about not only physical degeneration, but also intellectual insight:

To know how to grow old is the master work of wisdom, and one of the most difficult chapters in the art of living. (Henri Ameil, 1821–1881: quoted in Body Worlds and The Mirror of Time Exhibition – Obs, 2009)

Other philosophical narratives displayed at the exhibition that focus upon the health of the body (and mind) include a statement by the Lebanese American artist, Khalil Gibran:

Your body is the harp of the soul, and it is yours to bring forth sweet music from it or confused sounds. (Khalil Gibran, 1883–1931: quoted in Body Worlds and The Mirror of Time Exhibition – Obs, 2009)

This promotion of health and life, through a combination of philosophy and human corpses, aims to encourage the visitor to consider ontological well-being. However, this interpretive technique of utilising philosophy to enhance a life narrative appears not to take into account intellectual capacities of individual visitors. As one male visitor after visiting the exhibition pointed out:

To be really honest, I quite liked looking at the dead guys and all the different organ parts – you know the plastic people, and the hearts and diseased lungs and that – but all that stuff on the walls [referring to the philosophical statements], I didn’t really get. (BW Interviewee 3: Interviews, Visitor interviews at the Body Worlds and The Mirror of Time Exhibition, April 20–22, 2009)

Another male visitor also noted the issue of philosophical content to promote the aims of the exhibition and declared, ‘I didn’t really like it . . . there was too much information for me’ (BW Interviewee 4: Interviews, Visitor interviews at the Body Worlds and The Mirror of Time Exhibition, April 20–22, 2009). Nevertheless, the use of philosophy is a prominent feature of the exhibitions’ interpretation strategy. Similarly, images and photographs,
addition to plastinated corpses and human organs and tissue, are used to illustrate ill-health. In particular, the exhibit about blindness and the degeneration of eyesight uses real human eyeballs, dissected and displayed in glass cases to show the intricacies of both healthy and diseased eyes. Augmenting the interpretation of this exhibit is a story of artists Claude Monet and Edgar Degas, who both suffered eyesight and cataract problems in real life. The narrative here is what the artists actually saw of the subjects they were painting and how their failing eyesight may have affected their style of painting. The exhibit goes on to display copies of their original work, specifically the Woman Dying Hair and The Japanese Bridge at Givery; but also displayed are technologically altered copies of the paintings of what the artist may have actually seen (Obs, 2009). Consequently, a male visitor who was seemingly reminded of his personal circumstances by the exhibit was overheard quietly saying to his partner – ‘I must go to the opticians’ (Obs, 2009). In addition, an accompanying philosophical statement to the display by Plato – The spiritual eyesight improves as the physical eyesight declines – indicates that while the physicality of vision will undoubtedly decline over the duration of life, the ontological aspects of living, with age, can be enhanced. Conversely, this particular exhibit is meant for visitors to learn not only about clinical aspects of human vision, but also to promote a secular spirituality. Subsequently, Body Worlds illustrates the visual turn in tourism, whereby consumption of the ‘visual’ and ‘display’ becomes a form of touristic mediation (Burns & Lester, 2005; Crouch & Lubben, 2003; Palmer, 2009).

The notion of visitors mediating with visual displays of life narratives is indicated by a female interviewee who recognised the exhibition as part of a broader pedagogical apparatus, and compared the collective consternation over ecological concerns as opposed to concern for individuals’ health. She states:

This [exhibition] is a really good learning tool that we can share with this generation and the next . . . these are real people, real muscles, bones, organs that really exist inside all of us, and most of us make no effort to take care of our fragile bodies . . . so perhaps this [exhibition] will kick people into doing just that . . . preserving our health as opposed to the environment, which all that people seem ever to go on about nowadays. (BW Interviewee 5: Interviews, Visitor interviews at the Body Worlds and The Mirror of Time Exhibition, April 20–22, 2009)

While idealistic life narratives are evident (and even made problematic) within the exhibition, subsequently allowing meaning to be constructed, other more rational endorsements of healthy living are also apparent. In particular, formal sponsorships between Body Worlds and national health organisations, such as Heart UK and Diabetes UK, promote healthy living in a pragmatic manner. Specifically, an exhibit depicting a healthy human heart is displayed next to a whole plastinated corpse with a diseased heart. An internet portal placed next to the exhibit encourages visitors to access online tutorials about the heart, as well as to donate money to relevant health charity organisations (Obs, 2009). Ironically, though, at the time of observations, an ‘out of order’ sign was on the internet portal, denying visitors that day the opportunity to make additional learning connections (Obs, 2009). Nevertheless, other Body Worlds’ exhibits that formalised life narratives with external health organisations include the British Lung Foundation. For instance, an exhibit of a plastinated corpse with a cancerous lung, evidently resulting from smoking tobacco, is compared with a healthy lung from a non-smoker (Obs, 2009). Again, the overall message is one of informed choice, but strong encouragement by the exhibit title ‘Ditch that Pack, Kick the Habit’ – sponsored incidentally by the British Lung Foundation – clearly directs the visitor towards a smoking-free lifestyle. By way of illustrating visitor engagement with the exhibition, a female visitor was witnessed staring intently at the plastinated corpse with cancerous lungs. She muttered
quietly to herself – ‘I’m definitely giving up’ – a reference, most probably, to her own habits and an apparent desire to relinquish smoking, which, perhaps, is based upon her personal reflective experience at Body Worlds (Obs, 2009).

**Mortality reflections of the Self (through the Other)**

Mortality reflections of the Self (through the Other) as the second emergent research theme refers to how visitors are compelled within the exhibitory space to reflect upon their own particular life and, perhaps more importantly, their own life-end. Thus, both life and death are viewed through a reflective gaze of the Other Dead at Body Worlds. Consequently, the visitor, immediately upon entering the exhibition, is greeted by a quiet and dark exhibitory space, with walls and ceiling decorated in black (Obs, 2009). Strategically positioned spotlights illuminate individual exhibits, and certified interpretation boards and signage ensure that visitors are directed to exhibits where they may commence their reflective experience. A female visitor, while seemingly recognising and appreciating the official aim of the Body Worlds exhibition stated:

> I was [emotionally] moved much more than I thought I would be, and I feel quite queasy now, especially after reflecting on what I’ve seen . . . . But I supposed that is what the exhibition is all about, so I don’t think it is totally negative. (BW Interviewee 6: Interviews, Visitor interviews at the Body Worlds and The Mirror of Time Exhibition, April 20–22, 2009)

Similarly, another female interviewee suggested that her exhibitory experience and the persuasive nature of the exhibits would have a lasting effect, especially when it came to reflections on her own mortality:

> It’s a really compelling exhibit, and it may well change how I think about things, especially about my own death – which is a bit creepy, I know . . . I’ll certainly be thinking about this for a long time. (BW Interviewee 7: Interviews, Visitor interviews at the Body Worlds and The Mirror of Time Exhibition, April 20–22, 2009)

The reflective process of mortality commences very early in the visitor experience. At the beginning of the exhibition, visitors encounter a series of computer-generated images of a boy/man and a girl/woman morphing from their youth to maturity to old age and, eventually, to their demise (Obs, 2009). Consequently, the visitor is summarily transported to a consciousness of death, whereby individuals consume death of the Other, not only through displayed plastinated human corpses, but also through images of the dead. For instance, the ‘Emerging Skeleton’, an exhibit of a plastinated male cadaver emerging from his own skin and posed above a faux grave, with an associated interpretation board entitled ‘When the Heart Won’t Go On’, illustrates the moment of biological death (Obs, 2009). Moreover, separate photographs of a gravestone – a recognised marker of the dead – and a dead (old) woman in an open coffin accompany this exhibit, graphically implying that life will inevitably come to a natural conclusion. As a male interviewee pointed out:

> I think I walked around the exhibition with my mouth wide open. I couldn’t believe some of the stuff. . . . It’s made me really ponder my own mortality. (BW Interviewee 3: Interviews, Visitor interviews at the Body Worlds and The Mirror of Time Exhibition, April 20–22, 2009)

A key feature of the exhibition verifies this apparent ‘pondering of mortality’. Particularly, the strategic placement of a large illuminated mirror – as indicated in the exhibition
title – near to the exhibition exit, coerces the visitors to gaze into the Mirror and upon themselves and reflect, perhaps, on what the exhibition had to offer, namely narratives of both (healthy) living and subsequent dying (Obs, 2009). It is here, at the ‘Mirror’, that visitors have a mortality moment to consider, however briefly, their own personal circumstances. Indeed, a female visitor commented to herself as she approached the Mirror – ‘What’s that?’ She then looked into the Mirror for two or three seconds, and further commented to herself – ‘Urrh, No!’ Of course, this could demonstrate her apparent discomfort at looking at herself. On the other hand, at a more fundamental level, it could demonstrate how she may have already considered her health (and mortality) within the exhibition space. Consequently, the Mirror as a device to enhance the mortal gaze was, conceivably, too cognitively difficult to generate a contemplative sentiment (Obs, 2009).

Speculation aside, an elderly male interviewee did comment specifically upon his Mirror experience and his own notions of mortality:

When I came to that big mirror at the end, and with the spotlight shining on it, it seemed to me that the spotlight was actually shining on me personally. When I looked into the mirror, I did think Oh My God, I don’t have that long [he laughs at this point] ... but it does make you think, doesn’t it? (BW Interviewee 8: Interviews, Visitor interviews at the Body Worlds and the Mirror of Time Exhibition, April 20–22, 2009).

Supporting this idea of ‘the reflexive gaze’ (Urry, 2002), research by Leiberich, Loew, Tritt, Lahmann and Nickel (2006) with a sampling population of 1078 visitors examined the emotional reactions of individuals at the 2003 Body Worlds exposition in Munich. They reported that 40.6% of the visitors were led to reflect upon their own mortality because of their Body Worlds experience. Additionally, 42.6% of the visitors were resolved to pursue healthier lifestyles (Leiberich et al., 2006). Considering this self-reflection may occur both during and after ‘walking through the unknown dead’, contemplating individual health and mortality, or put more simply, considering the reality of both life and death, is largely generated by an engagement with real human corpses and their anatomical dissection. Indeed, this Foucaultian inspired willingness to participate in reflections of the Self and to cadaverise life through a ‘medical gaze’, whereby the dehumanising medical separation of the body from a person’s identity, appears to be a consequence of a Body Worlds tourist experience.

While individuals reflect upon their own life/death at Body Worlds, they also appear to reflect upon the death of Others. Put another way, visitors contemplate the mortality of those who either have had a direct or indirect relationship with them. Notably, visitors to the exhibition, who essentially take a self-guided tour through a temporary resting place of the dead, were witnessed to be speaking in hushed tones with their partners, friends and fellow customers. In particular, three female visitors, while gazing upon the ‘Emerging Skeleton’ exhibit, talked quietly about a male relative who had recently passed away (Obs, 2009). In particular, these visitors chatted among themselves about their relative who had died of heart failure, and the causes of that cardiac arrest. For these visitors at least, the exhibition illuminated a particular sad period of their lives upon which they appeared to reflect. Thus, it is here where the living reconnect with the ‘significant dead’, as unidentified public cadavers permit a prompting of private memories of identifiable dead friends and relatives. However, the exhibition stimulated not only a reflection of death of those close to the visitors, but also provoked a consciousness of trauma and death that was much more remote. For instance, two female visitors, while examining the ‘Foetus’ exhibit – glass jars of preserved pre-term babies – recounted to each other a story which had made media headlines
(at the time) of a pregnant woman with twins who had collapsed in a UK hospital toilet and subsequently died (Obs, 2009). Although the twin babies survived, the dead mother never saw her offspring (Nugent, 2009). Hence, what seems apparent is a triangulated psychosocial connection between the Foetus exhibit, a recent media portrayal of a tragic death (and birth) and subsequent empathy with a trauma. This triangulation is triggered not only by the capacity of Body Worlds to project narratives of both life and death, but also by the visitors’ apparent ability to absorb the experience and construct particular (personal) meanings with regard to mortality.

However, while mortality reflections are perceptible within the visitor experience, whether through a philosophical acceptance of inevitable demise or through a conscious contemplative effort to live healthily as dictated by the exhibition, for example, stopping smoking, eating a balanced diet or more physical exercise, some visitors appear to take a more pragmatic perspective. For example, two elderly female visitors, while viewing a dissected plastinated cadaver who had suffered from obesity in life and was sliced open to show fat levels around his or her body, began to chat quietly to one another about their own diets (Obs, 2009). While gazing upon the effects of obesity, and reading an interpretation board entitled ‘Battle the Radicals’, a description of various ‘bad chemicals’ that are present in food, one of the elderly females commented to the other, ‘you can’t go through life without something happening to us; I’m still going eat my chocolate and crisps’ (Obs, 2009).

However, perhaps the ultimate reflective device employed by Body Worlds is at the very end of the visitor experience. As individuals leave the exhibition, a member of the staff presents a ‘Life Certificate’ to departing visitors, tangible evidence which is designed to record a personal commitment to ‘live a purposeful life in longevity’. Consequently, the aim of certificating visitors seems to be a clear inducement of individuals to reflect further upon their life and healthy living and, in doing so, to help avoid the early onset of mortality. As von Hagens himself purports in a final philosophical proclamation on an interpretation board at the exhibition exit – though curiously, it is placed on a wall directly opposite the exit door and where most visitors appear not to see it – states:

The presentation of the pure physical reminds visitors to Body Worlds of the intangible and the unfathomable. The plastinated post-mortal body illuminates the soul by its very absence. Plastination transforms the body, an object of individual mourning into an object of reverence, enlightenment and appreciation. I hope for Body Worlds to be a place of enlightenment and contemplation, even of philosophical and religious self-recognition, and open to interpretation regardless of the background and philosophy of the life of the viewer. (Body Worlds and The Mirror of Time Exhibition: Obs, 2009)

**Body Worlds and dark tourism: mediating life and death narratives**

Death is a fundamental underpinning to life and to the order of life. As Metcalf and Huntington (1991, p. 2) aptly note, ‘life becomes transparent against the background of death’. In other words, death (and its thanatological analysis) can reveal the most central social and cultural processes and values and, consequently, becomes a catalyst that, ‘when put into contact with any cultural order, precipitates out the central beliefs and concerns of a people’ (Kearl, 2009, p. 1). On a more individual level however, exposure to death events, especially events that create a collective effervescent moral conversation about mortality moments, can crystallise and invigorate the Self’s own life pathway (Kearl, 2009; Stone, 2009a). Hence, for the purpose of this study, it is assumed that individuals’ death anxiety and experience of grief are strongly structured by their own social environment and personal life-worlds (Tercier, 2005). Thus, the logic moves from the
The role of the Significant Other Dead

Throughout history, religious rituals have provided an ontological link between the dead and the living. In turn, religion, which has evolved from ancient practices of praying to ancestors and gods, has constructed ecclesiastical mechanisms that promote public and spiritual ‘traffic with the dead’ (Walter, 2005). In particular, mourning rituals and subsequent prayers for the deceased provide intercession, for many, between those who have passed away and those who are yet to pass away. Indeed, a Christian perspective suggests that God ‘is not the God of the dead, but of the living... for there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus’ (Matthew 22:32/1 Tim. 2:5). However, an increasing prevalent secularised ideology suggests that the ‘dead have no spiritual existence, so communication with the dead soul is not so much wrong as impossible’ (Walter, 2005, p. 18). Thus, secularism, as a feature of contemporary society, may be considered a ‘barrier ideology’ cutting the living from the dead soul (Walter, 2005). Subsequently, Strobe and Schut (1999) argue that the contemporary (Western) individual has little choice, but to reconstruct a life without the (their) dead. This is particularly the case when the institutional sequestration of death is taken into account, whereby an apparent ‘absent/present’ death paradox exists within the public realm (Giddens, 1991). In short, Real death of the Self has been sequestered (or made absent) from the public gaze during the past 60 years or so through processes of medicalisation and professionalisation of funerary practices, in addition to a reduction in the scope of the sacred that has given rise to privatisation of meaning (Mellor, 1993; Mellor & Shilling, 1993; Willmott, 2000). However, in its place is (Re)created death, where the Significant Other Dead cohabit the living world (or are made present) through a plethora of mediating channels, including literature, architecture, monuments, the media and so on (Harrison, 2003). Stone (2011) augments this sequestration thesis, advocating that mortality has been relocated from the family and community gaze to a back region of medics and death industry professionals to create a bad death (also Kellehear, 2007). However, the modern Self still hopes for a ‘death with dignity’ or good death, as depicted by quixotic ideals of Romanticism, which, arguably, still pervade a consciousness of modern-day mortality (Howarth, 2007). Consequently, this apparent institutional sequestration of death raises notions of dread and potential issues of ontological
security and personal meaningfulness for the individual Self within secular society (Giddens, 1991). By way of 'de-sequestering' death, and making absent death present within the public realm, Stone and Sharpley (2008) suggest that (significant) modern-day death is revived through a substitute of recreated situations and memorialisation, including those found within dark tourism (re)presentations (also Stone, 2009b).

Therefore, to suggest that contemporary Western society is wholly cut off from its dead, with no traffic between the two domains, is not entirely accurate. Indeed, Walter (2005) advocates that there is considerable traffic, with several professions making a living out of the dead. In his 'mediator death-work' analysis, Walter examines those who work within the death, dying and disposal industry, including spiritualist mediums, pathologists, obituarists, funeral directors and so on. It could be argued that those who produce dark tourism (re)presentations may join this list – for example, Gunther von Hagens of Body Worlds. Walter goes on to note Philippe Aries’ claim of modern unfamiliarity with the dead, and states, ‘if Aries is right that it is lack of familiarity that makes death dangerous and wild, then mediator death workers re-tame it and enact this taming in public ritual’ (Walter, 2005, p. 19; also Aries, 1981). It is this notion of mediation/mediator and the taming of death within public spaces, that is – making absent death present – and its relationship with dark tourism consumption that this paper has revealed. Indeed, the empirical research suggests, albeit to varying degrees, evidence of a meaning of mortality for individuals, or at least the construction of mortality meaning within a dark tourism context. The empirical analysis also indicates that mortality meaning was attributed to dark tourism (re)presentations of Other death that take on particular levels of significance to individuals.

Hence, the Other of Death as a defining feature of dark tourism (Seaton, 2009) is important in the role of mediation between the living and the dead. Consequently, consumption of dark tourism provides a potential opportunity to contemplate death of the Self through gazing upon the Significant Other Dead. As Harrison (2003, p. 158) notes:

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...

Consequently, in a secular age of death sequestration – dominated by medicalisation – the good romantic death, or at least its perception, has been largely replaced with the likelihood for most people to have a 'hi-tech' (bad) death that is stage managed by medics and death industry professionals. Hence, where invisible death has been made visible and (re)created through the Body Worlds experience, dark tourism can provide a contemporary meditation of mortality for the Self through Other death. Therefore, dark tourism is a (new) mediating institution within secular death-sequestered societies, which not only provides a physical place to link the living with the dead, but also allows the Self to construct contemporary ontological meanings of mortality. Ultimately, dark tourism sites such as Body Worlds allow the Self to reflect and contemplate both a healthy life and a subsequent good death through consumption of the Significant Other Dead.

Conclusion
While dark tourism is a contemporary mediating institution, which allows the Self to construct ontological meaning and to reflect and contemplate both life and death through a
mortality lens, there are four key reasons that potentially explain why dark tourism is a mediating institution. First, dark tourism mediates mortality by presenting and communicating death. Secondly, dark tourism mediates mortality by providing the visitors an opportunity to accumulate ‘death capital’ upon which they may draw upon to aid reflection and contemplation. Thirdly, dark tourism mediates the complexity of death whereby contemporary mortality is reconfigured and revitalised through dark tourism spaces. Finally, dark tourism mediates the seemingly macabre by symbolically displaying the Significant Other Dead. Of course, inevitably, dark tourism as a mediating institution of contemporary mortality raises further questions – thus, future research avenues – of the role it plays in broader social practice and cultural dynamics, as well as in the ideation of tourism ethics, authenticity and identity of place. Moreover, future research should address dichotomic scientific–religious tensions of how dark tourism not only provides for mediation of mortality for the individual Self, but also can cast a critical reflection upon the collective Self and how secular societies deal with death. This is particularly so if the resurrected Significant Dead Other are conceived to represent various dichotomous socio-cultural or technological relations that may collide within secular society and, thus, contest narratives of both living and dying.

Ultimately, however, this particular study has specific implications, not least for the management and governance of dark tourism sites, as well as further understanding the consequences of dark tourism. Crucially, those who are responsible for the management and (re)presentation of ‘Other Death’ at dark tourism sites need to recognise the role of particular sites as potential receptacles of mediation between the lives of visitors and their perspectives of mortality. This is particularly important, considering the institutional sequestration of death, which to some at least, may instil a sense of ontological insecurity. To that end, dark tourism, which makes absent death present, is not so much about presenting narratives of death, but about representing narratives of life and living in the face of inevitable mortality.

References


