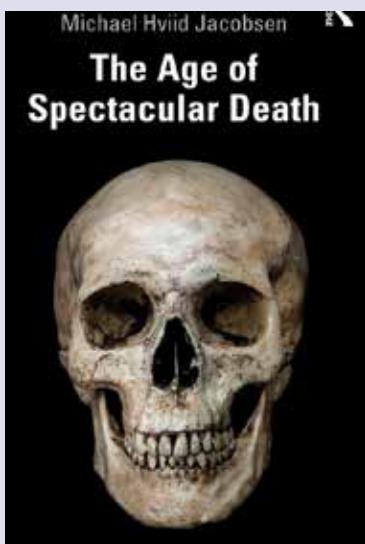




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# Death has become a spectacle to observe and deal with from afar

## What is distinctively characteristic of death in our “spectacular age”?

I outline five key characteristics, which are obviously not exhaustive of the development: The mediation/mediatization of death, the commercialization of death, the re-ritualization of death, the palliative care revolution, and the new scholarly interest in death. These developments signal that we on the one hand seem to be more interested in death and dying and to get in contact with it and recognize it, but on the other hand also that we still – as Philippe Ariès suggested in his work on ‘Forbidden Death’ – want to stay clear of death and avoid too close a contact. So the age of ‘spectacular death’ inaugurates a time of a paradoxical relationship to death in which we want to get close, but always staying at a safe distance of it. Death becomes a spectacle – something we observe and deal with from afar.

## You argue that the market managed to commercialize death. How did we come to allow market forces to profit from our grief?

If we go back to Jessica Mitford’s wonderful depiction of the American funeral industry in the 1960s, we see that death and grief was already undergoing drastic commercialization tendencies. These have continued ever since. There is absolutely nothing wrong in having a commercial interest in death, dying and grief or to make money on taking care of the dead body. For most modern societies this is a functional requirement that certain occupations and professions take care of our dead. However, we should always keep a keen eye to the fact that death – even though it is painful and emotionally distressing – has previously in human history been handled and managed by family members and members of the local community without outsourcing or delegating these tasks to external agencies such as the funeral industry. I think we have lost the art of physically dealing with death ourselves and that this lost art could be revived to the benefit of the bereaved themselves. The same goes for grief. There is now a growing profession of grief counselors and grief therapists who take care of our emotional pain and mental suffering after having lost a loved one. I think it is good that we have this option, but it would be better if we were better equipped to talk about death, dying and grief in our everyday lives with other people. One option does not exclude the other, but there is always the danger of medicalization and pathologicalization when professions get involved in dealing with intimate aspects of our lives.

## Some people are hopeful that technology will eliminate death as an “irremovable cornerstone of human existence.” In their dealing with death, how do they differ from those who believe we are doomed no matter what?

Human history is full of examples of redemption and the promises of eternal life. We have not gotten any closer to immortal bliss since time immemorial. The mortality rate is still 100 percent. But it is true that some see technology (as well as medicine) as our saviors in the endeavor to beat death. I am not all that optimistic. Being immortal is not a very human thing. The meaning of life, as Franz Kafka would once have it, is that it ends. So although virtual reality may hold some promises of our dis-embodied consciousness may survive in some shape or form in cyberspace, I am not really sure that I savor the prospect. I am myself a mortalist, believing that death is a part of life we need to recognize as important, because it provides us with the purpose and meaning of wanting to live – for now, not for eternity.



SANTIAGO LYON/AP

The funeral procession for Diana, princess of Wales, in London in 1997

## Some argue that death awareness is on the rise globally as we are becoming increasingly conscious of death because death in our times feels like a distant certainty in old age which most often occurs in a hospital setting or an otherwise caring environment of our choice, and due to natural causes. How do you see that argument?

My argument about ‘spectacular death’ is admittedly very Westernized and almost ‘ethnocentric’, taking my own immediate cultural and social surroundings as the empirical base for the argument. I am sure that elsewhere in the world things look different and are managed differently. So ‘spectacular death’ is not present everywhere to the same extent. But I do think what we are witnessing almost on a global scale is a rising expectation – as your question also suggests – that medical science, hospitals, and increasingly so also hospices will be the main guardians of death, now and in the future. Obviously, this also means that death becomes inscribed, as it were, into a modern healthcare context that somehow removes death from notions of ‘natural causes’. But I am not really sure death was ever entirely ‘natural’ – it has always been a social and cultural event that gained its meaning from the context in which it occurred (religious, metaphysical, medical, etc.). So I am not in that way really worried about death being inscribed in a healthcare context – as was, for example, Ivan Illich in his writings. I am more concerned with humanizing the healthcare context as much as possible so that death and dying are allowed to be recognized and accepted and treated with dignity and in ways that are humanly meaningful.

## Some argue that in the age of social media, our rituals for both life and death have become more universally performative: Shallow rather than deep, and conforming rather than authentic. What's your take on that?

I am familiar with that argument, and there may be some truth in it. However, we need to recognize that our ritualization of death, dying and grief has always – in all known cultures – been performative. When we care for the dying, when we mourn the dead, when we celebrate the life that has now passed, we are in fact performing socially and culturally acknowledged rites of passage. The same goes for social media – when we express our emotions and feelings to a global audience or just to a private group of people on Facebook, we also follow certain performative rules for expressing emotions. The new thing, I guess, is that we can do this also about people whom we never really knew when they were alive – celebrities are a good example of this. The so-called ‘spontaneous grief’ that is expressed globally when a celebrity dies obviously cannot be compared to the deeply personal grief expressed by someone having lost a partner for life or a child or a close friend. But in all cases, we are expressing and performing our feelings and emotions. Part of the social media way of expressing grief and compassion is that it is instantaneous, it does not require any real emotional investment and it is time effective. Contrary to the rites of yore that took the time they took and required extensive and intensive involvement, many of the social media and technology-driven rites associated with death and grief are quick fixes – and they do not last for long.



GETTY IMAGES

Obama takes a selfie with British Prime Minister David Cameron and Denmark's Prime Minister Helle Thorning Schmidt at Nelson Mandela's memorial.