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From 'Forbidden Death' to 'Spectacular Death' – On the Transformation of Death in the West  
(and Maybe Elsewhere)

Jacobsen, Michael Hviid

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**MICHAEL HVIID JACOBSEN\***

Aalborg University (Denmark)

ORCID: 0000-0003-0237-1318

## **From ‘Forbidden Death’ to ‘Spectacular Death’ – on the transformation of death in the West (and maybe elsewhere)**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This article aspires to capture the contemporary ‘death mentality’ in the Western world by proposing a transition from the time of ‘Forbidden Death’ to the age of ‘Spectacular Death’. Whereas ‘Forbidden Death’ – which according to the originator of the concept, French historian Philippe Ariès – was characterized by a modern tabooing, denial and sequestration of death, towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century we began to witness the contours of a postmodern ‘revival of death’ tendency. In the wake of this, it is suggested that we now no longer live in a time of ‘Forbidden Death’, but rather live and die in an era of ‘Spectacular Death’ in which death has become a spectacle – something mostly to be observed from afar, but with an intense force of attraction. ‘Spectacular Death’ indicates that our collective experience of, attitude towards, relationship with and management of death is increasingly characterized by the following five main features: mediation/mediatization, commercialization, re-ritualization and palliative care humanization of death and dying and finally also an academic specialization in the study of death. The article ends with a brief critical discussion of the range, scope and analytical applicability of the notion of ‘Spectacular Death’ also outside a Western context.

### **KEY WORDS**

death mentality, ‘Forbidden Death’, ‘Spectacular Death’, taboo, denial, revival, transferability

## **Introduction**

It is an almost common sense insight to suggest that societies and cultures differ quite considerably across the globe. They do so in con-

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\* Department of Sociology and Social Work, Aalborg University, Fibigerstræde 13, 75, 9220 Aalborg Ø, Denmark, e-mail: mhj@socsci.aau.dk

nection to the conditions of life they offer their members, but they do so as well when it comes to the circumstances of death. Moreover, it is also a truism to claim that societies and cultures display great variation throughout the development of human history – across millennia, centuries and decades. These fundamental facts underline the importance of always keeping a keen eye to such differences and variations. However, irrespective of all their many cultural variations and transhistorical differences there is (at least) one thing that *all* societies and *all* cultures need to do and share with each other – and that is to deal with the inevitable fact of death. In *all* societies and cultures, individual members die on a more or less regular basis, which requires that death and dying – as event and process – is managed and made meaningful according to the prevailing cultural customs and social norms (Jacobsen 2022). In this way, death is indeed normal and universal, whereas the many concrete ways we understand and manage death and dying and the ways in which we dispose of, mourn and commemorate our dead or think about eternity and immortality are highly dependent upon and reflected in historical and cultural differences. As once poignantly observed by Richard Huntington and Peter Metcalf in their anthropological work on the diversity of cross-cultural mortuary practices:

What could be more universal than death? Yet what an incredible variety of responses it evokes. Corpses are burned or buried, with or without animal or human sacrifice; they are preserved by smoking, embalming or pickling; they are eaten – raw, cooked or rotten; they are ritually exposed as carrion or simply abandoned; or they are dismembered or treated in a variety of ways. Funerals are the occasion for avoiding people or holding parties, for fighting or having sexual orgies, for weeping or laughing, in a thousand different combinations. The diversity of cultural reaction is a measure of the universal impact of death. But it is not a random reaction; always it is meaningful and expressive (Huntington and Metcalf 1979:1).

Death is indeed a universal and a constant in human history – it has been there all along and it will remain as an inescapable experience for all time to come – but at the same time the experience of death is contextual and showing significant diversity and change across time and place. Death as such, death proper, does not differ or change at all – the mortality rate in *any* society or culture stubbornly remains at a solid one-hundred percent – but so do our ways of dealing with it and the circumstances under which we live with and ‘towards’ death (Heidegger 1927/2998). With changes in demography, science, technology, life expectancy, social institutions, norms, values and beliefs, our ways of confronting inevitable death also change. The way humans understand, approach, manage and process death can to a large degree explain or at least frame many of the transhistorical and cross-cultural variations between societies and cultures and vice versa. Death thus serves as a prism through which we can glimpse many important as-

pects of life as it is organized and lived. As Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman contended:

The fact of human mortality, and the necessity to live with the constant awareness of that fact, go a long way towards accounting for many a crucial aspect of social and cultural organization of all known societies; and that most, perhaps all, known cultures can be better understood (or at least understood differently, in a novel way) if conceived of as alternative ways in which that primary trait of human existence – *the fact of mortality and the knowledge of it* – is dealt with and processed, so that it may turn from the condition of impossibility of meaningful life into the major source of life's meaning (Bauman 1992:9; original italics).

Humans are in all likelihood not only the only living creature capable of contemplating its own mortality, it is the only creature that knows that it will die – and it also knows that it know it, which is indeed a terrible knowledge to go through life with, waiting eventually to become simply food for worms. For this reason, 'death is the problem of the living', as Norbert Elias (1985/2001:3) once suggested (since dead people have few if any problems altogether). By understanding how death as a problem has been (and still is) confronted, managed and controlled, we will thus get an idea of a culture or society at large.

The way we specifically deal with the challenge or problem of death, however, as well as our understanding of it, does not stand still. It changes – however mostly almost insignificantly – over time. In their ambitious but sometimes rather helpless attempts at history-writing, sociologists are often prone to differentiate analytically between pre-modern/traditional, modern and late-modern/postmodern societies, which is a model that has also inspired studies of changes in relation to death (see, e.g., Walter 1996:195). Particularly the first transition from traditional to modern society (sometimes dated to the time around the 19<sup>th</sup> century) and the second transition from a modern to a late-modern/postmodern society (covering approximately the last third of the 20<sup>th</sup> and the early 21<sup>st</sup> century) are important in order to understand some fundamental changes in the way we think about and deal with death and they are also informative and indicative of where we stand right now in contemporary times.

In this article, we will be looking into how our collective attitude towards and understanding of death has changed approximately over the past century in the Western world based on a reading of some of the most widely cited sources of literature on the topic. We will first explore the time of so-called 'Forbidden Death' in the 20<sup>th</sup> century through to a time of growing 'death awareness' and a 'revival of death' at the end of the century before ending with a description of the age of 'Spectacular Death' in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. The article ends with a brief critical discussion of some reservations of extending this Western (or Westernized) perspective of death to other cultural contexts. The purpose is thus to provide a framework for understanding, comparing and discussing

the understanding and management of death across different cultures and societies, past as well as contemporary.

## Death, History and Society

There has never been a death-free life or a death-free society. Death has been there all the time throughout human history with a mortality rate, as mentioned earlier, never delivering neither more nor less than its usual level of one-hundred percent. In fact, humans cannot live without the knowledge and experience of death, although they may desperately want to, because death happens whether we like it or not. We may momentarily try to forget about or be successful in suppressing the knowledge of awaiting death, but not for very long. Our inescapable knowledge of death spawns a multitude of thoughts, feelings and actions aimed at making life with death liveable and meaningful, because we know that in the end we will and must die. Actually, we do not 'know' that we will die (in the same way that we know that winter follows autumn or that it is Tuesday after Monday), since the specific dating of death is always unknown and unknowable, and since we have not yet tried to die, but we nevertheless instinctively sense that this must be the case, not least because all those billions of people who lived before us and alongside us on Earth have all – without exception – eventually passed away and disappeared permanently.

Death is indeed a biological fact of life, because all living organisms eventually must and will die. Although all creatures die, death is also a very human thing, not only because we all must die, but because we as human beings are capable of reflecting on, contemplating and anticipating our own death. Death, however, is also a social thing. Although it is the individual human being who is first born and then eventually – at some undetermined future time – dies again, death never takes place in a historical, social or cultural vacuum. Death is, as it were, wrapped in and surrounded by numerous social practices and cultural meanings and the way we think about and manage death and dying thus becomes an important lens for understanding social life and society at large. Obviously, we do not know 'death itself', as Danish theologian Svend Bjerg (1975) once called it, hereby referring to how it feels to be dead and no longer being alive. But what we according to Bjerg *can* get access to are the 'thoughts of death' that people – individually and collectively – entertain whilst being alive. Even after their deaths we may find – in poems, paintings, philosophical treatises, letters and diaries – traces of what people thought about death and how they managed it in earlier historical times as well as in our own time. Moreover, archaeological excavations, anthropological findings as well as historical and archival studies reveal how death was understood, managed, mourned and celebrated in prehistoric times or by people living in communities

and cultures widely different from and almost incomparable to our own (see, e.g., Ariès 1981; Laqueur 2015; Pearson 2003; Seebach and Willerslew 2018).

History, as philosopher G. W. F. Hegel would once claim, is a record of our relationship towards death (Whaley 1981:1). Although 'death itself' – as an expected event inscribed already from birth in everyone's body – remains stubbornly the same, our thoughts about and relationship towards death (as well as to dying and grief) do not stand still. Death – and the way we think about it, talk about it, take care of it, and try to avoid, combat or perhaps embrace it – changes constantly but nevertheless almost invisibly. The revolutions that take place in our relationship towards death are mostly minor and relatively unnoticed compared to the big and often violent revolutions that otherwise transform social life. But death does constantly change, quite simply because humans cannot leave it alone. We seem to reconstruct and deconstruct death so it mirrors or fits the values, norms and ideals of the society in which it occurs (see, e.g., Bauman 1992; Jacobsen 2013). Also changing demographics play a significant role in how we understand, perceive and manage death. For example, whereas it was not unexpected to experience giving birth to a stillborn child or witnessing a child dying before the teenage years a few centuries ago, today it has become an almost unimaginable thing. In a society in which children have become the most treasured 'life projects' for their parents and in which the birth rate has steadily fallen over the centuries, child death in contemporary society is regarded as an unmentionable personal tragedy. Moreover, back in the 1830s, a quarter of all children would before the age of sixteen have experienced the loss of one or both parents (Berridge 2002:19). Nowadays and in the Western world, due to increased life expectancy and longevity – which is today around 80 years whereas in 1900 it was closer to 50 – it is mostly the elderly who die, and the vast majority of children (although not all) grow up with both parents and also grandparents (sometimes even great grandparents) alive well into their own life trajectories. Today, death is mostly reserved for the old and each deviation from this situation makes death a tragedy, a mystery and an abomination.

Death is, as mentioned, very much a social thing. Despite the fact that it is the concrete individual who dies (and the physical body that deteriorates and eventually gives up), he/she seldom does so entirely alone, and never in ways that are not somehow managed, sanctioned and circumscribed by the social norms and values of community and society (e.g., family members or specific professions such as doctors, nurses, funeral directors, priests, etc.). The ideals, values and norms that guide our lives also underpin the circumstances under which we die, are disposed of and mourned. In this way, simultaneously abstractly and concretely, death is an integral part of society. In every culture or

society, what Robert J. Kastenbaum called ‘the death system’ circumscribes, regulates and manages our thoughts about and encounter with death. The ‘death system’ can be defined as ‘the interpersonal, sociocultural and symbolic network through which an individual’s relationship to mortality is mediated and expressed by his or her society’ (Kastenbaum 1977/2012:102). This ‘death system’ is characteristic of a certain time and place and is thus highly indicative of prevailing religious ideas, cultural values, social norms and ideals as well as professional practices and technological means. The death system is important because it tries to make meaningless death individually meaningful and socially manageable. This death system extends into every nook and cranny of our society’s and culture’s attempt to deal with the problem of death. As it has been observed:

[Death] stands as a challenge to all our systems of meaning, order, governance and civilization. Any given cultural construct – from religion, and poetry to psychoanalysis and medical technology – may be construed as a response to the disordering force of death (Goodwin and Bronfen 1993:4).

The fact that death is a task or a problem that needs to be managed is obviously not a new thing. Even to our ancestors, death was also an affront, something causing great anxiety and feelings of loss and grief. However, as we know from many historical testimonies, death was inscribed in other frames of understanding and other forms of practice – relying mostly on metaphysical or religious cosmology and traditional authority – that made a life with death manageable and meaningful (see, e.g., Kellehear 2007; Ariès 1981). In the wake of the great Enlightenment project from the 17<sup>th</sup> century onwards and its showdown with religious beliefs (now increasingly seen as superstition) and traditional mores, values and lifestyles (now regarded as backward) and with the coming of modern society, this changed considerably: secularization, urbanization, industrialization, scientification, individualization, medicalization, institutionalization, bureaucratization and professionalization were some of the new relentless social forces that not only significantly shaped society and social life but also impacted our relationship towards death. Death suddenly became a problem desperately seeking a solution.

## **Death Tabooed**

Perhaps nowhere else has the notion of ‘taboo’ been used (and sometimes misused) more continuously and insistently than in connection to the topics of sexuality and death. Sexuality – and with it the act of procreation, nudity and eroticism – has especially since the dawn of religious dogma in the Western world (and thus particularly since the Middle Ages) been subjected to tabooing. Later, science took over



from religion by creating a *Scientia Sexualis* (the science of sex) that replaced the ancient *Ars Erotica* (the art of erotic pleasure) of our great ancestors (Foucault 1978). This meant that sexuality instead of being subjected to religious dogma was increasingly shrouded in a veritable medico-scientific discourse that through inquisition, examination and confession on the couch of the psychoanalyst sought to extract knowledge about secret desires, perverse preferences and unmentionable practices, thereby seeking to solve the 'mystery of sex'. It has been suggested that during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, death increasingly took the place as the primary tabooed topic in modern Western society whilst sexuality was increasingly de-tabooed (think of the so-called 'sexual revolution' in the 1960s and 1970s in the Western world).

The concept of 'taboo' can be traced back to the logbooks of Captain James Cook who when visiting the Polynesian island of Tonga in 1777 came across the local population's notion of *tapu* (taboo). Taboo refers to topics or things that are surrounded by implicit or sometimes explicit rules regarding touching, mentioning or consuming. The things or topics prohibited by the taboo are those regarded as too sacred, unclean, dangerous or socially disruptive for ordinary humans to confront and handle (see, e.g., Freud 1913/1998). These are matters best left to shamans and the few initiated ones, who are capable of dealing with the divine or devilish forces believed to reside within the tabooed object such as certain kinds of food or experiences with birth, illness and death. In primitive as well as modern society, death and particularly the dead body has been associated with taboo and many ritual practices are performed in order to deal appropriately with the dying and dead body as well as the wandering spirits of the deceased. Breaching the taboo on death would often result in punishment, social ostracism or being haunted by the souls of the dead.

French historian Philippe Ariès, one of the most frequently cited authorities documenting our changing historical engagement with and handling of death in the Western world from the Middle Ages to the present, specifically invented the epithet of 'Forbidden Death' to account for the way in which modern society tabooed death. In several pieces of work, Ariès (1974, 1981) showed how it was possible to capture an entire historical epoch's collective 'death mentality' and to summarize it with a single catchy notion. In his work, he specified and exemplified four such death mentalities from the Middle Ages to modern society: 'Tamed Death' in the Middle Ages, 'Death of One's Own' in the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance period, 'Death of the Other' during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and finally the aforementioned 'Forbidden Death' in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Each of these broad historical phases (with their respective local and national variations) represented a certain view on death, dying, grief and immortality that summed up how death as such was regarded and managed within a social and historical context. According

to Ariès, who himself was a conservative thinker deeply devoted to the medieval ideal of the ‘taming of death’, modern society was characterized by an increasingly alienated and distanced attitude towards death that was regarded as the exact opposite of the one prevailing throughout medieval times. Therefore, Ariès characterized the modern death mentality as ‘reversed death’, thereby indicating that our contemporary death mentality in many ways represented a reversal of its medieval counterpart. Death that was tamed in the past now became wild. This was particularly evident in the increasing medicalization of death which was previously a domain reserved for religious thought and practice, in the changes in the ritualized disposal of the deceased (from burial to cremation) as well as in the way expressions of grief were increasingly surrounded by silence and the social isolation of the bereaved, who were now being regarded as ‘lepers’ to be avoided.

Particularly characteristic of the modern mentality of ‘Forbidden Death’ was according to Ariès that death became an unspeakable topic at the same time as it disappeared from plain sight. Death, previously such an omnipotent and omnipresent phenomenon, was now moved to the very outskirts of social life, being regarded as something to be managed by an ever-expanding medical system that saw death as an unnatural occurrence (Illich 1977) and something to be combatted at all costs. In Ariès’s view, death itself became a technical phenomenon, something to be dealt with not by metaphysics or religion but by medicine, science and technology. Death was slowly but securely removed from everyday life and locked into institutional settings intended to keep death out of sight and out of mind. Death became an embarrassing defeat for modern society and modern medicine boldly believing itself capable of solving all problems. Death was an affront and a provocation to modern notions of a happy, carefree and never-ending life. Death called the bluff on all our hopes and subconscious beliefs, as Sigmund Freud (1915/1957) had insisted, that we were actually immortal. Therefore, modern society needed to taboo death and make it unmentionable in order to avoid admitting that death could in fact not be defeated. By the time of his own death in 1984, Ariès believed that something new was on the verge of happening to our collective death mentality – something was ‘cooking’ that seemingly inaugurated a new type of openness towards death, particularly in the Anglo-American world, but perhaps also a new form of acceptance that risked reducing and trivializing death to ‘the insignificance of an ordinary event’ (Ariès 1981:614).

By the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, in the wake of Freud’s work and around the same time of Ariès’s writings, also other prominent scholars in the fields of historical studies, psychology, ethnology and anthropology were almost stumbling over each other’s feet in order to declare death a modern-day taboo (see, e.g., Becker 1973; Farberow 1963; Feifel 1963; Gorer 1965). The taboo on death at this time was seemingly so

compact that it was almost impossible to talk openly about the topic in polite everyday conversation – however, in academic conversation death was a topic staving to acquire some attention. In this way, it was also a rather paradoxical taboo since so many books were still being written and published insisting on and testifying to the existence of a solid taboo on death (Simpson 1979:vii). British sociologist Tony Walter, to whom we return later, thus suggested about the prominence of the taboo perspectives among writers and researchers on death at that time that ‘if it came to a vote, the tabooists would probably win handsomely’ (Walter 1991:293). Although such a vote – at least to my knowledge – has never taken place, Walter was indeed right in insisting that the taboo perspective has been particularly prevalent among those trying to capture the ‘death mentality’ of the modern West during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Here several decades later, it is now Walter’s contention that the taboo on death has been dissolved (see, e.g., Walter 2017, 2021). For my own part, however, I am not so sure, but we will return to this later when outlining the contours of ‘Spectacular Death’. Nowadays, the tabooing/de-tabooing of death is still a matter that concerns particularly journalists interested in knowing if death is (still) taboo in society or if we have been successful in tearing down the taboo and talking more openly about death. Such a question is always difficult to answer convincingly or definitively, not least because the actual meaning of the notion of ‘taboo’ is mostly not sufficiently clarified or defined, and for this reason it is more of a theoretical than an empirical question (Jacobsen 2021a). Determining if and how death was/is a taboo is therefore not easy. However, it will suffice to state here that the majority of scholars writing on the topic throughout most parts of the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw death as tabooed.

## Death Denied

Besides being frequently described as ‘tabooed’ – a concept more often applied by anthropologists and psychologists and only to a lesser degree by sociologists (perhaps seeing the notion as pertaining primarily to the study of non-Western social contexts from which it originated) – also the idea that death is ‘denied’, ‘disavowed’ and ‘repressed’ has been prevalent in much 20<sup>th</sup> century death research, and perhaps particularly within psychoanalytical and psychological circles, although not exclusively. The idea that death is denied often focuses on the individual or sometimes collective consciousness as a mental contraption that seeks to filter away those unpleasant and potentially disturbing knowledge of and thoughts about death from the conscious mind, leaving them instead to simmer in the subterranean nooks and crannies of the unconscious (see, Robert and Tradii 2019). Despite focusing on the idea of death denial, the notion of ‘taboo’ was not neglected by the early

psychologists taking an interest in death. Actually, the founder of the psychoanalytic perspective, Sigmund Freud, wrote a book titled *Totem and Taboo* (1913/1998) which specifically utilised the idea of ‘taboo’ in connection to incest and animism in primitive cultures but also in connection to death. Here Freud drew on writings of some classic anthropologists and contemporary psychoanalysts (mostly Wilhelm Wundt and Carl Gustav Jung) and advanced the idea that some of the taboos of ‘the savage mind’ would return and haunt the modern mind in the shape of neuroses and other mental disorders.

Looking into the roots of modern death taboo and denial, it was Freud’s contention that this to a large extent could be regarded as an expected outcome of civilization and the decreasing contact and familiarity with death. According to Freud, modern civilized man [*sic*] – as compared to his [*sic*] prehistoric predecessors – increasingly tried to keep the knowledge of and contact with death at bay. As he stated about this modern approach to death: ‘We tried to hush it up’ (Freud 1915/1957:289). Whereas people in prehistoric times could not avoid coming into contact with death, experiencing and witnessing it regularly and at close range (with an average life expectancy in medieval times of around 30 years and around 50 in Freud’s own lifetime), modern civilized people rather attempt to keep death out of sights as well as out of mind. Any talk of death must be suppressed – particularly if children are present. Death to modern civilized man [*sic*] – and especially his own death – was utterly unimaginable and had to be effectively repressed and denied. In a text written during the early months of the Great War – a war ending up taking the lives of more than 20 million people – Freud thus insisted that in our society we had become so unaccustomed to the sight and prospect of death that we in our unconscious almost believe ourselves to be immortal. Death is always something that happened to others, while we ourselves remain affirmed in the fortified belief (death denial) that we would not die – mainly because we only have limited first-hand experience with or no proximity to actual death:

It is indeed impossible to imagine our own death; and whenever we attempt to do so we can perceive that we are in fact still present as spectators. Hence the psycho-analytic school could venture on the assertion that at the bottom no one believes in his own death, or, to put the same thing in another way, that in the unconscious every one of us is convinced of his own immortality (Freud 1915/1957:289).

A similar view of our inability to accept and/or understand and confront our own mortality – perhaps particularly reinforced throughout modern times – was expressed by Ariès (1974:106) who suggested about the denizens of modern society that ‘at heart we feel we are non-mortals’. The idea that death – and not least the reality of death – is something to be denied and repressed in modern society (by individuals and culture alike) was later taken up by other scholars inspired by a psychoana-

lytic perspective – including by Freud's daughter Anna Freud (1936). The same year as Freud's text on the thoughts on war and death was published (1915), also other early writers such as American educationist and researcher G. Stanley Hall (1915) wrote about the deep-seated feelings of 'thanatophobia' and the desire for immortality in the modern mind. As Hall observed: 'Fear of death is only the obverse of the love of life and together they constitute the struggle to survive' (Hall 1915:550). Death was thus associated with a threat to the perpetuation and survival of the modern self, something that was later also detailed by Ernest Becker in his Pulitzer-winning book *The Denial of Death* (1973/1997). According to Becker, the fear of becoming 'food for worms' drives people into all sorts of symbolic actions and ideas that are intended to take the sting out of death and make a life lived in the shadow of death meaningful. Being what Becker calls a 'self-conscious animal', humanity is bestowed with a dual nature: the animal side, which means that like all other creatures humans live and die, as well as the human-specific side, which means that human beings are meaning-making and symbol-using self-conscious creatures desperately trying to transcend their mortal destiny. As Becker insisted in his book:

What does it mean to be a *self-conscious animal*? The idea is ludicrous, if it is not monstrous. It means to know that one is food for worms. This is the terror: to have emerged from nothing, to have a name, consciousness of self, deep inner feelings, an excruciating inner yearning for life and self-expression – and with all this yet to die (Becker 1973/1997:27; original italics).

In Becker's view, culture, religion and all sorts of symbolic actions, meaning-giving life-projects and hero-worshipping become an important part of our continuous struggle against death (which is described with the notion from William James as 'the worm at the core') and thus serve as a safety-valve for our inescapable death-related fears and anxieties. Becker's perspective was later taken up, empirically tested and validated by a number of scholars working under the auspices of 'Terror Management Theory' (see, e.g., Solomon, Greenberg and Pyszczynski 2016).

What could be called the 'denial of death' thesis was also embraced by English anthropologist and author Geoffrey Gorer who with his provocative idea of 'the pornography of death' described the deep-seated need for repression and denial of death in modern society (Gorer 1955). Gorer's ideas exercised a significant impact on the later work of Ariès, who cited him several times and who repeated many of Gorer's ideas (Mitchell 1978:689), and both scholars were influenced by the work of Freud. According to Gorer, death in modern society was now regarded as obscene, even more so than procreation and sexuality that was increasingly losing the shackles of prudery, and thus needed to be kept behind closed doors and reduced to polite whisper. It was Gorer's contention – an idea inspired by psychoanalytic theory (particularly Freud's work) – that we

throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century had become increasingly squeamish regarding the sight of natural and actual death whereas we gladly wallowed in a variety of vicarious experiences of violent and fictitious death through crime novels, blood-dripping thrillers and horror stories. Thoughts of natural and real death were therefore suppressed and the sight of actual and authentic death were unfamiliar to most people, whereas images and stories of excessively dramatic death proliferated and were turned into entertainment. The same type of denial, Gorer insisted, also pertained to grief that increasingly became a publicly invisible and intolerable phenomenon whereas only half a century earlier it had been a most public sight. In his biographical recollections of encountering death and grief at different times throughout his life, Gorer recalled the case of the grief-struck widow of Gorer's own brother who in the early 1960s had died from cancer and whose wife had to suffer her loss in silence and was treated like a 'social leper' (Gorer 1965:xxxii).

In summary, the conception of death as tabooed and death as denied prevalent throughout most of the intellectual writings on death during the 20<sup>th</sup> century capture a time when death, at least from the perspective of many cultural interpreters and social commentators, was regarded as an archenemy of and an antithesis to a modern society in which science and a medically-supported and/or technologically-supplied possibility of immortality prevailed. The notions of 'death taboo' and 'death denial' – although they contain some inaccuracies, ambiguities and variations in their usage, and although they should therefore always be applied with interpretative caution (see, e.g., Donaldson 1973; Jacobsen 2021a; Tradii and Martin 2019) – thus describe a society unable to accept death but also unable to leave it alone. Death is seen as a disturbance that needs to be dealt with and carefully contained and controlled.

## Death Recognized

Towards the end of his magnum opus, *The Hour of Our Death* (1981), Ariès suggested that something new was apparently underway during the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in our collective attitude towards death and dying in the Western world. The solid death taboo of the era of 'Forbidden Death' was gradually starting to show some cracks and was being challenged by a new interest in a more open engagement with the topic of death and dying and attempts at humanizing the modern scientific approach to human mortality. During the 1960s, among a group of pioneering practitioners and researchers who were often working without much organisational coordination within their own respective fields, a new 'movement' began to emerge – an initiative (or rather a cluster of ideas and practices) sometimes described as the 'death awareness movement' (Doka 2003). These practitioners and researchers aimed at creating an awareness of death within society in

general and more specifically within the healthcare system by promoting – using the vocabulary from one of the prominent studies conducted by two sociologists writing about the topic at that time – an ‘open awareness context’ instead of the ‘closed awareness context’ prevalent for so long with its denial and silence surrounding death (Glaser and Strauss 1965). Instead of regarding death as a defeat of the medical profession, such a proposed ‘open awareness context’ would allow for a less restrictive and more accommodating approach towards death and dying in different care settings, it would argue for the need for ‘death education’, and it would later pave the way for initiatives within the hospice movement as well as palliative care.

This ‘death awareness movement’ thus became one of the main vehicles for carrying forward a critical approach towards the curative or medicalized perspective on death and dying so prominent in the modern hospital setting, denying the reality of death or pre-empting the possibility of recognizing and talking openly about death without a sense of defeat or embarrassment among the dying, their relatives and staff. In such a modern healthcare system, death was to be regarded from a scientific and clinical perspective rather than from the religious or communal perspective that had previously provided death with meaning. As Ariès had observed on the prevailing view of death and dying in the hospital setting during the time of ‘Forbidden Death’ in stark contrast to the traditions and ritual practices of the past:

Death in the hospital is no longer the occasion of a ritual ceremony, over which the dying person presides amidst his assembled relatives. Death is a technical phenomenon obtained by a cessation of care ... Death has been dissected, cut to bits by a series of little steps which finally makes it impossible to know which step was the real death (Ariès 1974:88).

According to Ariès, this technical (rather than ritual or ceremonial) view of death so characteristic of modern society and modern hospital meant that the dying were being robbed of their own deaths, and they were instead processed in and finally removed from the hospital in a hygienic manner allowing no room for ceremony or the public recognition of their deaths. They would die under extremely hygienic and sanitized circumstances but in utter silence and, in Elias’s (1985/2001) perspective, deep-seated loneliness. This was a time when not only death and dying but also other areas of and major transitional experiences in life – such as birth, childcare and the care of the elderly – were increasingly being embedded in new institutional contexts such as the hospital or the nursing home. It was against this institutionalization, technicalization, professionalization and medicalization of death and dying that a varied choir of critical voices from within the healthcare system as well as the academic community began to argue for an increasing awareness and humanization of death in modern society. Some of the most prominent

voices were nurse and researcher Cicely Saunders – who later became the founder of the first hospice in the modern Western world, St. Christopher’s in London, which opened in 1967 – and Swiss psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross who with her conversations with dying patients discovered many of the problems associated with dying in a society that found it increasingly difficult to accept the reality of death. Within this ‘death awareness movement’ – which as mentioned was not really a unified or coherent movement as much as a cluster of scattered ideas and practices – there was instead a focus on how to promote ‘death education, how to deal with experiences of ‘total pain’ associated with the experience of dying and to how provide ‘total care’ for terminally ill patients. These ideas and practices became important aspects in the subsequent development of hospice and palliative care initiatives as alternatives to the modern hospitalized way of dying. Moreover, a number of interactionist sociologists (Glaser and Strauss 1965; Sudnow 1967) carefully studied the way the dying and dead were actually ‘processed’ and ‘managed’ within the modern hospital setting, and these studies reported difficulties with accepting the defeat of death within curative/medical institutions. Moreover, they pointed to some significant differences in the treatment of terminal patients based on the perceived ‘social worth’ of the dying patient as well as to problems of reifying the dying and dead person (sometimes referred to as ‘social death’). Each in their way, these different voices argued for a humanization of death, for ‘dying with dignity’, for ‘death education’ for practitioners as well as ordinary people alike, for emotional support and spiritual care for the dying and bereaved as well as for the self as the ultimate source of authority in decisions regarding death and dying. Particularly this latter point inspired an interest in encouraging the dying to make informed choices about the end of life, the development towards patient rights and patient-centred care, and sometimes even advocating euthanasia which gained increasing popular support (and raised public and political controversy) not least due to landmark movies such as John Badham’s *Whose Life Is It Anyway?* (1981). It was during these decades from the 1960s to the 1980s that death, or at least so it seemed, was slowly but securely being brought back from its forced exile.

## Death Revived

In a piece published right at the threshold of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, historian Joseph Jacobs (1900) had memorably described the emerging modern approach towards death as a ‘dying of death’. By this he meant that death was in the process of losing its previous importance in the life of the living, and that the skulls, bones and skeletons that previously inspired religious scribes and literary writers as well as ornamented artistic work (in the shape of so-called *vanitas* or *memento mori* ico-



nography) had disappeared. If the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century had witnessed the gradual but relentless waning of the public visibility and presence of death as our ancestors had known and practiced it for centuries, and which Geoffrey Gorer (1965) illustrated with the disappearance of extended public mourning rituals, towards the end of the same century death, as we saw above, gradually began to make a surprise reappearance within many different areas of social life. This did not mean that denial and distance were now suddenly things of the past, but slowly cracks began to appear in the seemingly solid façade of the death taboo. First and foremost, throughout the 1960s and 1970s death and dying were beginning to be brought back into the public limelight by representatives of what was above described as the 'death awareness movement', which rather than constituting a coherent movement was a polyphony of voices from many branches of social and academic life – psychology, sociology, philosophy, social work practice, health care and the arts – calling for a more 'natural attitude' towards death than the artificial and alienated one setting the agenda throughout large parts of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Besides the important ideas emanating from this particular community of pioneering scholars, practitioners and artists, also a gradual shift in social and cultural points of orientation towards more 'post-materialist' or 'post-modern' values played an important role in the gradual recognition of death. Death was now something that had to be made personally meaningful and manageable in a world characterized by a waning of traditional values and religious beliefs and in which numerous New Age perspectives competed to fill the void. In addition, the repercussions on the societal and individual levels of social processes such as individualization, globalization, consumerism, multiculturalism and an increasing cultural focus on self-identity and lifestyle choices during the final decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century underpinned the contours of a new emerging form of engagement with death and dying in the wake of the death awareness movement.

Particularly within the ranks of the discipline of sociology did these quite significant changes in our Western attitudes towards death not pass unnoticed. As Ariès (1974:85) commented in his work, the 'brutal revolution' in collective attitudes toward and practices associated with death that happened during the 20<sup>th</sup> century – leading from a traditional death attitude to modern 'Forbidden Death' – had not failed to catch the attention of scholars working within different branches of the social sciences, and the same has indeed also happened towards the end of the same century with the transition from or transformation of 'Forbidden Death' into something new. Over the past decades, several scholars have tried to capture and conceptualize this new 'death mentality' (Ariès's notion). For example, in his important book *The Revival of Death* (1994) aforementioned Tony Walter – who was himself one of the key exponents of this new wave of sociological interest in death and

dying (which is sometimes called ‘death studies’ or ‘thanatology’ as more encompassing labels) – identified two main strands of what he characterized as a ‘revival of death’, or what he synonymously described as the coming of ‘neo-modern death’. The first strand of this development is labelled ‘late-modern death’ and relies very much on some of the basic ideas developed by British sociologist Anthony Giddens (1991) in his work on ‘late modernity’. Within this strand of ‘death revival’ some of the main characteristics are: de-traditionalisation, self-identity, expert systems guiding choice in all areas of life (including death and dying), institutional and individual reflexivity, the sequestration of difficult or critical life experiences, etc. In ‘late-modern death’, death and dying is to some extent liberated from the previous monopolization by the medical profession, but at the same time new expert systems arise to guide and control the dying and grieving processes and provide a new language of suffering and grief (such as therapeutic psychology). Walter labelled the second strand of death revival ‘postmodern death’. The main source of inspiration here is primarily taken from postmodern sociology and philosophy with their emphasis on notions such as: the authority of the subject, placing private feelings and emotions on the public agenda, a search for authenticity and the rise of individualism, romanticism and consumerism. It was – and remains – Walter’s contention that these two strands of death revival each in their way concurrently continue to shape and reshape our experience and management of death in the latter decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and into the 21<sup>st</sup> century (see Jacobsen 2021b).

Apart from the important work by Walter in drawing attention to the different contours or dimensions of the new landscape of death and dying towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, another theoretical attempt at capturing the ‘sign of the times’ regarding our contemporary relationship towards death has been suggested by Zygmunt Bauman. In the somewhat overlooked yet highly important book *Mortality, Immortality and Other Life Strategies* (1992), Bauman did perhaps not exactly argue that death had been revived as much as claimed that our perspective on and approach to death was undergoing some significant changes during what he termed ‘postmodern times’. In a comprehensive socio-philosophical argument, it was Bauman’s contention that death remains a conundrum to humans – and that it always has been. However, he also identified a certain shift in our cultural approach and attitude to death from what he characterized as the ‘modern deconstruction of mortality’, which is closely connected to the aforementioned institutionalization, professionalization and medicalization of death (intended to ‘solve the problem’ of death as a technical and medical issue), towards a ‘postmodern deconstruction of immortality’ in which new ways of understanding human life (also by seeking to extend it) and dealing differently with time (from permanence and linearity to transience and

circularity) makes immortality rather than death the main preoccupation. In Bauman's view, these two 'deconstruction strategies' – 'the modern deconstruction of mortality' and 'the postmodern deconstruction of immortality' – now co-exist (as did also Walter's two 'strands of revival') and each in their way work at transforming death from a biologically inescapable fact of life to a socially constructed and culturally manageable and meaningful phenomenon (see, e.g., Jacobsen and Runge 2023).

As an outcome of the combination of or clash between the different 'revival strands' mentioned by Walter and the shift in 'deconstruction strategies' proposed by Bauman, we now see several new problems arising in contemporary times marked increasingly by reflexivity, individualization, uncertainty, freedom of choice and the relentless uprooting of ritual and tradition. In such a world, death and dying become a highly individual, personal and contentious matter, and with a late-modern or postmodern individual deprived of many conventional religious and traditional frameworks that previously provided death and dying as significant transitional phases in life with meaning and purpose, facing death nowadays when robbed of the certainties and predictabilities of the past becomes a rather terrifying, lonely and incomprehensible experience that to a large degree is still sequestered and removed from public life (see, e.g., Mellor and Shilling 1993; Giddens 1991; Elias 1985). Death may have been increasingly recognized and revived, as suggested by the theorists above, but it remains a problem – for society but perhaps mostly for individuals. This has prompted new attempts to tame and domesticate death by making it part of one's increasingly individualized life-project by seeking to extend a 'life of one's own' into a 'death of one's own' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002).

## Death Spectacularized

The interest in deciphering, mapping and understanding our contemporary 'death mentality' or collective attitude towards death and dying has not dried out in recent decades. In fact, quite the contrary. In the wake of the aforementioned writings from the 1990s, a number of scholars from different academic backgrounds have tried to capture, conceptualize and illustrate some of the main trends and tendencies in our changing social and cultural relationship towards death, dying and grief over the past few decades (see, e.g., Berridge 2002; Noys 2005; Dugdale 2015; Boret, Long and Kan 2017; Khapaeva 2017; O'Mahony 2016; Walter 2017, 2021; Doig 2022 – just to mention a few important titles out of many). In one of the more theoretical attempts to capture the contemporary 'death mentality' it has been suggested that we currently live in times of 'Spectacular Death' (Jacobsen 2016, 2020) as a sort of new fifth phase building on and adding to the four preceding historical phases of collective 'death mentalities' suggested by Ariès,

ending with his notion of ‘Forbidden Death’. Inspired in part by Ariès’s work, the aforementioned ideas of the ‘death awareness movement’, the ‘revival of death’ thesis and the changing ‘deconstruction strategies’, it is perhaps an appropriate time to move beyond the by now conventional ideas of death taboo and death denial so central to Ariès’s last phase of ‘Forbidden Death’ covering large parts of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. According to the notion of ‘Spectacular Death’, the new developments within death and dying can be described by at least (but not exclusively) five inter-related dimensions of in our collective attitude towards and approach to death and dying in contemporary Western society. We will look into each of these five dimensions below:

– *The mediation/mediatization of death*: Once upon a time, death was a very physical, concrete and observable event taking place in the midst of the local community. Dying and death were experiences difficult to hide away, and mostly no particular efforts were made (or were available) in order to spare the dying or the relatives and community of the pain, agony and suffering sometimes associated with death. Obviously, today death is still a very tangible and physical thing: a living organic body dies (for different reasons) and is transformed into inorganic matter. As mentioned above, previously in human history people were used (and forced) to see, smell, hear and touch dead bodies – dying and death were an integral part of everyday life. Today, this is increasingly something delegated to different groups of ‘professionals’ and we have in the process lost a lot of the direct and unmediated contact with the dead body known to our ancestors. In this way, our contact with death is increasingly *mediated* by others (e.g., healthcare professionals, funeral directors, grief counsellors, etc.). Moreover, due to the significant developments in the availability and use of information technologies over the past decades our engagement with death and dying is today to a large extent a *mediatized* experience – we mostly read and hear about death and dying in the newspaper and the radio or watch in on the television or computer screen. This is the case with actual as well as fictional death. It was estimated back in the 1970s in an American study by John Hick (and quoted by Bauman 1992), that children in 1971 by the age of fourteen would have watched around 18.000 cases of death on television (many of which were obviously fictional). It makes good sense to stipulate that with the widespread availability of a variety of different technological platforms and gadgets, this number has multiplied many times since then. We are simply surrounded by the availability of mediatized death already from early on. In addition, our condolences and expressions of grief and sympathy are often shared with friends and unknown strangers in a virtual universe such as on social media or different specialized forms of memorial sites rather than being expressed and shared in face-to-face situations (see, e.g., Han 2020; Sumiala 2022). For this reason, death and dying is now

something we mostly read about or watch with a mixture of insatiable appetite and trembling terror, but when was the last time we actually saw or touched a real dead person? Death has become spectacular, mainly because we meet and treat it as a 'spectacle' – something to be watched from afar and often as part of products made available by the omnipresent entertainment industry and media agencies.

– *The commercialization of death*: Death does seldom come for free. It has always been associated with certain costs – paying for absolution, prayers or promises of salvation prior to death as well as managing the many different practicalities following death when disposing of the dead body. The fact that money can be made on death is therefore far from a novel thing. Death has always required certain 'intermediaries' or 'go-betweens' who could take care of the practical, ritual, judicial, financial and emotional aspects arising in connection to someone's death (think of priests, lawyers, funeral directors, grief counsellors, etc.). But something has changed particularly in modern times. The classic local undertaker who catered for the local community has gradually turned into a modern-day 'mortician', 'funeral director' or 'funeral advisor', sometimes working as part of a large-scale 'funeral industry', and psychologically trained 'grief therapists' now – charging hourly rates – supply the emotional support and advice previously offered to the dying and bereaved by the clergy. This development was already hinted at by Jessica Mitford in her study of the American funeral business in the early 1960s (Mitford 1963). In this way, dying, death and grief has been thoroughly commercialized and professionalized experiences in contemporary society as many people no longer rest assured that they themselves can manage these difficult events and decisions. Also in other contexts is death something that is being bought and sold – it has been thoroughly commercialized by the imaginative advertising and entertainment industries all too well aware that 'death sells' (Berridge 2002). Death is now used to market a variety of different consumer products or to create public interest in provocative art exhibitions containing visual reproductions and representations of death as well as in the publishing and movie-making industry's constant outpouring of books or films dealing with or playing on the topic of death. The ingrained and almost inexhaustible human curiosity about death is transformed by artists, film producers and book sellers into recognizable cultural artefacts and symbols such as artificial skulls or skeletons used as popular consumer items to sell almost anything (Kearl 2010). Dina Khapaeva (2017) has insightfully described how in recent decades a new 'death cult' has emerged in the United States (and increasingly also elsewhere in the Western world) that virtually amounts to a cultural celebration of death evident, for example, in the by now global popularity of the Halloween concept, the appeal of the horror genre in books, movies and television series,

and in many other areas of social life. We also see a rising interest in reading about anatomical and dissectional detail from those who work professionally with the dead bodies (see, e.g., Black 2019) and a public pilgrimage to the constantly touring and immensely popular *Bodyworlds* exhibitions (Walter 2004). Where there is death, there is surely money to be made.

– *The re-ritualization of death, dying and grief*: Throughout history and across all cultures, death has always been a highly important and thus highly ritualized transitional event. In all known human societies, death has remained a thoroughly ritualized event in the life of the individual as well as of the community being marked with private and/or public rites. Death without ritual, tradition or ceremony is almost unimaginable and meaningless, not least because death – perhaps more than any other rite of passage in life – is so definitive and incomprehensible. Rituals provide meaning, comfort and predictability when experiencing the emotional turmoil associated with death, dying and grief. Whereas modern society in many ways marked a radical rupture in regard to established traditions and ancient rituals intended to be replaced by efficiency, rationality, science and secularity, in recent decades we have witnessed an interest in the rediscovery and revival of old rites and customs and the invention of new ones in contemporary society in connection to death, dying, grief and memorial practices. Initiatives such as ‘death cafes’, ‘memorial walks’, ‘death awareness weeks’, ‘spontaneous rituals’, transferring the Mexican ‘Day of the Dead’ to Western contexts, inventing new personalized and customized ways of planning funeral services, innovative ornamenting of the gravesite and creative ways of memorializing the deceased, recognizing the importance of end-of-life rituals even in hospital facilities or nursing homes, experimenting with new ways of disposing of the dead body, etc. – all this clearly indicates that there is still a deep-seated wish and need for a ritualized passage to the unknown. Obviously, there is both a demand side and a supply side to this which makes the aforementioned commercialization and the re-ritualization processes of death, dying and grief closely intertwined. There are many entrepreneurial companies interested in and capable of assisting the dying, dead and bereaved in ritualizing their last farewell. The proposed re-ritualization of death as part of an age of ‘Spectacular Death’ also testifies to a growing public awareness and recognition of the possibility for taking personal responsibility for one’s own death evident, for example, in documents such as ‘My Last Will’ which allow people to specify in advance their requests for specific rituals, psalms, burial preferences, memorial service, etc.

– *The humanization of death (or the palliative care revolution)*: Developments in medical science have been speeding up during modern times, leading also to a constantly increasing average life-expectancy

(particularly in the Western world). Only two centuries ago, very few people died in the hospital since hospitals – as we know them as large-scale and highly specialized modern institutions – were not yet established, and even less so intended as places to die. Throughout large parts of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, it became increasingly customary that people died in hospitals and/or nursing homes – removed from their private home which throughout most of human history had provided the physical setting when people drew their last breaths. Modernity was in this respect a gigantic institutionalization project inscribing the denizens of modern society from cradle to grave into a variety of institutional settings: schools, factories, prisons and hospitals. During the 1960s and 1970s, as we saw above, new voices began to contest and counter this institutionalization – and with it also a hospitalization, medicalization and professionalization – of death and dying. The modern hospice initiatives (closely connected to the aforementioned ‘death awareness movement’) marked one first step towards creating a new platform for an alternative way of understanding and dealing with death and dying in modern society – a way also inspired by ancient ideals of a ‘good death’ that with the notions of ‘total pain’ and ‘total care’ wanted to look beyond pain as only a physical or medically manageable phenomenon. Nowadays, palliative care wards, hospices and palliative medicine have gradually become an integral part of the way death can be dealt with in the healthcare systems of most advanced societies (although in many other parts of the world these initiatives are still conspicuous mainly by their absence). This development – dating only back to the late 1960s – in many respects marks a silent revolution in our management of death and dying, being ignited by ideas about ‘death awareness’, ‘dying with dignity’, ‘acceptance’ and a concern with the psychological, spiritual, social and emotional dimensions of death, dying and grief. But whereas palliative care initially was regarded as a critical thorn in the side of the conventional curative hospital system, today it also increasingly contains, incorporates and merges certain elements of medical control and new forms of institutionalization with its focus on patient-centered care and individualized decisions (think of the hospice or the palliative care ward), thus combining different aspects of Walter’s (1994) aforementioned ‘late-modern’ and ‘postmodern’ strands of death revival.

– *The academic attention to and specialization of death:* Apart from the growing concern with and attention towards new ways of dealing with death and dying in the modern healthcare system, also within the scientific community has death gradually become a topic of some interest. Half a century ago, reflecting the ‘death mentality’ of the time, most colleagues in the social sciences and humanities would have been astonished (if not downright appalled) to discover that someone in their department was researching death and dying. It would probably have

been a rather lonely endeavour with few if any colleagues with whom to share knowledge. Death was for most parts regarded as an academic no-go topic – a dead-end for any promising research career. The taboo on and denial of death thus also extended well into the intellectual ivory towers, and the social scientific publications dealing with death were thus relatively few and far between. However, things have changed considerably since then, and during the 1960s and 1970s and onwards death and dying began to interest scholars and researchers (sometimes even prominent names) working within areas such as historical studies, sociology, psychology, theology, philosophy, anthropology and related disciplines. Death was suddenly discovered as a topic worthy of intellectual consideration and a torrent of academic literature began to be published (see, e.g., Simpson 1979; Vovelle 1980). Since then, death has lost some of its previous obscurity and has now become a legitimate – albeit still somewhat unconventional – topic alongside many other research concerns and now with academic journals, seminars, conferences, research groups and research grants devoted to the study of death, dying and grief. Considerable theoretical and empirical work is now being conducted and published some of which try to capture some of the significant changes taking place in our collective attitude and relationship towards death and dying.

These are the five central dimensions or main features of ‘Spectacular Death’ understood as a new type of contemporary ‘death mentality’. They each provide some perspectives on and insights into how, why and where death, which – at least according to some prominent theories – was previously tabooed and denied, has now slowly but securely ‘come out of the closet’ in society in general and in more specialized areas such as within the healthcare system and academia. However, these are obviously not the only (or necessarily the most significant) changes taking place within the area of death and dying in contemporary society. Adding to as well as transversing these five central dimensions of ‘Spectacular Death’, there is also – and perhaps particularly as a consequence of the palliative care revolution and its humanizing impact on the healthcare system at large – a renewed and ongoing public debate in many Western countries about a number of important medical, ethical and judicial aspects of dying and how to ‘die well’, to secure a ‘good death’ and also a ‘good grief’ and not least about the right to choose ‘euthanasia’ (see, e.g., Dugdale 2015; Hagger and Woods 2020; Leget 2017; Webb 1999). As a sort of practical and spiritual source of inspiration for our own time, often in the research and practice-oriented literature there has been a specific focus on how to restore classic ideals of the ‘art of dying’ (the so-called *ars moriendi*) and to provide guidelines for how to ‘die well’, ‘die clarified’ or ‘die peacefully’ that previously made it possible for people to live with death and accept dying without needing to taboo and deny it.



As indicated above, the notion of 'Spectacular Death' tries to capture our contemporary relationship towards death in a Western context in which death has become a 'spectacle' – something observed and managed at a safe distance as part of the mediatized consumer and entertainment industry, highly professionalized healthcare practices or academic specialization, whereas 'real death' is continuously something that is regarded as unpleasant and problematic – or perhaps even tedious. Obviously, it is important to stress that our relationship or attitude towards death is never completely straightforward or one-dimensional. This is also the case with 'Spectacular Death'. In some respects the notion is to be regarded as a sort of antidote to Ariès's idea of 'Forbidden Death' – a period in which death was supposedly a completely no-go topic of polite conversation and a thoroughly repressed and denied phenomenon in public life. According to most scholarly accounts dealing with death throughout large parts of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, death at that time was tabooed, denied, medicalized, institutionalized and thoroughly sequestered. However, the notion of 'Spectacular Death' also represents a sort of more or less direct extension of Ariès's idea, because contemporary society is still bent on subjecting death and processes of dying to control, management and containment. In this way, death has not been 'emancipated', and it is indeed questionable if and to what degree the taboo on it has actually been lifted – or just been transformed.

Moreover, it is important to emphasize that the suggested notion of 'Spectacular Death' does not imply or insist that *all* deaths have now suddenly become 'spectacles' – in fact, far from it. The vast majority of natural and normal deaths still take place in relative silence behind closed doors and accessible only to the closest of relatives and healthcare professionals. Taking place on a daily basis, these events do not attract any public attention. The notion *does* suggest, however, two important things that hint at a quite significant transformation in collective death attitudes and practices. First of all, that death is now increasingly – as compared to the time when Ariès wrote about 'Forbidden Death' – exposed and made publicly visible through new mediated/mediatized, commercialized, ritualized and professionalized practices (such as within palliative care or death studies). The notion of 'Spectacular Death' does thus suggest that death – at least to some extent – in recent decades has become a much more publicly talked about and visible part of social life, perhaps particularly within the areas of entertainment and popular culture, but also within more practice-oriented sections of the healthcare system such as in the many hospice initiatives, palliative care practice, in grief therapy and grief counselling and not least – as mentioned above – in different academic disciplines dealing with the topics of death, dying and grief. Secondly, the notion of 'Spectacular Death' proposes that all (or at least most) deaths *in principle* can become spectacular if they are singled out as publicly 'interesting', 'problematic'

or ‘tragic’, thus demanding media attention, public engagement and political action. Even the seemingly most natural or expected death can make it to the front cover of the newspaper if family members reveal or if journalists dig out something seedy, secretive or socially preposterous, and particularly if it happens to someone regarded as of ‘public interest’ (e.g., a Hollywood celebrities, football stars or famous politicians). But mostly the deaths that make headlines are the tragic, unexpected and dramatic ones – deaths that could or should somehow have been avoided.

In short, ‘Spectacular Death’ inaugurates a time in which we seem to be more interested in getting closer to death, to become acquainted with it and recognize it as part of our lives, but without embracing it because we also want to stay at a safe distance of it. Unexpected, dramatic and tragic deaths happening to strangers are interesting, momentarily upsetting and sometimes even entertaining (particularly if it relates to celebrities), thus capturing our sometimes boundless morbid curiosity, whereas ‘normal death’ (as it happens to most people most of the time) is mostly regarded as dull, boring and unpleasant – nothing entertaining about that. In addition to this, the notorious and incurable short-term nature of our modern curiosity, memory and interest makes us less keen to want to get acquainted with real or normal death, not least because it also demands our engagement, our deeper contemplation and acceptance of the uncomfortable, unpleasant and distressing reality of inevitable death.

## Discussion

The foregoing presentation of some overall changes in our collective attitude towards and management of death and dying covering approximately the period since the 19<sup>th</sup> century in a Western context (broadly understood), which was defined by a transformation from ‘Death of the Other’ and ‘Forbidden Death’ (Ariès’s notions) to that of ‘Spectacular Death’ (my own proposed notion), reveals that what may be called our ‘death culture’ (or in Philippe Ariès’s terms ‘death mentality’) has undergone a gradual but rather considerable transformation throughout the past few centuries, and particularly with some significant changes taking place over the past few decades. Death has changed from being a rather important and integral part of social life (‘Death of the Other’) to being forbidden and hidden (‘Forbidden Death’) to being nowadays something showcased and witnessed in wonder but not really integrated into life (‘Spectacular Death’).

Obviously, this story is something of a caricature – in reality it is not all that linear or simple. Death (and with it death culture or death mentality) is a rather complex matter, and collective attitudes and approaches towards death and dying are indeed difficult to detect, docu-

ment and describe since death marks the absolute zero-point of social life. Moreover, it is not something we can easily get access to, not least because real death and real dying (even despite the suggested arrival of the age of 'Spectacular Death') continue to be socially sequestered phenomena kept mostly behind the scenes of public life. Attitudes, practices and experiences related to death and dying are therefore not easy to come by or dig out – and we still lack solid data material to work with. This also means that as social researchers we sometimes resort to what may be described as 'theorizing from the armchair' instead of adding to or drawing on the available material on death and dying from the realm of social reality that can be found sometimes in the oddest and most unlikely of places. In our interpretations of death culture we may thus risk ending up with historical and sociological caricature – simply because we lack the necessary empirical grounding of our theoretical ideas. In reality, death culture is a much more complex, diversified and ambivalent phenomenon than can be done justice to with catchy phrases or deceptively simple oneliners such as 'Forbidden Death' or 'Spectacular Death'. Yet, as social researchers and social commentators we are required to seek to provide some sort of theoretical conceptualization and explanation of the phenomena we study, and in this case 'Forbidden Death' and 'Spectacular Death' may serve quite well as analytical tools, knowing all too well that the reality of death is much more nuanced, many-sided and multi-dimensional.

Let us therefore discuss the idea of 'Spectacular Death' in order to tease out its potentials and some of its pitfalls. First of all, it should be emphasized that the proposed notion of 'Spectacular Death' is *not* to be regarded as a normative or critical concept, but rather as a descriptive or analytical one – whereas to Ariès the conceptualization of 'Forbidden Death' was undoubtedly intended as a normative notion taking his admiration for the 'Tamed Death' of the Middle Ages into consideration. Ariès used 'Tamed Death' as a label to be contrasted with the undesirable wildness of death during 'Forbidden Death'. However, it should be stressed that the perspective of 'Spectacular Death' provided here and intended as an interpretative framework not only represents a sort of rather simplified sociological caricature but also to some extent a grossly Eurocentric view of changes in death culture – not unlike the Eurocentric or Westernized view represented by the important work by Ariès (1974, 1981) or fellow historian Michel Vovelle (1983) or the sociological perspectives presented earlier by Tony Walter (1994) and Zygmunt Bauman (1992). In all these pieces of work – not detracting from their importance and originality – an unmistakable Western perspective on death is presented without any or only scattered considerations for the rich cultural, mortuary and funerary practices or belief systems found elsewhere in the world. Moreover, most of the writers who have contributed to this type of theoretical and/or empirical work

have themselves come from a Western background and having very little knowledge of or interest in how death is actually 'done' outside of Europe or North America. This also means that the historical and social changes in death culture or death mentality taking place in Africa, Asia or South America for that matter largely remain terra incognita in such predominantly Westernized theoretical elaborations (although we need to recognize the vast and rich yet selective empirical material supporting Ariès's thesis). The same obviously goes for my own proposed notion of 'Spectacular Death', which is as tainted by a Westernized perspective as the work of my many sources of inspiration. This reservation, however, does not call into question any of the importance or originality of the notions of 'Forbidden Death', 'Spectacular Death' 'revival of death' or 'deconstructions' of mortality and immortality, but it does suggest the need for some caution when 'moving' these ideas outside of a specific Western context.

This Eurocentric/Westernized view on death culture obviously cannot be directly or uncritically transferred or applied to other cultural contexts in order to understand or explain changes taking place elsewhere. It is thus important that we seek to avoid what may be termed 'the fallacy of misplaced transferability'. Not *all* theories about modernity and postmodernity fare equally well or can easily be transferred to or used as valid interpretative frameworks for understanding what takes place in non-Western cultures and societies in which processes of modernization and postmodernization have not (or not yet) – as in Western societies – had a significant impact. However, *some* (perhaps even many) of the general social and technological processes described as part of 'Spectacular Death' – mediatization, commercialization, the development of new rituals and the revival of old ones, developments and innovations within healthcare as well as the academic discovery of and specialization in new topics such as death and dying – are obviously not confined to any geographical area. Across the world we increasingly witness the extensive and intensive impact of large-scale processes such as globalization, consumerism, individualization and scientification within *many* areas of social life, and countries on the Asian, African and South-American continents are not immune to the impact of these influences. Such processes are not geographically limited but seep out, spread, gain foothold and impact societies and cultures far from their source of origin. We should, however, be careful not directly to transfer European or American developments in attitudes towards or in the management of death and dying for that matter to non-Western contexts – just as we should be careful when using universalistic sociological theories for example about 'the civilizing process' (Elias 1939/1994) as a theory necessarily explaining changes in behaviours, manners and state formation in African, Asian or South American countries. Obviously, such theories may be useful as an ideal type, a theoretical bench-

mark or a comparative yardstick with which to pinpoint and measure similarities and differences, but it is not necessarily empirically correct and it does therefore require the import of more context-dependent cases, information and data material in order to acquire meaning and explanatory potential.

Of course, although death is indeed a universal phenomenon with a fixed death rate anywhere and at any time at 100%, it verges on the blatantly banal or trivial to suggest that when it comes to death and dying no one-to-one relationship exist between different societies and cultures – historical as well as contemporary. Cultural differences and variations in social structures, traditions, social norms, values, beliefs, economic systems, societal setup (e.g., healthcare system), lifestyles and life expectancy make it difficult directly and meaningfully to compare attitudes towards death and dying between fundamentally different countries as well as comparing the way these events are managed across Western and non-Western contexts. There are many different reasons why different countries understand and manage death differently (see, e.g., Walter 2012). In order to appreciate this we need to resort to the rich material made available by scholars who have reported on or studied death and dying in a cross-cultural context (see, e.g., Morgan and Laungani 2003-2009; Selin and Rakoff 2019). We need to obtain knowledge and information about the way death is 'done' differently in a variety of different contexts in order to be able more accurately to assess if and to what extent theoretical or analytical frameworks such as 'Forbidden Death' or 'Spectacular Death' work well outside a specifically Western context. For example, as Kiaresh Aramesh (2016) concluded in his comparative study of the death attitudes in Western and Persian cultures, there are indeed historical overlaps and cultural similarities but also some significant differences, and although Ariès's different stages of development in 'death mentality' from the Middle Ages to the 20<sup>th</sup> century or from a traditional to a modern mind-set can indeed be seen also in Persian contexts, some adaptation and twisting is necessary for the theory to work properly. Also other studies have hinted at certain similarities but also at some quite significant differences between Western and non-Western conceptions of death and dying (see, e.g., Eyetsemitan 2002; Lee and Vaughan 2008), thus casting doubt on the direct applicability and transferability of for example Ariès's 'stages of death mentality' to other non-Western contexts. Moreover, many of these non-Western contexts have in fact not experienced or instituted a heavy taboo on or denial of death throughout large parts of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as was the case in Europe and North America (at least according to many historical, sociological and psychological theories), so they have not in a similar way recently experienced a 'revival' or 'revolution' of death but rather a more smooth and gradual transition (if any at all). Some of them only relatively recently underwent

the so-called ‘take-off’ phase towards modernity as famously described by Walt Rostow (1960) that most Western societies passed through during the 19<sup>th</sup> century and early parts of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Moreover, many of these countries still remain clustered within the ‘traditional/survival values’ section rather than the ‘secular/self-expression’ section (as many Western societies) as documented by the World Value Survey (see Inglehart and Welzel 2022). This also means that some of the implicit or underlying preconditions for the main features of ‘Spectacular Death’ – such as commercialization and an advanced medical system – does not necessarily relate particularly well to them. The main characteristics of the death mentalities of ‘Forbidden Death’ as well as ‘Spectacular Death’ will probably be particularly prevalent in societies or cultures where life is not concerned with daily struggles for survival, in which the familiarity with and visibility of death is reduced to a minimum and in which death is mostly managed by professionals and can be somehow kept in the shadows or behind the curtains of social life. As already Sigmund Freud (1915/1957) had insisted, as we saw earlier, for so-called ‘uncivilized’ or ‘prehistoric’ people death was a commonplace experience that did not trigger the same experiences of fear and discomfort which it does for those inhabiting the modern world in which death is increasingly explained, managed, processed and made meaningful by a scientific worldview rather than by traditional values and religious beliefs.

In addition to this, we also need to realize and recognize that even *within* ‘Western societies’ there are many significant differences. So besides the difficulties involved in the direct transferability of Westernized perspectives to non-Western contexts, we also need to remember that in themselves the very notions of the ‘Western’ and the ‘non-Western’ cover a mind-boggling and bountiful range of different cultural traditions, expressions, manifestations and practices based on religion, social structure, modes of production, etc. Deciding whether and to what extent Ariès’s history of ‘death mentalities’ or my own proposed notion of ‘Spectacular Death’ may work as meaningful interpretative frameworks with which and against which to interpret, compare and measure other historical epochs or cultures is ultimately a matter of trying it out in practice through extensive empirical research paying close attention both to differences and similarities.

But despite historical and cultural differences, death is, as mentioned already in the beginning of this article, something that *all* societies and cultures need to confront and attend to. For this reason, death (and especially our thoughts about and practices related to it) is a phenomenon or ‘problem’ that requires multi-disciplinary collaboration and understanding from a range of perspectives such as sociology, philosophy, theology, psychology, anthropology, history, economics, medical history and so on. As suggested by Richard Huntington and Peter Metcalf (1979)

earlier in the beginning of this article, the cross-cultural expressions and manifestations of death and the ways it is managed and celebrated are indeed mind-boggling and bountifully different but we also see some transference of ideas and practices from one cultural background to another. Think of how the celebration of Halloween is now a global phenomenon reaching outside of the North American continent, the interest in copying ideas from the Mexican 'Day of the Dead' extends beyond Latin America, the modern hospice movement philosophy and palliative care practice originally developed in a Anglo-American context is now adopted in many different countries (however far from all), and looking at published academic literature and research shows that scholarly work on death and dying is also conducted at universities and research institutions outside of Europe and North America. All in all, the different dimensions of 'Spectacular Death' described above can indeed in *some* shape or form or to *some* degree also be detected many different places outside of the Western world, which due to globalization and multiculturalism is itself being inspired by ideas and practices from afar – so it is clearly not a one-way or one-dimensional development we currently witness. Our contemporary death mentality is indeed a complex mixture of many different sources of inspiration and influence that coagulate into constituting what has here been preliminarily described as 'Spectacular Death'.

## Conclusion

This article has outlined some of the main contours of our changing relationship and collective attitude towards death and dying in the modern Western world (broadly understood) as a backdrop for briefly discussing if (or if not) and to what extent such changes are also necessarily identifiable within and representative of non-Western contexts. Based on the work of Philippe Ariès and his different phases of 'death mentality' from 'Tamed Death' in the Middle Ages to 'Forbidden Death' in modern society, it was suggested that we now live in a new phase described as 'Spectacular Death'. Some defining features of this death mentality were then outlined. It was suggested that some of the central dimensions and features of the age of 'Spectacular Death' are likely to find their way also into areas and cultures outside what we tend to call 'the Western world' – the mediation/mediatization, the commercialization, the re-ritualization, the humanization and the academic attention to and specialization of death. These are – in varying degree – all features of the contemporary global landscape that are not limited to the West. But it was also suggested that these tendencies each in their way will find their *own specific* expressions and manifestations when seeping into and being incorporated into different cultures with less modern and more traditional outlooks. Not *all* aspects will necessarily mirror

and reflect what we see and have seen in the West – and we need to recognize that even within ‘the West’ (again broadly understood), there are many local, regional, national, cultural and social differences in the developments taking place.

The article has aspired to provide some admittedly tentative and mainly theoretical food for thought that would obviously require further empirical exploration and qualification. For this reason, the empirical ‘evidence’ provided throughout the article has truly been rather sparse, but the main point has also been to present some analytical ideas about our contemporary culture of death in the West and to discuss where it has come from, what it looks like now and where it may be heading – also outside a Western context. Death never stands still – at least when it comes to our conception of it, our attitude towards it and our management of it, which always reflect the time and place in which we are living and experiencing death. In the article, there was a focus specifically on the changes in ‘death mentality’ taking place throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries – or what has been described as the transformation from modern to late-modern/postmodern society. It was suggested that over the past half a century, we have gradually moved away from what has been characterized as an age of ‘Forbidden Death’ – in which death is tabooed, denied and sequestered – towards a new age of ‘Spectacular Death’ in which there is a constant tug of war between different inherently opposite tendencies such as continued tabooing, distancing and sequestration on the one hand and visibility, awareness and acceptance on the other. The contemporary death mentality in the Western world (‘Spectacular Death’) is thus characterized by pushes and pulls and a variety of co-existing but mutually opposite trends and tendencies.

The purpose of the article has not been to present or detail any anthropological or sociological findings from non-Western cultures, but only to consider and discuss whether the proposed developments and changes identified as part of a modern/late-modern/postmodern Western perspective on death and dying are also meaningful and relevant to use as a theoretical framework or analytical template for understanding and interpreting non-Western contexts. The argument was that we should *not* attempt uncritically to transfer these mainly theoretical and analytical ideas from a Western to a non-Western experience, thus committing the error of theoretical colonization or what was termed ‘the fallacy of misplaced transferability’. On the other hand, however, due to ongoing processes of globalization, mediatization, commercialization, scientification and individualization reaching far beyond the West, it makes good sense to suggest that some parts of ‘Spectacular Death’ – perhaps even significant parts of it – in time may also become visible and evident in non-Western societies. The conclusion must thus be that the scope of the notion of ‘Spectacular



Death' (as that of 'Forbidden Death') requires more empirical testing, elaboration and refinement – which actually pertains to Western and non-Western contexts alike.

As a sort of conclusion to the ideas and suggestions of this chapter, it perhaps makes some sense to re-phrase an important insight from British sociologist Jeffrey Weeks who in his study of the continuous historical shifts in and changing social constructions of sexuality memorably stated that 'as sex goes, so goes society. As society goes, so goes sexuality' (Weeks 2003:20). Taking the perspective of this article into consideration, we might then reasonably suggest: as death goes, so goes society. As society goes, so goes death.

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