

Article

“Spectacular Death”—Proposing a New Fifth Phase to Philippe Ariès’s Admirable History of Death

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Abstract: This article revisits, reviews and revises the much cited and magisterial description of successive historical death mentalities from the Middle Ages to modern society as proposed several decades ago by French historian Philippe Ariès. The article first outlines Ariès’s position starting out with the medieval “tamed death,” then moves on to point to several inherent limitations in his history-writing, before suggesting a revision and update of it. Whereas Ariès ended his history-writing with modern “forbidden death,” the author suggests that contemporary death mentality in Western society rather be labelled “spectacular death” in which death, dying and mourning have increasingly become spectacles. Moreover, the author proposes that what is currently happening in contemporary Western society can be interpreted as an expression of a “partial re-reversal” of “forbidden death” to some of the characteristic features of previous historical death mentalities, which—coupled with contemporary scientific and technological possibilities—creates several paradoxical tendencies making death linger uneasily between liberation and denial as well as between autonomy and control.

Keywords: Philippe Ariès; death mentality; tamed death; forbidden death; spectacular death; partial re-reversal

1. Introduction

Death is here to stay. It has been here all along. In all likelihood it will remain forever. All known societies have been forced to familiarize themselves with the fact of human death. Death is thus an integral part of human experience and existence—in the life of the individual human being, who is eventually going to die, in the development of society, as well as in the overall history of the human species. Although humankind throughout its history in infinite and quite often inventive and ingenious ways incessantly has tried to counter, postpone, delete or, when unsuccessful, reconcile itself with death, death still is and continues to be the main problem of the living who will have to live with and learn to accept that—at least so far—all attempts to destroy death have proven to be in vain. As German sociologist Norbert Elias once stated in his rendition of the human concern with death:

Death is the problem of the living. Dead people have no problems. Of the many creatures on this earth that die, it is human beings alone for whom dying is a problem . . . They alone of all living beings know that they shall die; they alone can anticipate their own end . . . It is not actually death, but the knowledge of death, that creates problems for human beings. ([1], pp. 3–5).

Death—and more specifically the unbearable awareness and knowledge of death—is thus a continuous task for the living to try to deal with. In fact, culture itself, and hence all kinds of culture, is a contraption intended to make such a life with death bearable and livable ([2], p. 31). Moreover, society not only consists of people going about the daily business of living their lives—it can also

accurately be described as people living-towards-death, as people banded together in the face of death ([3], p. 52). As once proposed by Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman:

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. ([4], p. 9).

Trying to cope with, avoid, understand or live with death and the knowledge of it is thus one of the main defining features of all human life and of any kind of social and cultural organization. The apparent absurdity of a life lived-towards-death therefore turns into the very source of meaning in life. Without death, much of what we do, say, think or plan would be incomprehensible or even downright meaningless. Hence death, just as much as life, is a defining characteristic of human existence.

Although the problem of death has been and in all probability will remain an integral part of human existence, death does not stand still. In itself, death is nothing. Even though death as such—death as an incontrovertible biological and natural fact of life—is a constant in our mortal lives, our comprehension of and attitude towards death—death as a “social construct”—continuously changes, albeit most often in ways almost invisible to the naked eye. In general, changes in our comprehension of and attitudes towards death are brought about by changes in our life conditions in areas such as historical, social, economic, religious, political and technological development. In short, we need to locate and interpret death in its historical, social and cultural circumstances in order to understand the impact of death in human life. Any adequate sociological analysis of death therefore needs to consider death as a historical, social and cultural phenomenon. One of those who have attempted to locate death in its historical, social and cultural circumstances was French historian of mentalities, Philippe Ariès (1914–1984), who in several important pieces of work proposed a potent and admirable analytical schema for understanding, categorizing and discussing historical changes in our “death mentality” [5–7]. By studying such “mentalities,” Ariès was not simply interested in what happened in the minds of concrete individuals, but by “death mentalities” he referred to intensive as well as extensive transformations in the very collective and cultural psychology of a given historical epoch ([8], p. 18). In fact, even today Ariès's work in many social science studies of death in the Western world still remains the key citation and main frame of reference despite the by now many years since its publication.

This article will initially provide a short overview of Ariès's much-cited, much-used and also much-abused work on the history of death and particularly his development of four stages of “death mentality” in the Western world from the Middle Ages to the present period (the late 20th century). Then the article proceeds first by critiquing certain aspects of Ariès's stage-theory and then by proposing a fifth contemporary phase captured by the analytical term “spectacular death” (covering the late 20th century and early 21st century). Contrary to the final historical phase of Ariès's writings (“forbidden death”), “spectacular death” inaugurates a revival of interest in death, dying and bereavement, professionally, politically, publicly and personally, which renders problematic the notions of taboo, denial and disappearance of death that was so characteristic of Ariès's “forbidden death.” In this part of the article, different dimensions of “spectacular death” are proposed and discussed. The article is concluded with the suggestion that “spectacular death” signals a “partial re-reversal” of “forbidden death” and with a discussion of whether we are now experiencing a demise and disappearance of the death taboo of “forbidden death” or whether this fifth phase of “spectacular death” just as its historical predecessor is also haunted by a denial and sequestration of death.

The primary purpose of this article is therefore to summarize as well as to update the stage-theory of historical death mentalities as proposed by Philippe Ariès more than four decades ago in order to show that we need to add a new fifth phase to capture our contemporary social and cultural

death scene. Admittedly, the article is much more suggestive than assertive, much more indicative than conclusive, much more interpretative than documentative, and much more polemical than characterized by historical “precision.” Moreover, its aim is not so much to test whether or not specific stages of death mentalities are historically accurate, “correct” or corroborated as it is to suggest an interpretative framework for understanding and accessing our contemporary state of play in regard to our attitudes towards and social practices and cultural organization surrounding death.

2. A Thousand Years of Death Mentality in Western History

There is not only one narrative to be told about the grand and protracted history of death, but rather multiple and indeed very different stories ([9], p. 68). However, the one story that has continued to reverberate throughout the international research landscape, the most cited and celebrated, is undoubtedly the one told in great detail by Philippe Ariès. He described himself as a “Sunday historian” because his professional research path before becoming what has been described as the “doyen of the historians of death” ([10], p. 88) had been so unexpected and unconventional starting out for thirty years archiving documents about tropical fruits ([11], p. 11). Despite this self-effacing, self-descriptive label of the “Sunday historian,” only very few publications dealing with the topic of death and dying in the social sciences or humanities within the last several decades have dared to commit the mortal sin of omitting the magisterial work of Ariès from their lists of references. Obviously, Ariès was not alone in trying to decipher the history of death. Many others, particularly French historians, also ventured into studying the *longue durée* of death, concerning themselves with labelling, defining, capturing and baptizing different epochs of death attitudes and practices in human history, including Edgar Morin, Michelle Vovelle, Pierre Chanu and François Lebrun [12–14]. Moreover, in recent years a new wave of interest in delineating and categorizing the magnificently complex history of death has also swept across the social sciences and particularly the discipline of sociology [15–18]. Therefore, although what Ariès once described as the “chorus of thanatologists” has been expanding quite substantially throughout especially the latter part of the 20th century, no other history of death has approximately achieved the same amount of attention, citation and recognition as that of Ariès himself.

His three major pieces of work on death—*Western Attitudes Toward Death from the Middle Ages to the Present* [5], *The Hour of Our Death* [6] and *Images of Man and Death* [7]—all, with some minor adjustments, tell the same story of death and death mentalities being transformed throughout one thousand years of Western European (and to some extent also North American) history. Obviously, the real history of death does not have a starting point, nor does it have an end point. However, according to Ariès, it makes good analytical sense to divide the past millennium into four relatively distinct phases of different death mentalities in the West starting out with the Middle Ages. People clearly also died prior to this period, but Ariès—contrary to others who have included the Stone Ages as well as the Ancient Greeks and Romans in their history-writing [16,17]—sets off in his work from medieval practices and attitudes. Ariès’s four stages—“tamed death,” “one’s own death/death of the self,” “thy death/death of the other” and “forbidden/invisible death”—function quite well as a way to organize an otherwise complex and multi-faceted historical process. Admittedly, the four stages—and the almost unavoidable determinism in their sequential ordering—may appear reductionist and trivial, but it does the job, as it were, in arranging a tremendous amount of connected, semi-connected and seemingly unconnected details into a readable and impressive historical plot.

As was hinted at above, Ariès was not entirely consistent in his history-writing on death. In the first published work, *Western Attitudes Toward Death from the Middle Ages to the Present* [5], Ariès had originally only mentioned four major stages of death mentality, whereas in the much more detailed *The Hour of Our Death* [6], he listed five stages. Here we will consider only the four-stage version of his work because the fifth phase—the 16th century “remote and imminent death” squeezed in between “death of the self” and “death of the other”—is not particularly relevant to the argument presented in this article. Moreover, Ariès initially labelled the first phase “tamed death” thus insisting that although

death, in and of itself, was perhaps not tame, people were successful in taming it. Later, in *The Hour of Our Death* [6], Ariès instead termed it “the tame death,” thereby indicating that death as such was in fact in the Middle Ages a tame phenomenon. Whether this was anything but a terminological gimmick or an accidental slip-up, or whether it should be interpreted as an important analytical statement is difficult to determine and should not concern us here; we will thus consistently use the original notion of “tamed death.”

Although Ariès was well aware that the history of death dates much further back than merely the last one thousand years, the analytical starting point for him was nonetheless the “tamed death” of the medieval period. To him, “tamed death” thus served at the all-important yardstick—analytically as well as normatively—for all the subsequent changes in death attitudes documented and discussed in his work. “Tamed death” was in almost every possible respect different from death in contemporary modern society—it was the, at least at times, relieving and not too upsetting culmination of an often relatively short and unpleasant life (the average life expectancy being around 30 years) lending support to Thomas Hobbes’s famous description of premodern life as “nasty, brutish and short.” Despite this, the period of “tamed death” for Ariès embodied an undisguised familiarity with death and a physical and spiritual proximity between the living and the dead evident in the *danse macabre* in many medieval paintings and woodcuts. Ariès wrote of these medieval people that “they were as familiar with dead as they were familiarized with the idea of their own death” ([5], p. 25). Death—and the buried and decomposing remains of the dead—was never far away in everyday life as people lived and died close together and hence life was lived in the conscious and inescapable shadow of death. The medieval deathbed would constitute the scene for the final farewell around which the local community would gather and communicate with the dying, who in religious imagery and iconography was also surrounded by angels and demons. Dying, death and mourning were thus public events. Religious sentiments and proscribed rituals (predominantly Catholic at that time in Europe) ensured that the sting of death was removed. Death was a prepared, accepted and solemn event without theatrics in which the dying presided. Although some of Ariès’s data material to document and describe the period of “tamed death” may seem somewhat dubious and limited in scope, he provided important insights into a death which—although undoubtedly feared and ferocious—nevertheless was an integral part of social life and an event with which one was made familiar throughout the short lifespan.

Cutting a potentially long story of death short, and without unnecessarily delving deeply into the wonderful nooks and crannies of Ariès’s treasure trove of historical detail, “tamed death” was throughout the late Middle Ages gradually replaced by the crystallizing of “death of one’s own.” This period marked a shift in death mentality that instead of focusing on death as such was more concerned with the individual and with the time of death as a moment of “maximum awareness.” The familiar ceremony of the deathbed now increasingly “became a spectacle reserved for the dying man alone and one which he contemplates with a bit of anxiety and a great deal of indifference” ([5], p. 34). Death, in short, became much more personal and it was now the individual’s own responsibility to secure a positive outcome of the final balancing of the books determining whether celestial peace and reconciliation or the sulfurous flames of purgatory waited in the end. Moreover, individual graves and sepulchers became much more common and tombstones became more individualized with personalized inscriptions. “Death of one’s own,” as indicated by its very denomination, was therefore about how the individual could prepare for, confront and reconcile himself with the inevitable. In the more voluminous *The Hour of Our Death* [6], Ariès mentioned a short period of interregnum described as a “turning of the tide” during the Renaissance as a metaphor for the landslide in our death mentality from familiarity with and proximity to death during “tamed death” and “death of one’s own” to increasing alienation and distance that was inaugurated by the end of “the death of one’s own.” This phase was then replaced with the arrival of what Ariès alternately termed “death of the other” and “thy death” or what has elsewhere been described as “beautiful death” [19]. Whereas “death of one’s own” had centered on the importance of witnessing the actions and beliefs of the person who was about to meet his or her maker, attention in “death of the other”—coinciding with the great

romantic period in European literature and art—now shifted to the experience of losing someone loved and to “a new intolerance of separation” ([5], p. 59). Hence mourning culture became much more elaborate and elegiac, etiquettes for prescribed mourning periods were enforced, and behavior and ceremonials were directed towards showing the deep sadness and despair associated with the loss of a beloved. Pietistic and spiritualistic “cults of the dead” testified to just how much death was now seen as a rupture and as greedy, therefore making mourners desperately seeking contact with the deceased. Victorian-style theatrics and strong and paroxysmic emotions took the role of simple ritual as the expression of sorrow increasingly became an exalted public spectacle. Graveyards were turned into monumental celebrations of the dead, while slow-moving mourning processions all dressed in black paraded the streets. Ariès partly ascribed this transformation to changes in our comprehension of the family from predominantly a financial unit to an emotional entity tied together by powerful affective bonds. Although the Victorians celebrated death, the period of “death of the other” eventually signaled the beginning of the end for death and mourning as public events and ushered in a relentless privatization and denial of everything associated with modern death, dying and mourning.

Throughout this protracted historical development of these three different and successive death mentalities over a thousand years in the West, processes of individualization, secularization, urbanization, the rise of humanism and the advancement of natural science were some of the main driving forces behind the gradual shift from one phase to the other and in many of the changes taking place in the planning, use and appearance of cemeteries, burial and disposal practices, relations between the living and the dead, eschatological beliefs, the time and place of dying and everything else associated with what is referred to as the “domain of death” ([6], p. 595). The final phase of Ariès’s writings was the “forbidden death” or “invisible death” so characteristic of the 20th century with its two life-wrecking world wars, its groveling admiration of any scientific and especially medical advancement, its significant expansion of our average life expectancy, its methodical questioning of theological and religious cosmologies and its increasing reliance on and spreading of information and communication technology—all of which have also had a tremendous impact on our current death mentality. Let us look a bit more detailed into this phase of “forbidden death” as it stands as a testimony of Ariès’s own time, age and death.

3. “Forbidden Death”: And Death Shall Have No Dominion

According to Ariès, throughout the long-drawn historical process leading from the aforementioned “tamed death” in the Middle Ages through “death of one’s own” and “death of the other” to the 20th century’s “forbidden death” of modern society, our understanding of and contact with death was slowly but profoundly transformed almost beyond recognition. He termed this phenomenon in French *la mort inversée*—“reversed death”—which involved several mutually supportive processes resulting in making death forbidden, hidden, invisible, marginalized and sequestered from experience. First, the “medicalization of death” meaning religion—that previously provided the primary explanatory framework for meaning-making *vis-à-vis* death, dying and hopes for immortality—gradually and with increasing intensity gave way to medicine and medical technology as the all-important means for controlling and making sense of death. Heaven, Hell and Purgatory disappeared as the final destination and were replaced by much more mundane, tangible and secularized substitutes [20,21]. Thus whereas the primary survival strategy was previously invested in the religiously grounded hope for eternal life beyond bodily existence, in modern society it was rather invested in the hope that medicine and later fitness and health would secure the bliss of immortality [22]. People thus increasingly started to seek comfort, hope and meaning from medicine when confronted with death and incurable disease, while technology overtook the role of ritual. Moreover, the doctor rather than the priest now claimed the throne as the “master of death,” and the hospital rather than the home became the place where people would draw their last breath. In Ariès’s apt and lamenting words:

Death in the hospital is no longer the occasion of a ritual ceremony, over which the dying person presides amidst his assembled relatives and friends. Death is a technical phenomenon obtained by the 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 ([5], p. 88).

An integral part of this medicalization of death was also what Ariès characterized as the routinized lying about death aimed at keeping the seriously ill and dying in the dark about their actual condition and imminent death—a situation well described in Lev Tolstoy’s classic literary depiction of the death of Ivan Ilyich. As a consequence of this, patients would die in “closed awareness contexts” [23] in which doctors and relatives conspired to preserve silence, order and ignorance. Indeed, it was a death so different from that of the past in which the dying person was in the know as well as in the driver’s seat. As part of this process, death was slowly removed from public sight—its medicalization went hand in hand with its privatization, institutionalization and professionalization. The dying and the dead were now stored in new types of warehouses—nursing homes, hospitals, sealed-off mortuaries and later in hospices inaccessible to most outsiders. Death became something to be spatially confined and policed [24]. As in Michael Lesy’s [25] book *The Forbidden Zone*, death now turned into the professional property of animal slaughterers, homicide detectives, doctors, coroners and embalmers, and the handling of death previously undertaken by non-professionals, families and friends now suddenly required specialized educational skills [26]. The much-cited “professionalization of everyone,” once mentioned by Harold Wilensky as a sign of the times, thus also pertained to the realm of death that became a domain of expertise and specialization. However, death not only disappeared from public life but also from many of our private dwellings as summarized by Walter Benjamin’s telling description of the transformation of our contact with death:

Dying was once a public process in the life of the individual and a most exemplary one; think of the medieval pictures in which the deathbed has turned into a throne toward which the people press through the wide-open doors of the death house. In the course of modern times dying has been pushed further and further out of the perceptual world of the living. There used to be no house, hardly a room, in which someone had not once died . . . Today people live in rooms that have never been touched by death, dry dwellers of eternity, and when their end approaches they are stowed away in sanatoria or hospitals by their heirs ([27], pp. 93–94).

Second, besides this medicalization, institutionalization and professionalization, Ariès also mentioned the “privatization and banning of mourning” from public life as part of the reversal process of death and dying. By the beginning of the 20th century, the powerful and expressive emotional climate associated with prolonged Victorian mourning practices and rituals had slowly become the source of embarrassment and inefficiency. Instead we would be expected to keep cool even when confronted with death and loss [28]. British sociologist Geoffrey Gorer [29] stated that death, due to widespread prudery and a reluctance or refusal to deal with it, had become a stranger while mourning—as some unspeakable sort of masturbation—and should be by all means kept private. During “forbidden death” one should therefore increasingly try to keep one’s grief at a minimum, at least securely locked away from any public display, and the purpose of grieving was in many prominent psychological theories of the time described as a relentless detachment process from the deceased. As death and mourning became problems needing to be solved in private or with the assistance of skilled professionals, the elderly, the dying and the bereaved came to experience the unbearable burden of loneliness [1]. C. S. Lewis’s wonderful autobiographical book, *A Grief Observed*, from 1961 [30] captured this new situation quite well in which mourning increasingly meant social isolation, loneliness, meaninglessness and the requirement of treatment from professionally trained bereavement counsellors and grief therapists.

Finally, Ariès also mentions the increasing “deritualization of death and mourning” evident, for example, in the increasing use of time-saving and minimalistic ceremonial practices and rituals such as cremation as the preferred mode of disposal instead of burial. Death and disposal has to be a swift and smooth process so that life could continue as uninterrupted by death as possible. This deritualization of everything associated with death, dying and mourning also meant that the collective and communal meaning-making that such rituals was traditionally imbued with became increasingly difficult and, when confronted with death, the individual was then left to find his or her own peace and purpose [31].

The overall outcome of this step-by-step “reversal of death” described by Ariès—death reversed from something natural and familiar to something pathological and dangerous—was that the dying had been deprived of their deaths. Death that was previously a familiar friend no longer appeared as an everyday phenomenon in people’s lives. It became extraordinary, something that we would seldom encounter and experience first-hand, something that was predominantly “managed” or “processed” professionally and something that was primarily filtered through media representations. Geoffrey Gorer incisively described this as the “pornography of death” in which natural death became shrouded in prudery while “violent death has played an ever-growing part in the fantasies offered to mass audiences—detective stories, thrillers, Westerns, war stories, spy stories, science fiction and eventually horror comics” ([29], p. 51). He thus observed a close parallel between the fantasies that used to titillate our curiosity about sex and pornography and the corresponding obscene fascination with death, but whereas the taboo on sex was gradually lifted, death seemed to sink ever deeper into denial and disrepute. Death, and everything associated with it, had now become a shameful, pathological and foreign object. Death was seen as the “scandal of reason” [4] and as something reminding us of our own powerlessness when confronted with the ultimate enemy. According to Ariès, contrary to everything else that we had been able to domesticate and rationalize, under the auspices of “forbidden death,” death—including the sight, smell, mentioning and knowledge of it—had instead become increasingly wild, untamed and uncivilized in marked contrast to the period of “tamed death”:

In a world of change the traditional attitude toward death appears inert and static. The old attitude in which death was both familiar and near, evoking no great fear or awe, offers too marked a contrast to ours, where death is so frightful that we dare not utter its name. This is why I have called this household sort of death “tamed death.” I do not mean that death had once been wild and that it has ceased to be so. I mean, on the contrary, that today it has become wild ([5], pp. 13–14).

Modern society and its “forbidden death” thus marked nothing less than what Joseph Jacobs at the threshold of the 20th century dramatically termed “the dying of death.” As he memorably observed, “there are no skeletons at our feasts nowadays” ([32], p. 264). Some of the main reasons for this “dying” or disappearance of death—and the accompanying social and cultural interdict on it—are to be found in changing demographics (e.g., the drastic reduction in infant mortality rates and a general rise in the average life expectancy of the population) but also in the fact that to most people most of the time, experiencing death became an extraordinary event in life. This modern death-defying mentality of “forbidden death” was perhaps most precisely summarized by Woody Allen’s wonderful *bon mot*: “It’s not that I’m afraid to die. I just don’t want to be there when it happens.” Ariès himself hinted at the same when stating that “technically, we admit that we might die . . . But really, at heart we feel we are non-mortals” ([5], p. 106). Thus, “forbidden death” was also a fertile compost heap for various illusions and dreams of immortality often intended to be achieved by medical or technological assistance.

As should be obvious from the admittedly compacted presentation of the phase of “forbidden death” above, Ariès was extremely critical of the development towards denial, taboo and distance in death. He was, however, also critical of the counter-tendency of the at the time budding thanatological movement. Ariès thus concluded his historical odyssey by prophetically looking into the near future:

A small elite of anthropologists, psychologists and sociologists has . . . (proposed) not so much to “evacuate” death as to humanize it. They acknowledge the necessity of death, but they want it to be accepted and no longer shameful. Although they may consult the ancient wisdom, there is no question of turning back or of rediscovering the evil that has been abolished. They propose to reconcile death with happiness. Death must simply become the discreet but dignified exit of a peaceful person from a helpful society that is not torn, not even overly upset by the idea of a biological transition without significance, without pain or suffering, and ultimately without fear ([6], p. 614).

In these, some of the famous last words Ariès published on death, he expressed his reservations about the thanatological ambition to humanize death and making it something to be achieved happily and as cheerful robots that seem utterly unconcerned with the fact of mortality. It was Ariès’s contention and conviction that despite the well-intended ambitions of the new “thanatological elite” of the “happy death movement” to make death less frightening and more dignified, the past familiarity with death seemed to be forever lost. He therefore lamented the gradual consolidation of “forbidden death” and its lack of contact with death and the disappearance of communal support and collective meaning-making that had marked the time of the “tamed death.” In this way, he seemed to repeat what has perhaps been a main leitmotif (and fallacy) in many parts of the history of death-writing, namely that the past provided people with a good death whereas the present-day medicalized, institutionalized and professionalized death necessarily promises—as compared to the past—a bad death [33].

4. Beyond Ariès

Without any doubt, Philippe Ariès left a generous, thought-provoking and lasting legacy behind for anyone interested in understanding or studying the history of death and dying in the West from the Middle Ages to the present day. Ariès himself met his own hour of death in 1984 and hence his amazingly insightful, equally detailed and comprehensive, history-writing—including works covering the histories of childhood, sexuality and family life—came to a natural halt. This also meant that the last phase of development of death mentalities, which he as mentioned above labelled “forbidden death,” has since stood as a final testimony of the prevalent death attitude in the world he left behind. However, as most historians, sociologists and other scholars would agree, the world of today is in many respects very different from the world of the mid-1980s. Many sociologists have therefore tried to capture this new epochal mentality or “collective conscience” at the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century with specifying epithets such as “postmodernity,” “reflexive modernity,” “late modernity,” “radicalized modernity,” “supermodernity,” “second modernity” or “liquid modernity”—all signaling that something quite substantial and groundbreaking has happened to our society during the latter decades of the preceding century and extending well into the new millennium.

Some of the main processes embodying and driving this development forward have been roundly described and diagnosed by sociologists as, for example, “de-traditionalization” (e.g., by Anthony Giddens), “individualization” (e.g., by Zygmunt Bauman), “globalization” (e.g., by Roland Robertson), “informalization” (e.g., by Cas Wouters), “risk society” (e.g., by Ulrich Beck), “network society” (e.g., by Manuel Castells), “postemotional society” (e.g., by Stjepan G. Meštrović), “surveillance society” (e.g., by David Lyon), “culture of fear” (e.g., by Frank Furedi), “consumerism” (e.g., by Zygmunt Bauman), “McDonaldization” (e.g., by George Ritzer), “Disneyization” (e.g., by Alan Bryman), “social acceleration” (e.g., by Hartmut Rosa), not to mention “multi-culturalism,” “secularization,” “psychologicalization,” “therapeutization,” the rise of a “new spirit of capitalism” and so on. The list is as long as it is difficult to summarize or streamline under one definitive heading. However, despite differences in terminology and emphasis, these various epithets and their underpinning diversified developmental processes each in their way point to and highlight how our contemporary world in many respects differs from that of those who lived through, experienced and died during the first two-thirds of the 20th century. In their own way, and particularly in combination, these social and

cultural developments described by many prominent social scientists have shown the necessity of new understandings of the status of death, dying and mourning in contemporary society.

Throughout the years, alongside substantial amounts of praise and admiration, Ariès's work has also been subjected to various kinds of criticism. For example, Norbert Elias accused Ariès of defending a nostalgic yearning for yesteryear in his undisguised normative predilection for and almost romanticized description of "tamed death." Elias observed how "Ariès's selection of facts is based on a preconceived opinion" that relies on idealizations and how he propounded a "one-sided historical perspective" ([1], pp. 12–14). One could also mention the fact that Ariès's work in many respects was Eurocentric/ethnocentric as it focused exclusively on Western European (French) and, to a lesser degree, North American cultural developments, thereby neglecting the rich and diverse material on death, dying and mourning that could be drawn from essentially different cultural backgrounds. Furthermore, although his work was generally characterized by a highly saturated use of historical data material, it at times rested on highly selective or limited data material, as, for example, when using the fabled story of the death of Roland the Knight as one of the primary sources for constructing the ideal typical "tamed death." Moreover, British sociologist Tony Walter ([34], p. 14) has added that Ariès underplayed the importance of the Reformation in explaining the changes taking place in death mentality during the 16th century that was an important factor in the aforementioned "turning of the tide." Although Ariès emphasized the importance of combining a synchronic and a diachronic perspective, it could also be suggested that his work represented a too deterministic or too simplistic model of historical development when proposing an almost unilinear progression from "tamed death" through "one's own death" and "death of the other" to "forbidden death." As poignantly observed by Zygmunt Bauman in his book on our deconstruction of death on any such analytical attempt—and not only that of Ariès—to boil down complex and bountiful human history into distinct and self-explanatory boxes, phases or stages:

We do not live, after all, once in a premodern, once in a modern, once in a postmodern world. All three "worlds" are but abstract idealizations of mutually incoherent aspects of the single life-process which we all try our best to make as coherent as we can manage ([4], p. 11).

In short, several authoritative voices, and especially from within the ranks of sociology, have uttered their reservations about different aspects of Ariès's otherwise praiseworthy history of death in the West. Ariès himself was fully aware that his history-writing was at times painted with too broad a brush that consciously neglected certain local or cultural dimensions or which drowned conflicting details in the service of the bigger and broader picture and the ambition to guide us through a millennial odyssey of our increasingly estranged struggle with death:

The historian of death must not be afraid to embrace the centuries until they run into a millennium. The errors he will not be able to avoid are less serious than the anachronisms to which he would be exposed by too short a chronology. Let us, therefore, regard a period of a thousand years as acceptable. Within this period, how are we to detect the changes that were not noticed by contemporaries? ([6], p. xvii).

Ariès primarily sought to answer this rhetorical question by drawing on what he himself described as intuitive or subjective material (in his own words contrary to the work of Michel Vovelle that was much more quantitatively oriented), which may in fact be one of the main reasons for some of the criticism raised against his work. He also willingly admitted that his history-writing on death was characterized by some crude generalizations when comparing himself to "an astronaut looking down at the distant earth" ([6], p. 603).

My own quarrel with Ariès is less directed towards the apparent deficiencies of his work—its historical shortcomings, its deterministic nature, its normative foundation, its dubious data material or its over-generalizations—and is more concerned with the fact that his work today, for historically obvious reasons, is less relevant for understanding contemporary practices and attitudes than when it

was first published. As observed by Ruth McManus, “death in advanced modernity is qualitatively different from modern death” ([35], p. 228) and thus perhaps the time has come to update Ariès and make his theory fit contemporary society [10]. Death, as we encounter and experience it today, is in many respects and for many different reasons—some of them listed above through the terminology of contemporary sociologists—markedly different than the “forbidden death” described by Ariès as the hallmark of our times. Although different aspects and insights from Ariès’s analysis are indeed still relevant, such as the fact that death remains an integral part of a controlling, medicalizing and sequestering mentality, it should be evident to most that the epithet of “forbidden death” is today too limited to convey the whole truth because it is challenged by a death that is gradually coming out of the closet, as it were, and now confronts us in ways unimaginable to our grandparents’ generation. We therefore need, I suggest, a new label and a new vocabulary to describe and capture our current state of affairs in the slipstream of “forbidden death.”

5. “Spectacular Death”: And Death Shall Have a New Dominion

Just as Michel Foucault [36] once convincingly questioned the validity of the “repressive hypothesis” when it came to understanding the status of sexuality in Victorian society, so we also ought to critically consider Ariès’s thesis that death is forbidden, hidden, invisible, denied and taboo in contemporary society. Death, it seems, is all around. It has not disappeared, it is neither forbidden nor hidden, and it is, quite possibly, not a taboo—at least not as it was in the times of “forbidden death.” Death, as we now encounter it, may perhaps rather be captured by the notion of “spectacular death,” which is the epithet here proposed for our contemporary death mentality a decade-and-a-half into the new millennium. Also others have recently used the notion of “spectacular death” [37,38], albeit in ways more specific and delimited than intended here. “Spectacular death” is death as it is experienced, constructed and performed in the most recent phase of what Australian sociologist Allan Kellehear [16] termed the “cosmopolitan age”—an age in which many of our traditions, practices and beliefs are reinterpreted so as to fit the new social and cultural circumstances. Obviously owing its naming to the idea of a “society of the spectacle” once proposed by French situationist theorist Guy Debord, “spectacular death” is a death that has for all practical intents and purposes been transformed into a *spectacle*. It is something that we witness at a safe distance but hardly ever experience upfront. Debord’s first thesis in fact stated that everything that was previously experienced directly now merely becomes a representation, making us spectators and bystanders [39]. “Spectacular death” thus inaugurates an obsessive interest in appearances that simultaneously draws death near and keeps it at arm’s length—it is something that we witness at a safe distance with equal amounts of fascination and abhorrence, we wallow in it and want to know about it without getting too close to it. There are many different dimensions of and facets to this “spectacular death”—too many to mention here—so in the following we shall briefly visit just five of them (for a more elaborated exposition of “spectacular death” [40,41]).

First, let us look at *the new mediated/mediatized visibility of death*. If death was indeed hidden, forbidden or invisible, as suggested by Ariès, we would neither see nor encounter it. Others have therefore proposed that the much articulated notion of a “death taboo” in Western culture may be losing some of its attraction and anchoring in our actual life circumstances [42], and according to Benjamin Noys in *The Culture of Death*, “in modern culture death is not simply invisible or taboo but bound up with new structures that expose us to death” ([43], p. 3). Although it is true that we seldom—compared to people living in the Middle Ages—encounter actual death in our own everyday lives (primarily because it is now moved behind the scenes of society and is handled by professionals), today we increasingly witness death (or at least death as represented by the media) through the media, recently evident in the shape of the global exposure to dramatic and undisguised images of journalists and aid workers beheaded by terrorists or the picture of the little drowned Syrian refugee boy on the beach of Bodrum. In this way, death is also made political through the media. For example, the picture of the drowned toddler, Aylan Kurdi, has since been strategically used by politicians and activists alike to argue for more humane and less restrictive immigration policies. Death depicted

through images of the badly mutilated or dead bodies of victims of warfare, disasters or terrorism are now made instantaneously available to a global audience (as opposed to the delayed and highly censored versions available to viewers of television or of the weekly newsreels in the cinema only a few generations ago), expected to react emotionally to the images, while remaining well aware that they will quickly be superseded by new images of ever more brutal, vivid and heinous atrocities. Today, death, dying and mourning are thus increasingly mediated and mediatized phenomena and not something we often encounter directly or personally, but rather occurrences we are exposed to and experience vicariously—and at a safe distance—through the screen of the television, computer or mobile phone [44]. Gorer's aforementioned "pornography of death" is thus far from receding and rather intensifies during "spectacular death" due both to an expansion in the sheer number of media agencies and outlets as well as to the instantaneous nature of much contemporary media and news coverage. If a child born during the 1970s would have seen some 18,000 homicides on television before reaching the age of sixteen ([45], p. 383), we can be quite sure that a child born after the year 2000 through the television as well as on the internet will have witnessed that much more mediated death. Moreover, today many media representations of actual or fictitious death as compared to the wonderfully instructive *vanitas* and *memento mori* images of the past seem empty and without the meaningful (often religiously grounded) narratives that previously made death more an existential topic than a spectacle. Their main purpose today is to impact, entertain and provoke attention. Stories about and depictions of death do, however, abound in many popular movies and, as such, death has always fascinated filmmakers and moviegoers alike [46]. Today is no exception. Box office successes such as *Meet Joe Black* (1998) or *The Bucket List* (2007) have humorously but also in a thought-provoking manner addressed death equally as an existential and an entertainment phenomenon, while the theme of immortality—the mirror-image of death and dying—constitutes the lead in iconic films such as *The Green Mile* (1999) and most recently in *The Age of Adaline* (2015) and *Selfless* (2015). The skeletons that disappeared during the time of "forbidden death" in modern society, as Joseph Jacobs stated above, is now resurfacing and multiplying on the silver screen. This "new visibility of death" [47] is observable also in spectacular art exhibitions such as the plastinated bodies of the "Body Worlds" spectacles, which have now become worldwide attractions, and it can equally be witnessed in the proliferation of skulls as contemporary cultural symbols and *memento moris* often used for commercializing, branding and marketing purposes by the increasingly globalized clothing industry [48]. This trend is also vividly visible in Damien Hirst's £50 million diamond-studded platinum skull, *For the Love of God* (2007), and in many other pieces of modern art toying decadently with the topic of death. We also witness an expanding public fascination with celebrity deaths—from the televised transmissions of the public mourning of Elvis Presley, John Lennon and Princess Diana to the more recent examples of Steve Irwin, Michael Jackson, Heath Ledger, Whitney Houston or Robin Williams, all of whom died from unexpected or tragic causes thus capturing the public imagination [49–52]. Even the untimely death of reality-television stars now seems to attract widespread public attention as was the case with British reality phenomenon Jade Goody, whose unsuccessful fight against cervical cancer was intensely covered by the media and was equally intensively debated and mourned on the internet [53]. Because these iconic celebrities lived and exposed their lives on the silver screen, their deaths also became public property through the media. In this way, death—at least as a mediated and mediatized phenomenon—is now much more intrusive and invasive than it used to be just a few decades ago. It is present whilst being bizarrely absent, and thus "death is everywhere yet nowhere in Western culture" ([54], p. 231). Zygmunt Bauman thus rightly contended that death in contemporary society is spectacularly present despite its apparent absence:

The impact of death is at its most powerful (and creative) when death *does not appear under its own name*; in areas and times which are not explicitly dedicated to it; precisely where we manage to live *as if* death was not or did not matter, when we do not remember about mortality and are not put off or vexed by the thoughts of the ultimate futility of life ([4], p. 7; original emphasis).

Geoffrey Gorer's aforementioned "pornography of death" that served as a sort of sublimation of the modern repression of death and as an outlet for such cultural fears and frustrations is today therefore fueled by a new kind of cultural fascination with death that is simultaneously found in the media and in the highbrow arts as well as in more commercialized or mundane art forms [55].

A second and closely related dimension of "spectacular death" is therefore *the commercialization of death*. Ariès believed that some of the major track changers in the history of death were mentalities rather than material circumstances. However, towards the end of his work, he did speculate on how American burial and mourning culture was an increasingly important factor in recent changes in Western death mentality and how this Americanization tendency was also closely associated with a new type of euphoric consumerism that challenged many of the traditions previously circumscribing death ([5], pp. 95–101). Death is therefore not only turned into a spectacle through the media; it is also used as a means to increase sales and the rapidly inflating costs of burial services which have been regularly reported and that [56,57] bear further witness to this commercialization of death. Images of death are even presently used in commercials (just remember the controversial suicide advertisement by the watch company Rem Rem some years ago or Benetton's use of an HIV-infected patient) to sell products and market services. Thus, a creative concern with death among artists, filmmakers and novelists is intensified further by an increased pecuniary and commercialized awareness of death on the supply side of many death-related service providers (funeral directors, casket constructors, urn makers, stonemasons, *etc.*), where ingenuity and entrepreneurial selling strategies are intended to match—and even dictate—the increasingly diversified and specialized consumer requests on the demand side. In Denmark, where this article was written, the funeral industry has even started advertising on national television—something that was utterly unimaginable not so long ago. Because death is frequently used as a source of entertainment in many parts of contemporary popular culture, it also makes death visible to the public in new and heretofore unexpected ways, simultaneously making it easier to market services and streamline products to potential consumers [58]. This also means that our concern with and exposure to death has not decreased—if anything we witness an increase in interest that in many respects is fueled by commercialized and consumerized interests.

Third, alongside—and somehow equally as an expression and consequence of—this new exposure to death and its commercialization through the media, arts and various service providers, we should not forget *the re-ritualization of death*. According to Ariès, the "reversal of death" taking place with the advent of modern society made ritual much more minimalistic and less elaborate, costly and time consuming than previously. At the same time, it emptied ritual of the important meaning-making—religious and personal—particularly associated with the human encounter with death. Perhaps as a new counterculture to this disappearance or denigration of many death rituals so characteristic just a century and a half ago, we now gradually see the rise of new rituals and the reappearance and reinvention of old ones visible in many ceremonial practices, media representations, architecture and so on [59]. A few Danish examples may serve to illustrate this point. In recent years there has been a significant increase in requests for more personalized, alternative and elaborate funeral services and rituals, such as demands for choosing popular music as a supplement to or substitute for traditional psalms during the funeral ceremony, the spreading of ashes over water, the personalized decoration of the coffin and the gravesite, the filling in of the document "My Last Will," new ways of transporting the remains of the dead (motorcycle and bicycle hearses), taking photographs of the deceased and so on. Moreover, initiatives such as "death cafés" "memorial walks," "angel kits" for the dying and their relatives as well as the rampant celebration of Halloween as a new ritualized and commercialized "Day of the Dead" show how something is indeed happening right now. Similar tendencies may undoubtedly be found in most contemporary Western countries as evidence of people demanding more freedom, choice and individuality in their death and mourning rituals [60]. Besides these few examples of changing ceremonial and ritual demands, we also see the rise or construction of new rituals associated with death—particularly the "spontaneous memorials" publicly marking the death of a celebrity or even an unknown person who died tragically or dramatically in a public

place [61]. It appears we have a strong urge to create memories and memorials of those no longer among us, especially if their deaths were particularly traumatizing or seen as unjust as is expressed in the “memorial mania” [62] that occurred after many recent terrorist attacks, assassinations, disasters and other tragic events. This desire to publicly mark and celebrate the remembrance of the deceased is perhaps not so different than that of the Victorian “death of the other.” The re-ritualization of death can also be witnessed on the internet in the construction of memorial sites such as Mindet.dk, in our frequent expressions of sympathy and solidarity with the bereaved on Facebook, Twitter or Instagram or the celebration of recently departed celebrities as well as in the concern with managing our own “digital legacies” referring to the electronic leftovers—homepages, text messages, documents, pictures, passwords, *etc.*—on our hard discs and on the World Wide Web whenever we die. It thus seems as if we need rituals in death today as much as ever before.

A fourth noteworthy characteristic of “spectacular death” is the *palliative care revolution*. The aforementioned medicalization of death and its accoutrements lie about death and dying, a practice which, according to Ariès, was very characteristic of “forbidden death” and its modern medical discourse throughout a considerable part of the 20th century, and which is now conversely and increasingly transformed into patient rights and a more open awareness context in which the dying and their relatives are kept informed and asked to make their own decisions. The undignified treatment of the paralyzed artist in John Badham’s film *Whose Life Is It Anyway?* (1981) has now been replaced by a notion of autonomy, personal decision-making and an increasing openness towards the previously unspeakable theme of euthanasia. The rise of the “death awareness movement,” “happy death movement,” “natural death movement” or “death with dignity movement” during the 1960s—concretely expressed in Dame Cicely Saunders’s opening of the world’s first purpose-built hospice, St. Christopher’s, in London in 1967 and in the widespread public reception of Elisabeth Kübler-Ross’s book *On Death and Dying* from 1969 [63]—and the subsequent establishment of hospices and palliative care units around the Western world, also highlight a monumental shift in death mentality. Since then we have seen the gradual development and expansion of palliative care as a philosophy and an institutional and scientific field of specialization, we have witnessed the expansion of the hospice care program with the establishment of child hospices or hospice initiatives for people suffering from dementia, and we have seen the intensified focus on grief therapy, grief work and bereavement counselling for various groups of surviving relatives as well as dignity therapy for the dying. We have also witnessed the quest for rehabilitating the home as the place where people die instead of dying in aseptic and sanitized institutional settings such as the hospital [64]. The search for the “good death” or “dignified death” has been a trademark of all these different yet interrelated initiatives that focus on many of the existential, juridical and ethical issues related to death. Add to all of this the fact that today death and particularly dignified death and dying are hot political potatoes in ways that were unimaginable in Ariès’s days. His “thanatological elite” has been instrumental in considerably informing and changing discussions about end-of-life ethics, euthanasia, dignity, care and many related topics and has constituted a defiant opposition to a “thanatopolitical” agenda more concerned with bioethics, life-sustaining technologies, resuscitation, organ donation and organ transplantation, gene technology, stem cells and so on [43]. Therefore, even though advancements in medical and technological areas still shape our attitudes towards death and our expectations towards life, we see a new concern with the care and dignity of the dying and the vulnerability of the bereaved that was not as pronounced at the time of Ariès’s history-writing.

Finally, the world of academia has not remained unaffected by these social and cultural changes and, within the social sciences and particularly in my own discipline of sociology, death has gradually developed into a *topic of academic attention and specialization*. My own personal encounter with death as an academic topic may serve as an illustration. When in the mid-1990s I was an exchange student at the University of Sunderland in England following a course on “Death and Society,” one afternoon I by happenstance came across a book titled *The Sociology of Death* on the shelf of the local university bookshop. This volume, edited by David Clark [65], in many respects introduced not

only me to the topic of death in sociology, but it also and more significantly signaled a community of thanatological researchers (although predominantly from England) was beginning to form that would be in subsequent years instrumental to the outpouring of numerous books and articles as well as the establishment of academic journals and research centers devoted to the study of death and dying. As such, the 1990s—for various reasons delineated and discussed by Tony Walter [66]—marked a breakthrough in the sociological appreciation of death as a theme worthy of attention. Although the edited volume by psychologist Herman Feifel, *The Meaning of Death* [67], is often hailed as the first landmark attempt at thawing the taboo on death within the social sciences and humanities, it took quite a few decades before death and dying actually started becoming household topics in the discipline of sociology. Today, there is a torrential amount of literature on death, dying and mourning, and international thanatological seminars and conferences are organized on a regular basis. Moreover, the social sciences, including sociology, have now become important carriers of knowledge and insight as they in many respects reflect the concern with death and dying also found elsewhere in society. It has therefore been noted how people “increasingly turn to social science and the popular press for answers about what once was the unfathomable nature of death and dying. Contemporary people have received a homogenized version of death and grief, replete with neatness, predictability and control, which in the end rob the grieving of meaning-making” ([68], p. 71). Therefore, many perspectives conceived and developed within humanistic or social scientific disciplines now serve as critiques of or correctives to the highly medicalized and standardized models of death, dying and bereavement so characteristic of “forbidden death.” Whereas death and dying—with a few notable exceptions such as Robert Hertz’s classic investigation of primitive burial rites and Émile Durkheim’s study of suicide—were generally no-go topics within the social sciences and perhaps particularly within sociology during most parts of the 20th century, it has now turned into something of a new and rich niche for understanding contemporary society [69].

As should be evident from this admittedly far from exhaustive delineation of five different yet interrelated dimensions of contemporary “spectacular death,” something—and indeed something quite extraordinary—has in recent years happened to the various parts of what Ariès ([6], p. 595) as mentioned earlier once called “the domain of death,” which therefore not only deserves a new signifying label but perhaps also an entirely new vocabulary to capture these many changes. But how are we to interpret these changes leading to what the epithet of “spectacular death” is intended to describe?

6. The “Partial Re-Reversal” of the Death Thesis

Philippe Ariès’s much admired and publicized thesis, as we saw earlier, suggested that death in modern society was increasingly forbidden, hidden, denied, silenced, repressed and tabooed. Some sociologists and other researchers have on different grounds challenged this denial of death and taboo thesis and have instead argued that the nature of contemporary death denial and taboo needs to be reconsidered [40–42,70–72]. My own proposed new phase of “spectacular death”—sporadically outlined above—makes it a bit more contentious if, how and to what extent death is indeed all of these things. It seems that while we successfully kicked death out of the front door of modernity, it appears to have sneaked its way in through the back door or has squeezed through the cat flap in contemporary society. It also seems as if the modern death mentality described by Ariès—and with him a host of other historians and social scientists—throughout the latter part of the 20th century and during the early decades of the 21st may be on its way, once again, to change its colors and contours. How are we to explain and understand this new death scene or death mentality in contemporary society? Perhaps it could be captured by the classic Freudian notion of the “return of the repressed” in which the heretofore repressed is reappearing—bit by bit—in our collective conscience and actions? Perhaps we need other analytical concepts?

According to Tony Walter, whose work has been instrumental in highlighting some of the major changes taking place surrounding death, dying and mourning in recent decades, we have witnessed a

“revival of death” whereby modern-day taboo and denial is now increasingly giving way to a more open-minded and individualistic “neo-modern” death mentality in which some of the ideals and practices of the past are evidently being revived [34]. Moreover, it has also been Walter’s contention that this “neo-modern” death simultaneously contains aspects of liberation, individual choice and autonomy on the one side, and increased control by new types of “death experts” on the other. Recently, Walter has admitted that this “revival thesis” suggested more than twenty years ago may in fact need an update as new understandings of and practices related to death are constantly developing [73]. Others have stated that what we are in fact seeing right now is an attempt at “retrieving” some of the lost *ars moriendi* of the medieval “tamed death” in contemporary society evident in many of the ideas and practices implemented by the palliative care movement [74]. Yet others have proposed that, since the mid-20th century, we have simultaneously been witnessing a “rediscovery” of death within many of our social practices as well as in our academic disciplines that previously largely neglected the topic, ([45], p. 491; [75–77]), whereas others have labelled it a “reinvention” in which our discourses on death and dying due to scientific and technological advances particularly pertaining to discussions of death criteria and organ transplantation have changed considerably over the last few decades [78]. Despite these slight terminological differences, the proponents of these ideas generally agree that something substantial has happened to our understanding of and exposure to death, requiring that we move beyond a taboo and denial thesis. It thus appears that we are reviving, retrieving, rediscovering and reinventing death in a process in which the old and almost forgotten practices and ideals are mixed with the new social conditions characteristic of contemporary equally individualized, globalized, mediated/mediatized and technologically advanced late-modern, post-modern or liquid-modern society. This made Brandy Schillace poignantly label it “the new (old) death” in her recent book *Deaths’ Summer Coat* [79].

Following this, it has been suggested that while the proposed “revival of death” thesis may indeed carry some valuable analytical weight, it is important not to forget that even the seemingly liberated and revived death also involves new forms of administration, limitation and subjectification in the way we comprehend, construct and manage death today [80–84]. I completely agree with the aforementioned, and many other studies and theories, suggesting that something new has happened to death in recent years. However, it is my suggestion that what we are witnessing is perhaps best described and understood as a “partial re-reversal” of death in which the different features of the “reversed death” of modern society mentioned by Ariès [31]—e.g., the medicalization of death, the interdict on mourning and the changes in disposal techniques and preferences—are now themselves undergoing substantial changes, some of which point to a return to previous practices and beliefs, whereas other tendencies point to something quite new and heretofore unseen. For example, a central feature of “spectacular death” is that it—apart from lingering uneasily between liberation and control—is also in many respects a “paradoxical death.” There are indeed many paradoxes and contradictions in our contemporary death culture. Take as an illustrative example a Danish case—quite possibly recognizable also in other cultural and national contexts—that even though many people in research questionnaires express a wish to die at home or to plan their own personalized funeral ceremony, they will eventually still end up dying in institutional settings such as hospitals or nursing homes and their funeral service is still a quite standardized event without the desired characteristics of a spectacular final farewell. Thus, although death may in many respects have been “re-enchanted” in contemporary society [85], the notion of “spectacular death” indicates that although we have liberated death from the shackles of denial and taboo, we still seem to have a long way to go to reach authentic and autonomous death.

Also other researchers have taken some steps in recognizing that something new is indeed going on in relation to death and dying and in pointing to how our relationship to death is increasingly paradoxical. On the one hand, we seek to sequester it and to control and contain it. On the other hand, we wallow in everything slightly associated with death and attempt to make it as authentic and personal as possible. According to Stjepan G. Meštrović [86], our “postemotional society” tries

to recreate synthetically that which has long since disappeared. This also pertains to death which is simultaneously feared and embraced. The globalization of everything means that today we are constantly confronted with news and information about everything that potentially threatens our human existence [35]. We are made afraid of pollution, AIDS, Ebola, SARS, H1N1, earthquakes, ecological disasters, tsunamis, terrorism, violent crime and premature death in general at the very same time as we are attracted to mediated deaths and disasters as well as eagerly seek out and participate in what is known as “dark tourism” [87]. Our aspirations to contain and control death are therefore paradoxically undermined by our simultaneous obsession with it. As actual death gradually disappeared as a normal or expected sight in the everyday lives of most people, it has come to occupy a larger part of their lives because they are now expected to make their own deaths a concern throughout their entire lifespans—e.g., live a healthy life, make decisions about death and dying, contemplate the most viable survival strategies, *etc.* Despite, or perhaps rather *because*, the era of “forbidden death” tried so desperately to ostracize death and remove it as far away from public view as possible, in the era of “spectacular death,” it continues to haunt the consciousness of the living. Modern society’s insistence that death be removed from human sight and public awareness paradoxically resulted in quite the opposite: death has come to dominate ever larger proportions of our lives. American fiction writer Don DeLillo insightfully observed in his award-winning novel *White Noise* many of the paradoxical features of “spectacular death”:

“This is the nature of modern death,” Murray said. “It has a life independent of us. It is growing in prestige and dimension. It has a sweep it never had before. We study it objectively. We can predict its appearance, trace its path in the body. We’ve never been so close to it, so familiar with its habits and attitudes. We know it intimately. But it continues to grow, to acquire breadth and scope, new outlets, new passages and means. The more we learn, the more it grows. Is this some law of physics? Every advance in knowledge and technique is matched by a new kind of death” ([88], p. vii).

Therefore, although the “partially re-reversed” “spectacular death” in many ways seeks to embrace and domesticate death, making it something safe and familiar that we must learn to live with, it simultaneously also expands the realm and reach of death and allows it to colonize ever bigger chunks of our earthly and mortal lives.

Many challenges confront my proposed notions of “spectacular death” and a “partial re-reversal of death” thesis. First of all, we obviously do need more in-depth empirical studies of our contemporary death beliefs and practices in order to determine what is in fact currently transpiring. Is it “spectacular death,” or is it perhaps something else? Is it just yet another fancy “tag” used to promote suggestive and sparsely validated ideas under a flamboyant label? Such an indicative and descriptive label clearly needs further theoretical and empirical elaboration, substantiation and documentation in order to be either verified, falsified or otherwise. Second, does the notion of “spectacular death” capture all the different facets of death in contemporary society? Of course not! As with all the foregoing four phases advanced by Ariès, it is also merely another ideal type construction intended to shed light on certain features of death while leaving others in the dark. Third, the obvious question remains: is “spectacular death” as proposed here merely a short-term interregnum or an accidental historical hiccup, as it were, between “forbidden death” and another more lasting human reconciliation with death, or does “spectacular death” in itself mark and signify the new shape of the death mentality of the 21st century? The questions are more plentiful than the answers provided here, and as with the famous “Owl of Minerva” once mentioned by German philosopher G.W.F. Hegel that only spreads its wings at the falling of dusk—a metaphor used to describe how we can only comprehend historical events and processes once they have passed as they are difficult to capture in flight—it is obviously difficult to determine whether we are indeed entering, standing in the middle of or perhaps are just about to leave a given phase in historical death mentality. The idea of “spectacular death” presented here is primarily intended as an analytical construct aimed at showing that there may be good reason

to stipulate that the label of “forbidden death” is no longer sufficient to capture our contemporary death scene and that we need to come up with new ideas and concepts.

7. Conclusions

All societies must simultaneously deny death and accept its inevitability—they must necessarily acknowledge that their members will eventually die as well as contain the sight and knowledge of death thereby making it possible to live meaningful lives in the shadow of death [89]. Contemporary society with its “spectacular death” is no exception to this rule. This article has aspired to present some of the most prevalent features of our current death mentality in Western late-modern, post-modern or liquid-modern society. Obviously, the account presented here is neither exhaustive—pointing merely to certain contours and identifiable tendencies—nor does it take the many local and national differences in death mentalities and practices into consideration. Although death is and remains a merciless constant in human life because it cannot be wished away however hard we try, it is also in a constant process of deconstruction in which humans try to make sense of it in many new and different ways [90]. Our conception of and attitude towards death thus changes throughout history in accordance with our changing understanding of human life and with the advances and developments taking place in our social and cultural circumstances. Inspired by the magisterial work of Philippe Ariès on the history of death in the West throughout the past one thousand years, the article proposed the notion of “spectacular death”—with its analytical possibilities as well as its limitations—as a new phase replacing Ariès’s “forbidden death” as the latest and most updated addition to the long and winded history of death in the West. “Spectacular death” inaugurates a period in which death is gradually returning from its forced exile during “forbidden death” and is now something discussed and exposed in public through the media, although “spectacular death” simultaneously commodifies death and makes it the bizarre object of shallow consumption and entertainment. Moreover, “spectacular death,” as we saw, is also a “paradoxical death” because it perhaps promises more than it can deliver—an autonomous and authentic death. Thus, whereas “spectacular death” seems to de-taboo death in public, it perhaps reinforces its sting in private life.

G.W.F. Hegel once suggested that world history is the record of “what man does with death” ([91], p. 1). However, writing the great history of death is, obviously, just as much a matter of writing the history of human life. As so many insightful philosophers have proclaimed throughout thousands of years, life and death are intricately interwoven with one another in an eternal chain of cause and consequence. As such, death in itself is irrelevant—however, it in so many different ways informs and dictates our very way of living. Our present-day apparently renewed preoccupation with death here dubbed as “spectacular death”—whether substantial or shallow, whether short-termed or more durable—is undoubtedly rooted in our species-specific and enduring fear of death and perhaps more than anything else also in our increasing lack of first-hand experience with it which culminated with the era of “forbidden death.” “Spectacular death” passes on and intensifies certain characteristics of “forbidden death” as well as—in its own unique way—is instrumental in retrieving and rediscovering dimensions of death belonging to the great historical past of “tamed death,” “one’s own death” and “death of the other.” “Spectacular death” thus, as we saw, equally revives, rediscovers, recycles and reinvents death. It remains to be seen whether the contemporary reign of “spectacular death” actually inaugurates an end to the die-hard death taboo and the despair surrounding death so characteristic of “forbidden death” or if it is just another ingenious extension of our persistent attempts to hide, shun and deny death. It seems as if the ability to learn to live with death is still—and perhaps will remain—one of the most daunting and difficult tasks with which humanity has to deal.

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