THE LIVING AND THE DEAD, FROM PREHISTORY TO THE PRESENT
FYSEM-UA 736
Spring 2020

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Course description:

Every individual eventually faces their own mortality, every religion addresses death and afterlife, and every society devises rituals to cope with bereavement. This seminar explores the entanglements between the living and the dead in cultures across the world and through time. Weekly discussions will focus on readings from anthropological and sociological theories on death, burial, and funerary rituals, followed by an in-depth examination of the topic through case studies from the ancient and the modern world. Topics include imaginings of afterlife in world religions, art, and literature; funerary rituals and expressions of grief; the space and place of death (cemeteries, hauntings, and dark tourism); the commodification of death; the materiality of the human body after death (including the adornment, beautification, manipulation, or preservation of the corpse); holy relics; public commemoration and funerary art as a means of expression of social identity; death and gender; and the exploration of death (and the undead) in 21st-century American pop culture. We will have a closer look at death-rituals and practices from the plastered skulls of Neolithic Near East to body-turning dance ceremonies of Madagascar. Assignments include response and research papers, creative exercises, and class presentations.

Course objectives:

In this seminar, students will

- think about and discuss beliefs about human mortality, death, and afterlife as an inevitable facet of human condition;
- be exposed to a wide range of funerary beliefs and customs from around the world and through time;
- develop analytical techniques for talking and writing about overarching themes and symbolic imagery in art and architecture that pertain to death, dying, mourning, and commemoration;
- learn about the complexities and theoretical challenges that surround the interpretation of archaeological contexts (especially the analysis of mortuary contexts and human remains);
• gain experience in preparing formal oral presentations and leading classroom discussions.

**Classroom Policies**

*Attendance and Participation:* Class attendance is crucial and mandatory. A very big component of this seminar is in-class discussions around the readings and other materials (usually visual or literary). It is absolutely critical to do the readings and to be prepared to talk about them in class (=participation!). In case of documented excusable absence (i.e. medical emergency, death in the family, etc), notify me as soon as possible after the missed class; otherwise you will lose points from your attendance and participation grade. Students who will miss classes due to religious observance should review NYU policies on the topic (link [here](#)) and notify me ahead of anticipated absences.

*Technology:* In general (especially during discussion), laptops, tablets, phones, or other electronic devices will not be permitted in class (except when I announce that we need them for a classroom purpose).

*Website and communication:* We have a course website (powered by Sakai, accessible through “NYU Classes” on your NYU homepage). I will post all materials here (prompts, guidelines, additional readings, etc). I will also send all mass emails to class via this interface, so you will likely receive them in your NYU inbox. Please check your associated email account regularly.

*Assignment submission:* All written assignments are due in class as printed hard copies. If you do not submit a hard copy in class, it will be considered late (subject to a penalty of 25% off the grade for each class meeting you fail to turn it in). I will not accept email or online submissions for grading. In addition to hard copies, digital versions of the 5-page research papers (Paper #1 and #2 below) will be submitted to the course website for recordkeeping.

*Classroom etiquette:* This class revolves around discussion and an exchange of ideas. We will always remain respectful of other people’s opinions, especially considering the fact that the topic of this class may touch upon sensitive religious and spiritual beliefs or emotionally challenging personal experiences of loss, grief, and bereavement. Disruptive, aggressive, or disrespectful behavior will not be tolerated.

**Grading:**

- Attendance and participation 10%
- Response papers 40% total (10% each)
- Paper #1 (The Art of Death) 20%
- Paper #2 (Deathscapes of New York) 20%
- Formal class presentations 10%

**Assignments:**

Response papers: Four 3-page response papers based on weekly topics and class discussion. Prompts will be announced and discussed briefly in class.
Paper #1: “The Art of Death”: Short research paper (5 pages) on a work of art that features death, dying, mourning, or funerary commemoration as its central theme. Students will work in teams of 2-3 to select a suitable work of art that is on display at a local museum, visit the work together, discuss their experiences and observations on site, and submit a paper (each student will write and submit an individual and original paper to be graded). Each team will also prepare a short power-point to present their topic in class and lead a brief discussion. (Paper and presentation due April 2nd). For a list of NYC museums (many of them with free admission for NYU students), see https://www.nyu.edu/life/arts-culture-and-entertainment/free-museum-access.html.

Paper #2: “Deathscapes of New York”: Short research paper (5 pages) on a monument or urban space that is related to death, funerary ritual, burial, or commemoration in NYC. Examples include cemeteries, “haunted” places, memorials, and funeral homes, among many others. Students will work in teams of 2-3 to select a space that fits the topic, visit the space, and write a short paper that includes the historical/social/cultural context of the space and their personal observations based on their visit (each student will write and submit an individual and original paper to be graded). Students will also prepare a short power-point to present the topic in class and lead a brief discussion. (Paper and presentation due May 1st).

Required texts:

Other required texts, available online:
- Additional readings from *The Oxford Handbook of the Archaeology of Death and Burial* (abbreviated as the “Oxford Handbook” in the Weekly Schedule below), AVAILABLE ONLINE THROUGH NYU LIBRARIES.
- All other readings (papers, articles, etc) will be posted or distributed as pdfs.

Additional Information:
Honor code and plagiarism: NYU Honor Code and information on Academic Integrity can be found here: https://guides.nyu.edu/c.php?g=276562&p=1844738. In accordance with university policies, all work must be your own. If you use a source, you must cite it (we will discuss citation techniques in class). Suspected cases of plagiarism will be forwarded to the appropriate department for disciplinary action.

Disability Disclosure Statement: Academic accommodations are available for students with disabilities. Visit the Moses Center website at www.nyu.edu/csd and contact the Moses Center for Students with Disabilities (212-998-4980 or mosescsd@nyu.edu) for further information. Students who are requesting academic accommodations are advised to reach out to the Moses Center as early as possible in the semester for assistance.
NYU Writing Center provides resources and help in preparing assignments. For information about hours and appointments, visit [http://www.nyu.edu/cas/ewp/html/writing_center.html](http://www.nyu.edu/cas/ewp/html/writing_center.html).

The Wellness Exchange offers support for personal and health-related issues. Call (212) 443-9999 (24/7 confidential calls) or visit [www.nyu.edu/999](http://www.nyu.edu/999).

**Weekly Schedule and Readings:**

**Week 1.** (January 30th) Introduction  
- *Celebrations of Death* Ch 1: Preliminaries (pp. 24-39)  
- *Celebrations of Death* Ch 8: American Deathways (pp. 191-214)

**Week 2.** (February 6th) Death and afterlife: death and emotion; beliefs about death; imaginings of afterlife.  
- Parker Pearson Ch7: The Human Experience of Death (pp. 142-171)  
- *Celebrations of Death* Ch 2: Emotional Reactions to Death (pp. 43-61)  
- *Celebrations of Death* Ch 3: Symbolic Associations of Death (pp. 62-75)

**Week 3.** (February 13th) Funerary rituals, past and present. **Response paper due.**  
- Parker Pearson Ch1: Learning from the Dead (pp. 1-20)  
- Parker Pearson Ch2: From Now to Then (pp. 21-44)

**Week 4.** (February 20th) History of death and burial: interpreting the archaeological record  
- *Oxford Handbook*: Beautiful Things and Bones of Desire (pp. 1-14)  

**Week 5.** (February 27th) Death and the self: social personae after death. **Response paper due.**  
- Parker Pearson Ch 4: Status, Rank, and Power (pp. 72-94)  
- Parker Pearson Ch 5: Gender and Kinship (pp. 95-123)  
- *Oxford Handbook*: Identities in Transformation (pp. 511-526)  

**Week 6.** (March 5th) The archaeology of death: case studies from ancient Greece  

**Week 7.** (March 12th) The art of death: death, dying, and mourning in art


c. De Pascale, E. 2009. *Death and Resurrection in Art*. Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum. Skim through the chapters “The Blood and the Arrow” (pp. 9-81) and “Vanitas vanitatum” (pp. 81-130). This is mostly annotated paintings and illustrations with very little text.

**Week 8.** (March 26th) The art of death: commemoration. **Response paper due.**

a. Lutz, D. 2011. “The dead still among us: Victorian secular relics, hair jewelry, and death culture.” *Victorian Literature and Culture* 39:127-142. (For visuals, scroll through some of the objects on [http://artofmourning.com](http://artofmourning.com) and be prepared to discuss in class.)


**Week 9.** (April 2nd) The art of death: class presentations. **PAPER #1 DUE**

**Week 10.** (April 9th) Human body after death, part 1: treatment of the corpse, agency of the corpse, adornment and beautification of the corpse.

a. Parker Pearson Ch 3: Reading the Body (pp. 45-71)

b. *Oxford Handbook*: Treating Bodies (pp. 459-474)


**Week 11.** (April 16th) Human body after death, part 2: fragmented bodies.


**Week 12.** (April 23rd) Death commodified: grave goods, investment in afterlife. **Response paper due.**


Week 13. (April 30th) Space and place of death, part 1: deathscapes, cemeteries, hauntings, dark tourism
   a. Parker Pearson Ch 6: Placing the Dead (pp. 123-141)

Week 14. (May 1st) Space and place of death, part 2: Deathscapes of NYC. Class presentations. PAPER #2 DUE
Week 15. (May 8th) Death in 21st century USA: death rituals in a post-modern world; death, the dead, and the undead in modern pop culture