



Malady and Mortality: Illness, Disease and Death in Literary and Visual Culture, Conference Falmouth University, 19-20TH September 2013

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<http://maladyandmortalityconference.co.uk>

In our modern world, the emphasis is often speed, compression, living in the moment and multitasking.

How then do we consider death? Or mortality?

What has happened to the tropes of the natural, in which the continuous cycle of living and dying pervade?

How does our modern world proffer moments of stillness, slowness, reflection, legacy?

Our lives insist upon the present and capture us in a vision - almost a promise - of immortality.

Yet we are not.

As Butler and others have contended, the body implies agency, but also mortality, vulnerability.¹

This two day, interdisciplinary conference presented an opportunity to consider the ways in which modern culture acknowledges mortality - and its signifiers - in relation to illness, dying and bereavement. It offered an opportunity to new languages (visual, literary, filmic and otherwise) of loss, grief and bewilderment. It also celebrated the creativity and innovation of emergent artistic and medical practices and concerns, digital communities and networks.

Some delegates considered the ill, dying, dead and bereaved in relation to: the spaces that they occupy: the ways in which such subjects exist in public and private discourse; their involvement in the complexity of medical care and funeral rituals; and their simultaneous visibility and invisibility.

Others explored and critiqued the role of the dead in the lives of the living; the relationship between the living and the dead; the dynamics between mourning and art; the need for empathy and communication between medics, patients and carers; the beauty and horrors of illness and dying; and the social spaces for grief and the performance of memory.

For most, the ambiguous status of the living and the dying necessitated a departure from traditional symbolism and a move instead towards creative practices insistent upon the liminal, the translucent, the transient, and the ephemeral – those borderlines and interfaces between absence/presence.

For my own part, this conference had many beginnings - a visit twenty years ago to the Tropen Museum in Amsterdam with its Nigerian coffins and Mexican Day of Dead statues; a glimpse - in a newspaper – of the extraordinary painting by Daphne Todd of her mother's last breath; a belated reading of my mother's death certificate; the sight of a beautiful cell image (my own) on a radiologist's screen.

Attending the conference were artists, academics, medical and creative practitioners, writers, undergraduates, postgraduates and student ambassadors. The keynote speakers were **Professor Alan Bleakley** (Plymouth University Peninsula Schools of Medicine and Dentistry), **Professor Tony Walter** (Centre for Death & Society, University of Bath) and **Dr Michele Aaron** (American and Canadian Studies, University of Birmingham).

Professor Bleakley's thought-provoking plenary, 'First, Do No Harm': Medicine's Crooked Timber', highlighted the alarming level of fatal medical error in the UK and the problems of communication between doctors and patients, and between teams of doctors. As a possible 'cure', Professor Bleakley heralded the potentially beneficial relationship between medicine and the arts, most especially, four literary modes of medical practice – epic, tragic, darkly comic and lyric. In his paper, 'Imagining the Dead as Angels', **Professor Walter**, expounded the increasingly popular reference to the dead as 'angels' rather than souls, particularly within online, media and visual contexts. **Dr Michele Aaron's** plenary paper, 'Watching Others Die: Spectatorship

and the (Racialised) Ethics of Being Moved', highlighted the extraordinary capacity of film to represent and 'share' dying in an ethical way. Focusing upon Allan King's 'actuality drama', *Dying at Grace* (2003), Dr Aaron analysed the spectator's implication within the 'co-experience' of dying presented by the film's intimate but disinterested portrayal of 5 patients dying in the palliative care unit at the Salvation Army Grace Health Centre, Toronto in the winter of 2002-2003.

Illness and Dying: Medical and Patient Practice

Briege Casey's research into student nurses' perceptions of medicalised and suffering bodies revealed the ways in which creative and artistic practices might be used to encourage trainee nurses to explore and articulate body corporeality and vulnerability experienced by those in care. **Anne Taylor and Aled Picton** highlighted the ways in which creative and reflective writing practices undertaken by medical can provide outlets for the emotional experiences of medical trainees. **Lorna Warren and Julie Ellis** analysed the effects of impending death upon the photographic practices of 'ordinary' families. **Anastasia Maksymluk's** analysis of patient identity and narrative established a provocative dialogue between her own artistic responses to an unplanned medical admission and that of a long term recipient of psychiatric and primary healthcare. **Julia Kennedy's** autopathographic account analysed the value of e-patienthood as presented in the autobiographical and medical narratives of a Chronic Lymphocytic Leukemia on-line, trans-global patient group. Following qualitative research focused conducted in the North West and South West of England, **Kerry Jones** discussed the ways in which online forums offer virtual sites in which bereaved parents can validate their grief, claim personhood for their children and re-negotiate their ambivalent status as bereaved parents. In 'Pain In The Neck', **Martin Hubbard** performed a lecture on the persistence of mind/body dualism in understanding pain.

Illness, Memory and Representation

Fiona Johnstone's discussion of photographic self-portraits by Mark Morrisroe, who died of AIDS-related illness in 1989, demonstrated how the artist's self-representation as a sick and dying subject employed the highly sexualized, erotic tropes of his earlier work. **Sarah Arnold's** examination of urban decay photography revealed the paradoxical tensions in works simultaneous insistence upon

embalment, annihilation and the potential for renewal. **Joanne 'Bob' Whalley's** 'The Unborn Undead', vivaciously and provocatively entwined the personal experience of the 'bi-fold body', one carrying a dead foetus / baby 'zombie', with the theoretical paradoxes and illicit pleasures of Schrödinger's box, Derrida's 'undecidable', Cronenberg's *The Brood*, and Atwood's *Kat*. In 'Whose Disability Is It Anyway?', **Lionel Warner** analysed the responses of school students to the portrayal of disability in Brian Clark's play, *Whose Life is it Anyway?* (1978). **Sreemoyee Roy-Chowdhury** argued that the female protagonist of Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* (1895), Sue Bridehead, is afflicted by neurasthenia, a condition identified by symptoms such as anxiety, depression, headaches and insomnia, and figured within the text as a response to the built environment of the post-industrial, capitalist era. **Rebecca Edgerley's** analysis of Old Icelandic Sagas revealed the ways in which 'growing old' in Viking-age society shifted the power struggle between men and women. **Chrisy Dennis's** analysis of the actress, dramatist and author, Mary Robinson, illustrated how representations of Robinson's ill/transgressive body in C18th newspapers focused upon her sensationalised liaisons with prominent members of the aristocracy and parliament, and thus significantly contributed to public responses to the political upheaval of the 1780s. **Kym Martindale's** paper, 'Out of Place in Eternity', analysed the ways in which the poetical work of Frances Bellerby was profoundly informed by a sense of rupture - instigated by the death of her brother Jack in 1916 - and a simultaneous understanding of perfection and 'wholeness'. **Steven Wilson's** analysis of syphilis autobiographies from C19th France considered the ways in which literature was used to process medical realities and the human experience of mortality and **Mark R. McDermott & M-O. Levasseur** explained the development of the Multidimensional Mortality Awareness Measure (MMAM) and their analysis of data corresponding to morality awareness.

Art, Imaging and Mourning

Nikki Salkeld and Ashley Rudolph's 'MOTH Project' considered the personal conversations, intellectual and artistic processes involved within the creation of a new, visual system of death symbolism and signification. **Lucy Willow** discussed the ways in which her artistic work and installations employed material such as dust and

melted plastics in order to exploring the relationship between ephemerality, mourning and loss. **Sue M. Porter and Ann Rippin** explored the correlations between the narrative practice of auto-ethnography (from the perspective of the disabled) and research practice of using objects (real and imagined) as a stimulus for embodied inquiry. **Alex Murdin's** discussion of his own environmental art project, the *Lyme Regis Project*, in relation to Spencer Tunick's *Dead Sea* (2011) situated a discourse of mortality in relation to Thanocratic variants of eco-politics. With reference to their photographic work, **Montse Morcate and Rebeca Pardo** analysed the role of contemporary photography in the most intimate and delicate moments of grief in the context of terminal illness or death. As both a response to Pearson's question, 'How does place act as mnemonic?' (2007:14) and her personal narrative of bereavement, the artist, **Davina Kirkpatrick** highlighted the ways in which her multi-dimensional work employs narratives and metaphors of grief in order to investigate the relation between what continues to exist and what is missing in the physical world, and initiate new forms of 're-memberance'. **David Jackson's** film, *Three Days Down South: A Story*, offered a personal portrayal of the traumatic and psychological effects of war (the Falklands conflict) from the perspective of a war veteran with mental health disability. **Rebecca Collings's** paper 'Funny as a Funeral' examined the ways in which recent dark comedy television programmes have made use of deathbed and funeral scenes as sites of subversive humour.

ⁱ Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, 2004, p. 26.