How people who are dying or mourning engage with the arts

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Abstract

Though death and loss are recognized as significant themes in fine and popular arts forms, we know virtually nothing about how people who themselves are dying or bereaved use the arts - unless they are practising artists or under therapeutic supervision. This article first reviews how established artists have used death/loss themes in their work, along with the work of arts practitioners in palliative and bereavement care and the role of the arts in death education. These literatures tend to privilege the production of artworks over their consumption, and reveal the absence of research into the arts practices of lay people who are dying or grieving. The article goes on to advocate ethnographic research into lay practices, using the author’s own personal experiences and observations to indicate the kind of findings that ethnography may produce, in particular the likely importance - at the end as in the rest of life - of meaningful arts consumption. The article then suggests avenues for researching lay arts practices at the end of life, before concluding with some possible implications for professional care of dying and bereaved people.

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My friends are dying. In the past couple of years, six of them went. Actually, five friends and a husband. I feel as though it’s my job just to be here, just to grieve, and to spread the news among the herd. Here in front of the doors of the Arts and Letters Club, standing stiffly in the middle of the sidewalk, is a thin, pale, already-cadaverous old man. Here’s his bony frame, Ichabod Crane on the streets of Toronto. Staring at the door, eyes intense and fearful, his head swivels on the stalk of neck and he comes, at last, to resemble Henry. I watch how long it takes for my name to say itself in his mind. Is it his age or mine? The door is dark old wood, deeply carved with a pattern of acorns and oak leaves. Steve would have liked that, a little William Morris at the venerable old club. How do those who are nearing the end of their lives or who are mourning the death of others use the arts? This is a topic about which we know surprisingly little, despite there being considerable literatures on the significance of death and loss in the fine, performing, and popular arts. In this article, I first briefly review the relevant literatures which focus on the published works of famous artists and on the therapeutic practices of arts practitioners. First, if – as I show shortly – death and loss are significant themes in all the arts, it is important to ask how people who are dying or bereaved use the arts.