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Syllabus - Teaching Program for the Course

Death and Religion: Theories and Practices Across Time

Maya Balakirsky | Hermeneutics

Course No

Course Type:	Class/Seminar
Academic credits:	1
Year of study:	2025-2026
Semester:	א
Day & Time:	Tuesday, 16.00—17.30
Reception Time:	Tuesday, 17.30-19.30
Lecturer Email:	mkatz307@gmail.com
Moodle Site:	_____



Course description and learning goals

Course Abstract

Death is definitive. In practical terms, death defines life. Yet, no matter how natural death seems, it is also mythic, fueling a whole culture around it. No matter how inevitable death is, it remains, for the living, an imaginary experience. Ideas of immortality influence our understanding of mortality. While death happens constantly, it is reimagined anew in each generation. And, even though death is universal, different cultures and subgroups within cultures create unique customs and images related to the passage of life. Religious views on death offer an underexplored perspective for understanding identity, selfhood, and collective memory across different eras. Artistic themes and visual practices related to death—such as necropolitics, celebrity funerals, and modes of death (e.g., execution, suicide, and martyrdom) reflect and leave a lasting impact on human history.

The course is thematic and does not follow a continuous historical timeline, but it is arranged in loosely chronological order. Each class examines a different theoretical approach to death and dying alongside a wide variety of artistic and functional objects, rituals, and customs related to dying and death. Whether warding off the Angel of Death, preparing the body and the grave, funerals, mourning rituals, or artistic depictions of the dead's return through Buddhist reincarnation, dybbuk, the Undead, the Afterlife, Christian resurrection, or the Messianic Rising of the Dead, the attempt to deal with death is a fundamental human endeavor across the ages.

Learning objectives

The course aims to explore the significance of visual and material culture in shaping and reflecting attitudes and practices surrounding death in different religious traditions and histories.

Knowledge

1. Learners will recognize material practices surrounding death.
2. Learners will gain familiarity with methods for analyzing art and visual culture that take up the subjects of death, dying, and the dead.
3. Learners will gain exposure to a wide variety of artistic media that have been historically used to mark the passage of life.

Skills

1. Learners will theorize necro-politics.
2. Learners will compare the use of similar objects by different faith traditions.
3. Learners will feel more confident approaching a “text” (whether an object, a piece of music, a work of literature, an advert, etc.)



Lessons plan (Including active learning):

Lesson No.	Topic	Active learning	Required reading	Assessment
1	Death as Epistemology: Knowing through the End	Collaborative learning/ Guided observation	Philippe Ariès, <i>Western Attitudes Toward Death</i> (the four major approaches) Sigmund Freud, “Thoughts for the Time on War and Death” (selections). Liran Razinsky, “A struggle with the concept of death: “Thoughts for the Times on War and Death,” <i>Freud, Psychoanalysis and Death</i>, 112-130.	Class participation
2	Immortality and the Conquest of Death in Ancient Literature and Art	Collaborative learning/ Guided observation	Jas Elsner, "Art and Death," (chapter six), <i>Imperial Rome and Christian Triumph</i>, 145-65. <i>The Epic of Gilgamesh</i> (Tablet XI) <i>The Egyptian Book of the Dead</i> (selections) Look: Dura-Europas, 3rd Century, Syria	Class participation
3	The Myth of Death and the Ontology of Absence	Collaborative learning/ Guided observation	Mircea Eliade, “Sacred Space and Making the World Sacred,” in <i>The Sacred and the Profane</i> (London: Harcourt, 1987), 8–65. Homer, <i>The Iliad</i> (Book 24 – Burial of Hector) Homer, <i>The Odyssey</i> (Book 11 – Visit to the Underworld) Look: The Death of Hector, Amphora, c. 800 BCE	Class participation
4	Jewish Afterlives: Memory and Messianism	Collaborative learning/ Guided observation	Jon Levenson, <i>Resurrection and the Restoration of Israel</i> (Ch. 1). Jacob Neusner, <i>Death and the Afterlife in the Rabbinic Traditions</i> (selections) Look: <i>Eschatological Banquet of the Leviathan</i>, c. 1350	
5	Sacrifice and Spectacle: Martyrdom as	Collaborative learning/ / Guided observation	1 Corinthians 15 <i>The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity</i>	Class participation

	Theological Theater		Peter Brown, <i>The Cult of the Saints</i> (Ch. 1: “A Fine and Private Place”) Look: St. Matthew writing the Gospel, c. 800	
6	Jonah in the Belly of the Fish: Liminal Bodies in Christian Art	Collaborative learning/ Guided observation	Bezalel Narkiss, “The Sign of Jonah,” <i>Gesta</i> 18.1 (1979): 63-76. Stracke, Richard. “Jonah the Prophet: In Iconography,” <i>Christian Iconography</i> , 2014, available here: https://www.christianiconography.info/jonah.html Campbell, Joseph. “The Belly of the Whale,” <i>The Hero with A Thousand Faces</i> , 90-94. Look: Jonah and the Whale in European Art	Class participation
7	Death as Instruction: Texts of Legacy and Transmission	Collaborative learning/ Literary analysis	The Ramban’s Letter to his Son, trans. Solomon Schechter. R. Yehuda Ibn Tibon, “A Father’s Admonition,” in Hebrew Ethical Wills, ed. Israel Abrahams, 51-93.	Class participation/ <u>Comparative Analysis</u>
8	The Afterlife of the Body: Samsara, Karma, and Image	Collaborative learning/ Guided observation	<i>The Bhagavad Gītā</i> (esp. Chs. 2 and 18). <i>The Tibetan Book of the Dead</i> (excerpts). Wendy Doniger, <i>The Implied Spider</i> (essay: “Myths of Death, Rebirth, and Karma”) Look: Depictions of the Wheel of Life (Bhavachakra), File:The wheel of life, Buddhism Bhavachakra.jpg - Wikimedia Commons	Class participation
9	Temporal Geographies of the Afterlife	Collaborative learning/ Guided observation	Dante, <i>Inferno</i> (prologue) Jacques Le Goff, <i>The Birth of Purgatory</i> (Ch. 1 & 5) Caroline Walker Bynum, “Material Continuity, Personal Survival and the Resurrection of the Body”	Class participation
10	Early Modern Reformulations:	Collaborative learning/ Guided observation	Martin Luther, <i>Sermon on Preparing to Die</i> (1519)	Class participation

	Death and the Self		Michel de Montaigne, <i>Essays</i> (“That to Study Philosophy is to Learn to Die”) Look: Matthäus Merian, <i>Todten-Tantz</i>, 1621 Jacob van Ruisdael’s <i>The Jewish Cemetery</i>, c. 1654–1655 Portrait of Isaac Aboab da Fronseca (1605-1693) by A. Nagtegaal.	
11	The Modernization of Death: Secular Rituals/Sacred Absence	Collaborative learning/ Guided observation	Immanuel Kant, <i>Religion within the Bounds of Bare Reason</i> (Book IV) Thomas Laqueur, <i>The Work of the Dead</i> (Intro & Ch. 2) Look: Jacques-Louis David, <i>The Oath of Horatii</i> (1784); <i>The Death of Marat</i> (1793) The Prague Holy Burial Society Cycle, c. 1772	Class participation
12	Mortality: Existential and Psychological Approaches	Collaborative learning	Søren Kierkegaard, <i>The Sickness Unto Death</i> (selections) Friedrich Nietzsche, <i>Thus Spoke Zarathustra</i> (Prologue; “On the Grave-Song”)	Class participation
13	The <i>Judenmord</i> : Beyond the Limitations of Representation	Collaborative learning/ Interactive listening	Julia Kristeva, <i>Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia</i> (Ch. 1: “On the Melancholic Imaginary”) Look: Marc Chagall, <i>White Crucifixion</i>, 1938 “The Artistic Competition for the Memorial at Auschwitz” Listen: Leonard Bernstein, <i>Kaddish: Symphony No. 3</i>	Class participation
14	Pilgrimage to the Dead: Memory Sites and Sacred Tourism	Collaborative learning	Yoram Bilu, “The Sanctification of Space in Israel: Civil Religion and Folk-Judaism,” 371–93. Alex Weingrod, “Changing Israeli Landscape: Buildings and the Uses of the Past,” 370–87. Raphael, Simcha Paul. <i>Jewish Views of the Afterlife</i>. 2d ed. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009 (selections).	Class participation/ <u>Object study</u>



Final grade

Description of the learning product	Weight in the final score
Oral participation in class on assignments	Will account for 25% of the final grade
Comparative Analysis	25% of final grade
Object Study	50% of final grade



Course requirements

Attendance—required; up to 2 absences excused

Comparative Analysis: 25% Due Class 7.

Choose two different religious or cultural traditions and compare how death is theorized through visual culture, ritual practice, or material aesthetics. Focus on either how death is ritualized, staged, or visualized or how images or objects mediate grief, remembrance, or transcendence. You will be able to use this assignment as the basis of your final object study and this will give you an opportunity for feedback. Use at least one theoretical framework to analyze how meaning is constructed around death. This should be more analytic than descriptive. 3-4 pages.

Final Paper: 50% Due Class 13.

Object Study—Choose any specific object, film, ritual, or space related to death from any period in history. How is death represented, inscribed, and/or denied? Analyze the creation, use, changes, and reception of that object. Discuss how at least two theorists would analyze the representation of death in your object choice (e.g., Ariès' attitudes, Freud's death drive, Foucault's biopolitics/necropolitics, Butler's performativity, Ricoeur's memory, etc.). 8-10 pages. Name and title on first page, Times New Roman, 12 point font, double-spaced. Citation is required. You may use Chicago, APA, or MLA formats. Please choose one citation style and be consistent throughout your project.



Prerequisites

	N/A

Bibliography:

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Becker, Ernest. *The Denial of Death*. New York: Free Press, 1973.

Ben-Ami, Issachar. *Saint Veneration among the Jews in Morocco* (Detroit, Mich.: Wayne State University Press, 1998).

Leonard Bernstein, *Kaddish: Symphony No. 3*

Bilu, Yoram. "Moroccan Jews and the Shaping of Israel's Sacred Geography," in *Divergent Jewish Cultures: Israel and America*, eds. Deborah Dash-Moore and Ilan Toren (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2001), 72-86.

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Doniger, Wendy. *The Implied Spider: Politics and Theology in Myth*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1998.

The Egyptian Book of the Dead: The Book of Going Forth by Day. Translated by Raymond Faulkner. Edited by Eva von Dassow. San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1994.

Eliade, Mircea. "Sacred Space and Making the World Sacred," in *The Sacred and the Profane* (London: Harcourt, 1987), 8-65.

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Ferziger, Adam S. "Ashes to Outcasts: Cremation, Jewish Law, and Identity in Early Twentieth-Century," *AJS Review* 36.1 (2012): 71-102.

Freud, Sigmund. "Thoughts for the Time on War and Death." In *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Vol. 14. London: Vintage, 1999.

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Grinboym, Ben-Tsiyon. "Jewish Metalwork, Sculpture, and Graphics in Poland," *Di kehile shtime; Głosgminy żydowskiej* 1:3 (September 1937), 27.

Gutmann, J. "When the Kingdom Comes," *Art Journal* 27.2 (1967-68): 168-175.

Hachlili, Rachel. *Jewish Funerary Customs, Practices and Rites in the Second Temple Period. Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism* 94 (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2005).

Hoffman-Cortius, Kathryn. *Judenmord: Art and the Holocaust in Post-war Germany* (London: Reaktion Books, 2018).

Homer. *The Odyssey*. Translated by Robert Fagles. New York: Penguin, 1996.

Jagodzińska, Agnieszka. "Kaddish for Angels: Revisioning Funerary Rituals and Cemeteries in Nineteenth-Century Jewish Warsaw." In *Revisioning Ritual: Jewish Traditions in Transition*, Simon J. Bronner, ed. (Oxford: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2011): 265-289.

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Suggestions and ideas:

Course Abstract

If we ask students what they learned or how they have developed in this course, what would you like them to say?

Learning objectives

The learning **objectives** will clarify what the student is expected to know, understand and/or be able to demonstrate after completing the course. Write up to 5 goals for the course using applied verbs of learner performance.

It is recommended that you focus on 3 types of learning objectives: Knowledge, Skills, Values. You should aim not only for knowledge but also for skills and worldviews or values that you would like your learners to acquire as a result of the course.

Precise formulation of course objectives

1. Links back to the course's main idea and defines the syllabus and learning sequence.
2. Demonstrates the development of skills and worldviews in addition to knowledge.
3. Creates a distinction between content for classroom learning and content for self-learning or expansion.
4. Details assessment processes.

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Examples of the learning objectives mentioned above:

knowledge

Familiarity with facts, content, concepts, issues, and key ideas in the field of knowledge.
For example: learners will describe/elaborate/explain/define...

Skills

The ability to reach a product or result effectively using the knowledge that has developed.
For example: the learners will analyze / identify / choose alternatives / plan / make a decision / evaluate / decipher / execute...

Worldviews and Value Perspectives

Opinions, insights, thoughts, and beliefs that learners will have the opportunity to form for themselves during the course.

Examples of formulating learning **goals**: Learners will develop perceptions/ hold positions/ identify/ appreciate/ recognize the importance...

Active learning

Teaching that promotes active learning is teaching that does not only impart knowledge (while students are passive listeners) but includes a **variety of teaching/learning methods** in which students are active in class.

Active learning leads learners to thinking, discussing, investigating, and creating. They practice skills, solve problems, tackle complex questions, make decisions, propose solutions, and explain ideas in their own words through writing and discussion.

Incorporating active learning strategies into university courses significantly improves students' learning process, increases the chances of memory and application, and helps narrow gaps between learners.

Active learning can be planned at the entire course level (around a big problem, building a project in groups, Jigsaw (in which each group learns part of the subject and presents to the whole class) etc. Or at the level of single lessons (simulations and role-playing games, tours, workshops, labs, etc.).

Active learning advances: (Freeman et al., 2014; Theobald et al., 2020)

- Content recollection.
- Teamwork, problem solving skills.
- Personal contact with the students.
- A variety of learning opportunities for learners with different needs.

Active learning components to integrate into the course - examples:

- Building a project, closely linked to each topic or lesson, in groups of 4-5. Some of the course sessions become focused group mentoring sessions and time for teamwork or are divided into instructional and teamwork components.
- Problem-based learning. Collaborative research towards the solution of a problem with instructor's mentoring.
- Flipped classroom model course: Personal work on theoretical/theoretical materials before class. Active in class discussion/practice/processing based on preliminary learning.
- Playlist learning: In the Netflix model – micro-units for self-learning.
- PBL project-based learning (i.e. joint problem solving or execution of a rolling project).

Active learning activities to incorporate into lessons – examples:

- Collaborative learning in different models.
- Jigsaw – teaching fellows in internship groups.
- Guest **workshop** from another university **or** business **company or** association (from Israel or abroad).
- Extracurricular learning: tours (museums, relevant companies/associations), presentation at a conference, etc.
- Use of digital tools, VR/AR imaging, use of robots, clickers, paddle, etc.
- Simulations and role-playing games.
- Research in laboratories.

Formative assessment

Formative **assessment** is feedback given **during** the course, as opposed to summative **assessment**, in which the feedback is given to students only **at the end** of the course (e.g. project or test). When students receive feedback as they learn (e.g. by submitting exercises, presentations, **quizzes**, creating podcasts, mini-computer quizzes, and assignments), they can actively shape the process and are given the opportunity to improve and learn via the assessment **process**.

Formative assessment promotes active participation, asking questions, critical thinking, independent design of learning.

Does not require significant additional time to review deliverables. You can prepare a rubric, integrate peer evaluation, give general class feedback on specific points, or use questionnaires that provide immediate **feedback**.

Formative assessment supports:

- An up-to-date snapshot of learning progress.
- Memory of content.
- Deepening of the learning process.

Examples of formative assessment outcomes:

- **Questionnaires** at the beginning of a meeting.
- Course Forum Interactions.
- Submitting exercises/ chores.
- Digital assignments / quizzes **with a** built-in solution – using a digital tool that gives immediate feedback and allows you to experiment again and again with questions.
- A short self-recording of a group of learners (on Zoom, for example) in which they express an opinion, evaluate a product, explain an answer.
- Guided **participation** in an online forum.
- Submission: Video production/podcast/3D printing/robot programming, etc.