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The production of a proper place of death

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Abstract

Personalised memorials often provoke a process of formalisation. As motives behind the development of a proper place of death we may find given social, cultural, religious or aesthetic structures.¹ However, I propose there are hidden motives for these value judgements other than aestheticism, religiosity or cultural authenticity. Even if, as Åkesson describes it, personalised memorials may serve as a positive and graspable connection between the symbolic and diabolic reality,² the opposite may also be true. Negative experiences of personalised memorials might, for instance, lie implicit in various value judgements and may perhaps be explained by what Kristeva calls abjection.³ Abjection, for Kristeva, is something confusingly horrible which suddenly breaks through in a moment of revelation when the expected is turned upside down. Certeau presents a related view, stating that the instantaneous flashes of memory can only find catalysts in spaces that enable unpredictable situations to occur whereas memory becomes static in autonomous proper places.⁴ If we move Kristeva's and Certeau's discussion to the context of persona-oriented memorials, we may well find that standardised and impersonal grave lots for some people enhance emotional control and thus help tame the fear of death, whereas the more unpredictable encounters with roadside memorials or memorial decorations from "the living world", like toys, photographs or personal items, function as catalysts, hence, revealing the ever-present powers of death and turning the space of ordinary life upside down by exposing its temporariness and fragility. Thus, the borders of the cemetery, originally enclosing the churchyard to separate the consecrated earth from the unconsecrated, continues, in current secular and large-scale cemeteries, to keep death in order, inside well-trimmed hedges and proper grave lots. Outside there is life - and the protection works both ways.

Introduction

Memorials and places of ritual, such as funeral monuments, roadside memorials and cemeteries, can be said to reveal the politics of space as in the tension between sacred versus secular and between private versus public interests.⁵ At the same time they also reflect a given society's religious structures, cultural differences and social orderings, as well as the changes in these matters over time.

New ways of dealing with the deceased continuously leave traces in the space of death. From the churchyard, as the sacred heart of the

city,⁶ to the anonymous placing of cremated remains in extra-urban cemeteries and, more recently, to the practice of strewing the ashes outside the borders of the cemetery, in an environment that is specific to the deceased. Some researchers even speak of a shift: from an institutional to an individual notion of death, leaving its mark on ritual activity, memorials and places of ritual.⁷

The nineteenth century's long term planning and successive construction of new burial grounds and new ways of burial, with the help of among others scientific, technical and ideological strategies, have been quite successful in institutionalising a consciousness of what a proper place of death should be like. However, informal ritual activities also have the power of producing places of ritual as well as reinforcing social or cultural identity. It is interesting to note here that informally produced places of ritual often trigger a process of formalisation of their own, which is reminiscent of the theorist Michel de Certeau's discussion of how tactics in turn may produce new strategies.⁸

In this discussion, Certeau uses the terms *strategies* and *tactics* as opposites, since strategies are connected to the ruling forces in society, such as for instance economic, political, religious or scientific institutions, whereas tactics belong rather to the common people who do not have the means or status to produce what Certeau calls a *proper* place of their own. According to Certeau, a proper place emerges when a strategy circumscribes a place as proper, thereby excluding that which is improper. By means of tactics, on the other hand, you can only use, manipulate, or divert, the proper places produced by strategies. You can never own them.⁹ The fact that tactics cannot produce a proper place can also be seen as the very engine for the tactic procedure, states Certeau.¹⁰ The social structures and proper places produced by strategies thus provoke people to perform tactics. Certeau further states that this in turn inspires new strategies for reordering and reorganising the tactics produced and so on.

I suggest that such a process of formalisation is noticeable in memorial spaces that somewhat run counter to the current demand for rational and efficient public environments, free from religious, political, and persona-oriented symbols. If you think of spontaneous sites of

grief and veneration created by the death of a well known person, or where the numbers of deceased is “reasonably” high, you may probably all recognise the process I am referring to. Soon enough an official monument, arranged according to a given strategy, is constructed, turning the spontaneous memorial space into a proper public memorial place.

As a Swedish example of this we may regard the murder site on Sveavägen in Stockholm where the Swedish Prime Minister Olof Palme was shot. Initially the murder site was covered with flowers as people gathered to express their sorrow publicly. In this particular case the flowers were red roses, which are the symbol of the political party *Socialdemokraterna* of which Olof Palme was the leader. Shortly thereafter an official bronze plaque replaced the heap of flowers, instituting the accident site as a memorial place.

Another example of such a formalisation process comes from the southern region of Sweden, where the Swedish Road Administration suggests creating an official policy for roadside memorials in Skåne.

I will further argue that even though strategies, like the ones mentioned, often give an impression of objectivity, rationality, and care for certain given social, cultural, legal or religious structures, they may also be triggered by more subjective feelings. Negative individual experiences of persona-oriented memorials might, for instance, lie implicit in various value judgements and will in this text be explained by what the psychologist Julia Kristeva calls abjection.¹¹

Case study; roadside memorials in Sweden

The memorial spaces I refer to in this text are memorials at the sites of motor vehicle accidents, with examples from an ongoing study of different people’s experience of roadside memorials in Sweden.

The mentioned study focuses on different people’s conceptions of roadside memorials in Sweden and include interviews with survivors of traffic victims, both those who tend and those who do not tend a memorial, and different categories of professional drivers, such as taxi drivers and lorry drivers, as well as employees at the Swedish Road Administration.

As an entrance to the interview situation, the history of roadside memorials in Sweden has been discussed, with the interviewees’ opinion of the course of events at the centre of attention.

History

Almost all interviewees’ refer to the late nineteen eighties and early nineties as a starting point for the appearance of roadside memorials in Sweden, with an increase in numbers during the nineties and early two thousands. Some believe that the practice of placing flowers and lighting candles at an accident site in Sweden started with the development of a spontaneous memorial site after the mentioned murder of Prime Minister Palme in 1986. The continuous development of such informal places of ritual in Sweden is then correspondingly tied to the occurrence, and vast media coverage, of four great disasters in a time span of only twenty years, starting with wreckage at sea in 1994, when the ship M/S Estonia was swallowed by the Baltic Sea with 580 Swedish citizens onboard. This incident was followed by a fire at a local meeting hall in Gothenburg, killing 63 young people attending a discotheque in 1998, which in turn was followed by the murder of the Swedish Foreign Minister Anna Lind in 2003. The last disaster was the international catastrophe of the Tsunami in South-East Asia, which caused the death of 702 Swedes in 2004.

Media coverage of the murder site of Olof Palme was widespread, and for most of the interviewees this was their first acquaintance with the practice of placing flowers directly on the site of death. This grieving practice was to be repeated in front of the burnt out meeting hall in Gothenburg, where an immense memorial space was created shortly after the fire. At the murder site of Anna Lind, the same kind of public grieving ritual was enacted and recent reports of Swedish families, grieving their loved ones lost in the Tsunami, has revealed yet another form of grieving practice, such as the creation of a persona-oriented memorial in ones own home. Instead of being placed directly on the site of death, these home memorials contain things that are connected to the place of death by what we may call *contiguity*, such as sand taken from the beach where the person went missing, or in the case of motor vehicle accidents, splinters of glass or fallen leaves from the accident site. Framed

photographs of the deceased constitute another type of home memorial based on what we may call *similarity*.¹²

The personal item - a positive link

Why the practice of marking the place of death still seems to be increasing is a question asked by cultural geographers, such as Kate Hartig and Kevin Dunn. In a survey on roadside memorials in Newcastle, New South Wales, Australia, Hartig and Dunne provide a suggestion reminiscent to Certeau's belief that strategies provoke tactics. They propose that roadside memorials may be filling a gap in the trend towards gardens of remembrance and plaque-gardens, leaving the survivors with no personalised space to visit. The formality and strict requirements of official cemeteries, as regards the regulations on both gravestones and decorations, may be an additional cause for the increase of roadside memorials, states Hartig and Dunne.¹³

However, from another perspective, we may well see the roadside memorial as an additional way of expressing the deceased's identity and social person rather than as a replacement for the grave lot in the cemetery. This is also the main perspective found in my study, where the survivors regard roadside memorials and home memorials to be supplementary places of ritual, with slightly different functions than the burial plot in the cemetery.

Among these three places of ritual, the roadside memorial seems to be the least important and is in the long run less visited than the burial plot, with an exception for the annual death date. Some survivors rate the cemetery as number one while most rate the home memorial, or simply the home at large, as the most important place for remembrance.

The reason for this evaluation seems to be the place's ability to bring about a positive presence of the deceased. While the roadside memorial inevitably is a horrible place, the home is in the same fashion an overly positive place. Supported by photographs and other personal objects the home serves as a constant reminder and everyday presence of the deceased. The cemetery seems in this context as rather neutral. Or, as a number of survivors put it, the presence of the deceased can not be felt on the cemetery since this is not where they lived. The presence of the deceased

can only be felt at home, or in some other place connected to the deceased personal life, where the absent person, according to the survivors, still is present.

In line with this, the personal items placed by an accident site or a burial plot could be held to enable a similar connection between the deceased's personal life and the impersonal site, reinforcing it as a memorial space. The same may perhaps be held for several of the practices found in my study, such as collecting sand, fallen leaves, and splinters of glass from the accident site and keep as tokens for remembrance or as a link to the deceased.

The personal item - a negative link

Nevertheless, while personal memorials are positive for some, they may for others constitute a negative experience. Predictably, many of the interviewees condemning roadside memorials also dislike persona-oriented and vividly decorated grave lots, as well as the thought of keeping material things that symbolise the deceased. A few of these interviewees even criticise the very function of cemeteries as material places for veneration and remembrance, while others instead hold the traditional cemetery highly and believe roadside memorials to be radical and blasphemous alternatives.

Interestingly, a critique of the individualised society of today, pared with an idealising of the traditional communitarian society, is noticeable among the most contemptuous persons. For a few, this includes the condemnation of reality shows on TV and the celebrity cults connected to them. The construction of roadside memorials is by someone even seen as a kind of fulfilment of Andy Warhol's famous prediction that in the future, everybody will be world-famous for 15 minutes. Thus, in some cases, we could perhaps see the condemnation of roadside memorials as connected to a certain ideology. Another way of seeing it would be to classify it as a judgment of taste, which may sometimes even be connected to moral or causal judgment.¹⁴

In the development of the western cemetery, as a proper place of death, a connection between the judgment of taste and moral or causal judgment can be found.¹⁵ As motives behind these value judgements we may find the urge to maintain or enhance given structures. Sometimes motives

like these are immanent in value judgments connected to taste, such as in tasteful versus tasteless, at other times they are disguised as common sense, as in the well known phrase “what would happen if everyone acted like you”.

Maybe the opposite could also be said to exist, i.e. aesthetic preferences disguised as, for instance, moral, religious or cultural value judgments. An example of this may perhaps be found in the architect Augustus Welby Pugin’s view of mass-produced funeral memorials as irreligious and immoral, compared to artistic or architectural monuments in a Gothic style,¹⁶ or in an example from a recent church antiquary conference in Sweden, where a landscape architect suggested to distribute folders among grave owners with recommendations for certain kinds of vegetation, considered as part of our cultural heritage.¹⁷

However, when it comes to the general condemnation of persona-oriented memorials and decorations I suggest that there are hidden motives for these value judgements other than ideology, aestheticism, or cultural authenticity. Even if, as the Swedish ethnologist Lynn Åkesson describes it, personalised memorials may serve as a positive and graspable link between the symbolic and diabolic reality,¹⁸ the opposite may also be true. Negative experiences of personalised memorials can, for instance, lie implicit in various value judgements and might be explained by what Kristeva calls abjection.

Abjection, for Kristeva, is something that is incomprehensibly and confusingly horrible from which one does not cease to try separating. It is something forgotten that is constantly remembered. The repression of this forgotten can suddenly break through in a moment of revelation, terribly clear in all its ambiguity, when something contradictory to the expected suddenly appears or when the expected is turned upside down, exemplified by Kristeva with an episode where death is represented by things that for her symbolise life.¹⁹

A parallel might also be drawn to Kristeva’s reflection that without a proper context the dead body does not signify death, it merely shows us the improper or unclean side of life that we constantly try to reject in order to live.²⁰ The dead body as a sign of death does not function in isolation; for Kristeva it needs the specific setting

of religion or science to convey the right information.

The same communicative difficulty may appear in the presence of memorials placed outside the given context of a cemetery. Even though the memorial artefacts placed on these sites should function as an indication of veneration and grief, the profane and everyday setting of an accident or murder site somehow contradicts this message.

Further more, while you can consciously avoid a visit to the cemetery, or at least prepare yourself for an expected encounter, the unpredicted sight of a roadside memorial may suddenly bring about repressed feelings of pain and anger, as for some of the interviewees in my study.

Conclusion

Conclusively, standardised, or even anonymous, places of death may for some function as redemptive tools with which to control the fear of death, whereas the more unpredictable encounters with roadside memorials or memorial decorations from the living world, like toys, photographs or personal items, may unveil the close link between death and life, hence, revealing the ever-present powers of death and turning the space of ordinary life upside down by exposing its temporariness and fragility.

Even though strategies like the ones regulating the design of gravestones or reordering roadside memorials may be justified by what is often called common sense, I have in this paper suggested they may well be triggered by more subjective feelings, like abjection.

Hence, the borders of the cemetery, originally enclosing the churchyard to separate the consecrated earth from the unconsecrated, continues, in current secular and large-scale cemeteries, to keep death in order, inside well-trimmed hedges, straight grids of paths and proper grave lots. Outside there is life – and the protection works both ways.

¹ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, new edition, translated by Steven Rendall (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 2002), xix, 117-8.

² Where symbolic reality stands for a feeling of unity and meaning of life whereas diabolic reality stands for feelings of disruption and disillusion. Lynn Åkesson, *Mellan levande och döda: föreställningar om kropp och ritual* (Stockholm: Natur och Kultur: Forskningsrådsnämnden, 1997), 112-13, 149-50.

³ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, translated by Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 3-4.

⁴ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 87-8.

⁵ Lily Kong, "Cemeteries and Columbaria, Memorials and Mausoleums: Narrative and Interpretation in the Study of Deathscapes in Geography", *Australian Geographical Studies*, 37/1 (1999): 1-10.

⁶ Philippe Ariès, *The Hour of Death*, translated by Helen Weaver (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983) [First published in Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1977].

⁷ Douglas J. Davies, *Death, Ritual and Belief: The Rhetoric of Funerary Rites*, second edition (London, New York: Continuum, 2002) [First edition published in 1997]. Curt Dahlgren, *När döden skiljer oss åt... Anonymitet och individualisering i dödsannonser: 1945-1999* (Stockholm: Databokförlaget AB, 2000). Göran Gustavsson, *När det sociala kapitalet växlas in: om begravingar och deltagandet i begravingar*, Lund studies in Sociology of Religion, 4 (Centrum för Teologi och Religionsvetenskap, Lund University: Arken bokhandel, 2003). Curt Dahlgren & Jan Hermanson, "Kremation och spridning av aska: förändrade begravnings seder i Sverige under sent 1990-tal?", [Online] *RIT religionsvetenskaplig internettidsskrift*, 6/2003 (Copyright: Curt Dahlgren, Jan Hermanson & CTR, Lund University), retrieved 30 March 2004, URL <<http://www.teol.lu.se/rit6/artiklar/jh1.pdf>>.

⁸ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, especially 29-42.

⁹ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 36-7.

¹⁰ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 29.

¹¹ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 3-4.

¹² The effect of contiguity and similarity, in the construction of memorials, will be further dealt with in my PhD-thesis.

¹³ Kate V. Hartig and Kevin M. Dunn, "Roadside Memorials: Interpreting New Deathscapes in Newcastle, New South Wales", *Australian Geographical Studies*, 36/1 (March, 1998): 17.

¹⁴ See for instance: David Hume, "Of the standard of taste", *Of the delicacy of taste and passion: Of tragedy; Of the standard of taste*, Kurslitteratur, Institutionen för estetik, Uppsala universitet, 22 (Uppsala, 1994), 21-43 [Essays originally written in the 1770's].

¹⁵ George Alfred Walker, *Gatherings from Grave Yards, facsimile edition of the first edition* (Kila, MT, USA: Kessinger Publishing, 2003) [First published in 1839]. Augustus Welby Northmore Pugin, "An Apology for the Revival of Christian Architecture in England", *The True Principles of Pointed or Christian Architecture and An Apology for the Revival of Christian Architecture in England*, joint facsimile edition of the first editions (Gracewing Publishing: Leominster, Herefordshire, Gracewing, 2003). [*True Principles* first published in 1841; *An Apology* first published in 1943]. Augustus Welby Northmore Pugin, *The present state of ecclesiastical architecture in England*, facsimile edition of the first edition (Oxford, 1969) [First published in 1843].

¹⁶ Augustus Welby Northmore Pugin, *The present state of ecclesiastical architecture in England*, 44.

¹⁷ *Kyrkoantikvariedagarna*, Länsstyrelsen, Malmö (2003-09-04 – 2003-09-05).

¹⁸ Lynn Åkesson, *Mellan levande och döda*, 112-13, 149-50.

¹⁹ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 3-4.

²⁰ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 73.