

Cities, Cemeteries and Resistance: Paris and the Modern Rationalization of Death Christopher Bodnar, Carleton University

This paper argues that although cemeteries are occasionally used to demonstrate the historical shift toward sanitized, standardized spaces of modernity, these changes were, by no means, uncontested in historical examples. This assertion is based upon a study of resistance movements against cemetery changes in Paris through the 1880s. The specific example used in this study encompasses the period of 1850 through 1885, during which the city of Paris was flattened and rebuilt. Largely administered by the Paris Prefect Haussmann, the new plans for the city called for the building of a massive cemetery outside the city, connected to the centre of Paris by an elaborate railway network. Amidst all the plans developed for the city, this is one of the most significant efforts of the time that was never achieved, despite the fact that land had been acquired and significant effort and expense put toward planning the project. What those in charge of the project came up against was a strong resistance by the working classes of Paris as well as the communities surrounding the city. Within the strong tradition of the cult of the dead, the poor saw this project as an effort to further remove their classes from the new urban form. Likewise, the inhabitants of surrounding communities refused to accept that a city could inflict its dead upon other communities; each must be responsible for their own. What ensued was a struggle over the rationalization of sites of death and the entire rituals involving death. But, more important, the resistance was indicative of significant class divisions that, while characterizing much of Paris' history, are largely erased from collective memory through the rationalized spaces produced to reclaim meaning away from the resisters.

I argue that while the cemetery serves as a pertinent example of the rationalization of space and life processes in the modern period, the very nature of rationalization abstracts the artefact from the socio-cultural circumstances within the historical period. As such, the resistance movements indicate the struggle against the governing power in Paris throughout this period and demonstrate that the rationalization of cemeteries was, by no means, a naturally given phenomenon, nor was it uncontested. Moreover, the cemetery marks a key notion as to how societies conceptualize spatialized communication, both between the worlds of the living and the dead as well as between individuals and societies within the living world. Most important, the cemetery demonstrates the transfer of experience in absolute space, to borrow a term from Lefebvre, to the abstract space of capital's visual systems within the context of modernity's development.

Why the cemetery?

Perhaps one of the first explanations due is to respond to the question: "Why the cemetery?" First, I feel that the cemetery remains a significantly under-analyzed cultural form. To say that the cemetery is only part of a larger infrastructure of modernity is to deny the important cultural role these spaces have for individual communication. This communication marks not only the longing of the living individual to meaningfully connect with other living humans, but also to communicate with lost relatives and a world that remains veiled and mysterious. The rationalization of cemetery space has in one sense increased the mythical nature of death; the certainty with which individuals

communicated with their ancestors and God through the traditional cemetery was replaced with uncertainty of communication in the abstract space of modern rationality.

Second, the notions of death developed in earlier modernity have had significant ramifications on urban development within a contemporary context. By rationalizing the space of the cemetery, death, in general was abstracted from the lives of urban dwellers. These populations shifted away from cultural practices that revolved around death as a central focus of life's work. Alongside rapid industrialization, political economic imperatives became the central focus of life within the city. Cultural forms, whether the physical body or other material artefacts, were to be categorized and stored in cemeteries and museums as the ephemeral popular culture of the moment, while fleeting, came to drive industrial production. And these phenomena are not absent from contemporary urban systems.

It is in this light that there are, in fact, relationships between the modern cemetery and city and the contemporary city. The importance of rational division, classification and ordering of death was not unique to cemeteries. Cultural artefacts in general were the focus of preservation within the cities of Western societies, if not their *raison d'être*. Mumford (1961) suggests that humanity's "respect for the dead, itself an expression of fascination with his powerful images of daylight fantasy and nightly dream, perhaps had an even greater role than more practical needs is causing him to seek a fixed meeting place and eventually a continuous settlement," (7). But while cemeteries were removed from the city in the early modern period, the city became a new site for storing the artefacts of the dead: the city became a cultural archive. Virilio (2002) suggests that we now have museums for everything: "Little by little, the difference between the contemporary living-space and the sites of the archaeological past would fade. Modern Europe would take on a discreetly funeral character," (53). If the cemetery became the first permanent city to which the nomadic living returned to visit their dead, the contemporary Western city in a tourism-based society is the cultural cemetery to which travellers visit to linger with the remains of a society to which they are foreign. The cemetery comes to act as more than just an example of spatial reconfiguration, but as a metaphor of Western society. The rationalization of knowledge and cultural preservation brings us to a point at which our cities are cultural graveyards. Similarly, the rationalization of cemetery space in modern Paris was an early attempt to rid the city of the working class. While a long process, the task has been achieved. The contemporary city of Paris is a place where the cultural elite go to play, academics go to satisfy their curiosity and tourists go to experience the culture of the past. It is in the city's surrounding banlieue, or suburbs, that the majority of the region's population live, along with the explosions of socio-cultural conflict that is too easily contained in Paris itself. The banlieue are the mirrored opposite of the city of Paris; they constitute the *lieue-bani*, of banished places and peoples the city has rejected. And the struggles of the past and present risk being lost within these graves unless the tensions inherent in the social and spatial relations remain a part of the city's dynamic.

After all of this change, it was the nature of the geographic space of the cemetery around which the city presented its successes: despite the scientific work done around preserving bodies, standardizing sanitary processes after death and the bureaucratization of death, it was the visual, geographic, aesthetic nature of the cemetery the city chose to display in its contributions to the Universal Expositions of 1889 and 1900. Indeed, the

visualized nature of death and the accompanying abstraction away from the physical act of preparing the body and experiencing the lingering rot of flesh in the city became the veil through which the populations were to understand death. The representation of the aesthetic cemetery also abstracted the very struggles behind the rationalization of cemetery space in modern Paris.

Cemetery space in spatial theory

Foucault makes the first reference to the cemetery I follow. This reference is found in his discussion of heterotopias (1986), although only in passing rather than by way of an extensive analysis of the cemetery. Heterotopias, Foucault explains, are the real places that reflect the imagined spaces of utopias that have no real place. They are “something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted,” (24). What is particularly pertinent regarding heterotopias and cemeteries is that heterotopias are “outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality,” (24). But what Foucault suggests is that these places act like mirror, or a “placeless place”: “In the mirror, I see myself there where I am not, in an unreal, virtual space that opens up behind the surface,” (24). More to the point of the heterotopia as a mirror, “it makes this place that I occupy at the moment when I look at myself in the glass at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived it has to pass through this virtual point which is over there,” (24).

Foucault explains that the cemetery is an example of how a society, as history unfolds, “can make an existing heterotopia function in a very different fashion; for each heterotopia has a precise and determined function within a society and the same heterotopia can, according to the synchrony of the culture in which it occurs, have one function or another,” (25). While the cemetery is a unique cultural space, it is, nonetheless, strongly linked with all spatial sites of a given social construct in space.

What is important in Foucault’s discussion of the cemetery in relation to the concept of the heterotopia is that there was not simply a transition from the graveyard as a sacred space to that of a secular site. But Foucault only provides us with a brief outline as to how the heterotopias may be a useful concept for understanding spatial meaning in the transitions between various epistemes. While suggesting that heterotopias are “simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted”, he does not explain how this may be apparent in real situations, whether historical or contemporary. This is a significant gap if we are to explore a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between resistance and spatial meaning.

Michel Vernes (1975) outlines more specifically why the movement of cemeteries out of the city was a distinct class issue. The city of the early 1800s was a design that imprisoned the poor to the open spaces of the street while it protected the rich in their largely interior homes: “This is this spatial transcription of the law that stabilized society,” (61). The city’s streets formed a labyrinth in which street-dwellers maintained an advantage; needing to scrounge for their basic sustenance, those living in the street could navigate the alleys and take advantage of their stealth to assure their livelihood. The poor were dangerous in Paris and the interior lives of the bourgeois were intended to ensure their safety (59).

But the poor, Vernes suggests, were dangerous in other ways that became evident during the cholera outbreak of 1832. The disease left its mark not only on the city's cemeteries, but also on the survivors with grotesque disfigurement. The opacity of the urban space for the rich was mirrored in the masked or disfigured faces of the poor and the rich alike. The need for new means of managing disease, death and the poor became apparent to the bourgeois; those who held economic and political power wanted the city to be rendered transparent to their eyes. Thus, even before the vast rebuilding of Paris beginning in the 1850s began, death and discipline were removed from the centre of the city. This took the form of new cemeteries, the removal of public executions from the centre of the city and an attempt to use institutions of order for the "common function of juggling instable life and death, of separating them," (64). The health and lawfulness of the city was the "corrected reflection" of that which had been removed beyond the city's walls.

Lefebvre (1991) equates the relationship between death and life with the relationships between the living. It is, he proposes, the spatial relationships people establish in their own experiences of these spaces that contribute to a larger social body through the intercommunication of meaning. The native dweller of the traditional Paris felt a connection with the cemetery because they, no doubt, had numerous relatives buried there. The cemetery was not a site for storing remains as much as it was a place, alongside the church, to communicate more directly with God and, in more secular times, a place to communicate more directly with ancestors: "It connected the city, the space above the ground, land-as-soil and land-as-territory, to the hidden, clandestine, subterranean spaces which were those of fertility and death, of the beginning and the end, of birth and burial." (242). It is within the complex social relations between the living and the dead and the power death held within the society that of social body took its shape. As such, Lefebvre explains, "Civic unity binds the living to the dead just as it binds the living to one another, especially in those instances, which are frequent, where the city as concentrated wealth is concretely embodied as a monarch," (235). As a result, Lefebvre classifies the cemetery as an absolute space rather than abstract space. It is this qualification that gives cemetery space its power within the society; while representing a particularly powerful symbol of the unknown qualities of mortality to the population.

Resistance and the failure of cemetery railway

The specific historical occurrence I am examining is the proposal to build a cemetery outside the walls of Paris – in fact, a 20 minute train ride from the city in Méry-sur-Oise. While the efforts to move cemeteries outside the city began shortly after the Revolution – the thought was to provide honourable burials to each individual as the state took over the funeral industry from the church and civil society – the larger scheme to build one huge cemetery so far from the city originated during the time of Haussmann's massive reconstructions. Given what has been said to this point about class divisions and the cemetery, I have sought to examine the phenomenon beyond that of poetics. And it is surprising, in some regards, to find that the cemetery was such a contentious issue.

First, the city's public funeral directors maintained a number of letters written through the 1870s from politicians and members of the public on file objecting to building cemeteries away from the city. In addition, a series of police reports record resistance meetings, posters and petitions found in the city from November 1881 to

January 1882. The places of organization are indicated as “drinking establishments” and those attending meetings were identified as members of the working class. The accounts made by police identify two distinct points of oppositions. First, there is general opposition against having a cemetery so far from the city. Second, there is distrust of the project for its profit objectives; thirty years after Haussmann introduced the plan, people remembered the land speculators who turned a significant profit off of the proposed cemetery land. But throughout all accounts of the cemetery opposition, police reports recount a common theme: should a proposal such as the Méry-sur-Oise cemetery be successful, “all of Paris will be closed to the poor.”

Another curious but obvious source of opposition to the cemetery comes from the mayor of Franconville, a small village near the proposed cemetery and rail line. The mayor produced petitions for working class Parisians to sign, appropriating their voices in the fight against the cemetery. They are a people, the petition claims, who do not possess the resources to undertake public utility research or organize significant movements to voice their oppositions to such projects. But the petition highlights the importance of the cult of the dead in the city and the importance of being able to visit cemeteries for the working classes of the city. Other documents, incidentally, outline the mayor’s own position regarding the proposed cemetery: too much noise and disruption of his town and a significant potential for unwanted working class individuals interrupting the lives of the town’s upper class residents.

Curiosity

There are a number of examples that could be used to demonstrate the class lines in this issue. But there is another phenomenon I would like to point to regarding the public relations to death through the spaces of urban experience over this period. This involved the cult of curiosity that arose around death. A science tending to the preparation of the dead and the professionalization of these tasks through the funeral industry emerged at the same time that cemeteries were being further removed from the city. As a result, the bodies of the dead were removed from the presence of families soon after death so they could be prepared for inhumation. Schwartz (1995) notes that the Paris morgue was built in 1864 and, by later in the century, contained a *salle d’exposition* for the purpose of exhibiting corpses behind glass windows (298). The public would, according to theory, view the bodies in the hope of identifying the unclaimed deceased. In response, the public attended viewings on a daily basis, often lining up to observe the depository of the dead. Death became a, observable, removed, public spectacle. This, in part, demonstrates the manner by which death became increasingly removed from the daily experience of much of the population.

So, where does this take us?

First, given Foucault’s assertion that the heterotopia as a counter-site that is “simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted” offers an entry point into asking how the conflicting meanings of a site are tied into the individual experience and use of the specific places. For the working classes of Paris, the rationalization of the cemetery’s space and its removal from the city limits added a layer of opacity to their own relationship with the site, just as is commonly argued that the rebuilding of Paris disoriented the working populations of the city. The city’s revolutionary population saw

its own utopic potential within their own communities – they contested the meaning of the city and built a counter-site within the city. The conflict over the cemetery was as much a conflict over the city and the vision that could be actualized in real space. At the same time, the control allocated by the bourgeois through the manageable rationalized processes and sites of the external necropolis were comforting. Likewise, while the cemetery in the old Paris was a counter space to the religious ideals of the resurrection, the modern cemetery was an oppositional space to the city itself. The mask-like guise of the disease-disfigured faces that mirrored the unknown and masked spaces of the city was ejected from the urban experience. The competing meanings of the cemetery space demonstrate the plasticity of meaning and the potential for ongoing struggle. The Paris that emerged, however, also demonstrates the power of the physical urban constructs in establishing some histories in common memory while trying to erase others.

In the end, the city built cemeteries around its periphery, but in grid patterns that emphasized the order and management of death. Also present in this model was the visual aesthetic pleasure of the space that is so typical of modernity. The unpleasant may be masked by the pacifying visual. And this appropriation of abstracted death and its organization in space is on what Baurillard suggests that the state built its security: “It is on secularized death, the social transcendence, that it supports itself, and it comes from this abstract mortality that it embodies. As the doctor does for the body, the state manages the dead social body.” (17).

The prominence accorded to the visual masks the pain and terror accorded by more involved experience. Virilio calls this the new “image strategies” and asks “What does it matter that the appearances of the world find themselves reduced to fleeting optical illusions, provided that the screen . . . relieves everyone of the exact measure of their smallness,” (38). The visual is able to remove us from our necessarily unpleasant experience of the physical embodied experience. And perhaps the final outcome of the cemetery within the context of modernity was that resistance over the heterotopias of real space became irrelevant in comparison with the resistance over the visual veils of capital we use to understand experience – what Lefebvre calls abstract space.

Bibliography

Baudrillard, J. (1975). “L’économie politique de la mort”, *Traverses : Lieux et Objets de la Mort*. Paris : Editions de Minuit. 17-27.

Foucault, M. (1986). “Of Other Spaces”, *Diacritics*. 16(1): 22-27.

Lefebvre, H. (1991). *The Production of Space*. Oxford UK & Cambridge USA: Blackwell.

Mumford, L. (1961). *The City in History: its origins, its transformations, and its prospects*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World.

Schwartz, V. (1995). "Cinematic Spectatorship before the Apparatus: The Public Tast for Reality in Fin-de-Siecle Paris" In *Cinema and the Invention of Modern Life*, L. Charney and V. Schwartz (eds). pp. 297-319.

Vernes, M. (1975). "La ville purifiée ou la mort conjurée?", *Traverses : Lieux et Objets de la Mort*. Paris : Editions de Minuit. 57-64.

Virilio, P. (2002). *Ground Zero*. London and New York: Verso.