

Celebrities and cemeteries: Death as the newest commodity

Emily Meller

Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of Technology Sydney

This paper explores the place of a cemetery in a supposedly secular society. It shows that the commoditisation of death has allowed a traditionally religious space to transcend this category to become an integral part of modern Sydney. Drawing on Bruno Latour, it explores how the internal contradictions in the modern constitution are accountable for its current position. Wright's theory of progress is a starting point for explaining how consumerism has enveloped the cemetery. Foucault's theory of power and Marx's critique of capitalism provide a theoretical basis for the argument that even in death people seek power in the hope that they can contribute to a future society that has 'progressed' further than our own. The objective is to show how a postmodernist critique of this process is partly what has contributed to the proliferation of celebrity culture in the cemetery. Only with a new perspective can we hope to escape the disintegration of society that is inevitable if 'progress' and 'postmodernism' continue to dominate our discourse.

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A mass of white monuments and crucifixes stretch down a gentle slope towards the horizon. The expanse of blue calms and reminds of a world outside the cemetery. The dramatic cliffs provide a sheer drop. Religion now resides at the literal edge of the city. It appears as though it may be pushed off and left to dissolve in the ocean, but as any local can tell you the land it occupies is actually prime real-estate. Apparently, we are no longer a predominantly Christian society. Yet far from becoming irrelevant, this supposedly religious space retains dominance, residing at the non-geographic yet undeniable 'heart' of Sydney. That is why the perceived power of Waverley cemetery is based not on religious observance, but on its success as a small business.

The first burial in Waverley cemetery took place on the 4th of August in 1877. It was the burial of eighty-five year old Ruth Allen. Apart from a brief mention on the Cemetery's website, she is otherwise untraceable. Her history is lost among the fifty-thousand other internments the cemetery has seen. Finding Henry Lawson's grave is much easier. It is a simple stone grave curb, filled modestly with small white pebbles. Yet, unlike some less famous graves, the headstone is immaculately maintained. Death is no deterrent when it comes to worshipping the famous. Celebrity culture in a cemetery? It is surely as absurd as it sounds.

It is easy to claim this idea is a product of the postmodernist condition from which we all apparently suffer. It is crushing, supposedly destroying any kind of spirit modernism gave to us. As a parasitic disease, it is impossible to explore it outside of a modernist context, or ironically, in a non-modernist discourse. If, as Jean-Luc Nancy suggests, postmodernism is the end of the world, if we are already dead, it is not because of this culture-feeding parasite. It is because we have fallen into a grave dug by the fathers of modernism who framed its constitution (Latour 1993).

A history of Waverley cemetery reveals its emergence coincided with our 'consumer culture' in the nineteenth century (Noble 2008). In a time filled with concerns about the loss of religion in favor of a dominant market it managed to establish itself as an integral part of Sydney's cultural identity. It did this by conforming to the capitalist system that supposedly

facilitated the destruction of religion. It is a system, like modernism, that constantly 'transgresses its own boundaries' (Clegg 2011). It costs eleven-thousand, three-hundred and thirteen dollars to buy your dead body a home (Waverley Cemetery, 2010). Of course, it is silly to suppose the purchase of this land has any immediate or practical benefit. The buying of a plot is for the benefit of future generations. Not only that, but buying a plot at Waverley cemetery places the individual among the bodies of the famous and infamous. Celebrity is defined as 'a person whose name has attention-grabbing, interest-riveting and profit-generating value' (Kotler & Stoller 1997). The Cemetery, as a tourist destination with thirty-six thousand people passing through, is well aware of the value in a name. That is why over eight walking tours of the cemetery, facilitated by the construction of a walkway, allow people to see the graves of the famous and infamous buried there. It is a place in the public consciousness, an important part of history that is unlikely to be easily eroded by the salty coastal winds. Here, the memory of the individual can be kept safe, for a price. This illogical system is known as hyper-capitalism, the commoditisation of an idea or simulation (Baudrillard 1983) with a totally arbitrary cost. It is easy to see why Marx described capitalism as a system in which 'all that is solid melts into air' (Marx 1848). Religious worship becomes secondary to the worship of celebrity. People are not buying a passage to God, but a place in history. The question is whether this should be something that is for sale.

The interplay between history and business is unsettling. It is caused by the progress myth that is etched into modern Sydney culture. Namely, 'the assumption that a pattern of change exists in the history of mankind... that it consists of irreversible changes in one direction only, and that this direction is towards improvement' (Wright 2004). History and Science, supposedly objective modes of enquiry, become politicised and profit-based. Progress is cleverly disguised as a law of nature, with no regard for the influence of context on the discovery of these 'laws'. Instead, it is presented as common knowledge that a human is better than an ape. Thus, the death of a human is more tragic than the death of an ape. Mourning directly correlates to the tragedy of the loss. Thus, in an advanced society comprised of well-educated, creative and productive citizens, every death is a loss that deserves commemoration. As pointed out by Wright (2004), '[p]rogress has an internal logic that can lead beyond reason to catastrophe. A seductive trail of successes may end in a trap.' The intensity with which we are gripped by an obsession with celebrity culture hints at social Darwinism, an example of the possible catastrophe that occurs when science and history become politicised. The perception that some people have lives, bodies of work or simply personalities that are more highly valued than others fits flawlessly with the idea that some people have 'progressed'. A comparison of Ruth and Henry reveals how the myth continues to reside in the cemetery. Analysis of this dark side of modernism is termed 'postmodernism'. It is a warning message etched onto our cultural gravestone.

This engraving, like the others in the cemetery, tells a story. It is the story of our self-destruction, resulting from the human need to achieve something better than those in the past. In modernism, while space remains dead and fixed, time is dynamic (Soja 1995). This is what people aim to keep up with in the cemetery. By having a personal history recorded in stone, the individual can forever be a part of society's collective memory, when it would otherwise be obliterated. This process, the historicisation of space, allows individuals to create a personal history. It is no coincidence the etymology of the word means 'story,' as it is precisely an obsession with stories that has given rise to celebrity culture. According to Gitlin (Turner 2004), 'today's stories are but prologues or sequels to other stories, true and less true stories, stories that are themselves intermissions, stories without end.' This obsession with our own identity, our own stories and the stories of others has not been obliterated, but magnified by the fragmentation of the subject in an increasingly commoditised world. Celebrity culture in a historical space is not so much absurd as inevitable.

In contrast to the modern day process, the burial of Ruth Allen would have been a purely religious occasion. Family and friends would have gathered around to send her to the pearly white gates in a modest Christian fashion. It is not simply the case that celebrity worship has overtaken religion in modern society. Both modernist institutions coincide unproblematically. The modern constitution referred to by Bruno Latour (1993) accounts for the co-existence of two diametrically opposed ideologies in the single, rather small, space. The hybridisation of nature and society is the main paradox of modernity, which claims to rigidly separate these two ideas. Latour outlines the modern constitution's claim that 'even though we construct nature, nature is as though we did not construct it' and secondly that 'even though we do not construct society, society is as though we did construct it'. So when the burial process is viewed as a purely social construction, it is often argued that mourning is a 'universal' human process in all societies. It seems like something we can control, and could stop if we wanted to. Yet, it still continues, and will probably do so for the rest of time. The inevitability and universality of death provides a selling point that can apply to everyone. Waverley, as a heritage site, is even more distinguished and can use the naturalness of death coupled with the social ceremony of burial to create a product that appeals to an entire society, whether religious or non-religious. Cremations are rising in popularity, and there is even scope for atheist burial services. People no longer want to be buried there for religious reasons, which is surely the greatest internal contradiction possible for a cemetery.

In Sydney today, religion is seen as irrelevant, archaic and crumbling like the un-findable grave of Mrs. Allen, yet simultaneously as an inescapable, transcendent and powerful force. Christianity is losing popularity according to the 2006 census, which indicated it was the only religion to experience negative growth (down by 0.6%). However, it a greater proportion than the 19% who stated they had no religion, plus the 12% who gave no answer. Yet many perceive our society to be fundamentally Judeo-Christian, both culturally and legally. To fit both descriptions is impossible without some significant ideological twisting and turning, leading to the compromise that can be termed loosely as a 'postmodern perspective.' The 'crossed-out God' (Latour 1993) is a modernist mechanism that cannot be critiqued, despite its inherent inconsistencies. Obviously, according to Kant's modernist critique of pure reason, there is no room for an all-powerful traditional Judeo-Christian God. It is absurd to give a force that much power in a supposedly logical system of knowledge if its existence cannot be proven by that same system. Instead, as Latour points out, 'this last constitutional guarantee was given not by a supreme God but by an absent God - yet His absence did not prevent people from calling on Him at will in the privacy of their own hearts. His position became literally ideal' (Latour 1993). This is precisely the position he occupies at Waverley cemetery. Thus, the cemetery exemplifies the interplay of religion and reason, supposedly incompatible, yet co-existent. But when taken from its original context and transplanted into ours, cracks allow darker characteristics, like the cult of celebrity, to surface.

In the cemetery these perspectives are easy to trace. Firstly, there is a scientific need to bury our dead, lest they decompose and spread disease among the living. This is presented as logical truth by modernist institutions and through legal regulations such as the *Public Health Act (NSW) 1902 (Cemeteries: Guidelines for their Care and Conservation 1992)*. While it may well be observable that disease spreads, there are many other ways to ensure we are safe. Scientifically, it is illogical to place our dead in the centre of our city. It not only puts them in close proximity to the living, but takes up very valuable land and resources. Spatially, then, the cemetery is far more political than scientific. Its existence is ensured by the *Heritage Act (NSW) 1997* in which the modernist mechanism of law is turned in on itself to preserve, based on the premise of protecting our own history, otherwise unviable and impractical spaces. Foucault's analysis of power relations in spaces sheds light on this phenomenon,

explaining how the cultural and historical significance of a cemetery takes precedence over the reason and logic that supposedly created it. It is the crossed-out God at work and, in displacing the cemetery from its original context, it risks a distortion of its original function with potentially devastating consequences.

Power frees imagination and power writes history (Foucault 1972; Clegg 2011). Foucault further argues that 'a whole history remains to be written of spaces – which would at the same time be the history of powers' (Foucault 1972). Globalisation has led to a restructuring of urban spaces in accordance with the socioeconomic 'condition' referred to as postmodernity. It is argued that the main concern of the C19th was that of history, which is why the creation of Waverley cemetery was seen to be so important for recording Sydney's history. However, the paradigm has now shifted. With subjects dislocated, we now have an obsession with geography and with spaces. Foucault (1986) expresses the belief that 'the present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space... our experience of the world is less that of a long life developing through time than of a network that connects points and intersects with its own skein'. This is not to say that we are not still pre-occupied with history, with our own personal stories and with being remembered after death. However, the shift has been from a dead fixed space to one that is malleable and through which we can easily move across networks. The idea of celebrity dominates this network because it is no longer enough to be recorded in history, like Ruth. Instead, we now seek to transcend the barriers of space as well, and fame is the easiest way for our identities to travel across space and through as many networks as possible.

Burial in Waverley cemetery, amongst celebrities, is seen as a way to ensure some historical power. It is one's ability to transcend the traditional modernist barriers of space that give them power in a globalised world. This is because the rise of capitalism has led to a spatial restructuring of world cities like Sydney. They are merely networks that are designed to generate the most profit in the most efficient way. When all the borders become easily penetrable and space is no longer an obstacle to the hybridisation of culture, the politicisation of space aims 'to compartmentalize, to circumscribe, to incarcerate' (Soja 1995). As a heterotopia, a cemetery is a cultural anchoring point that aims to distinguish western Sydney culture from others, to ensure that people feel a connection to a uniquely 'Sydney' space. It is thus presented as 'society in its perfected form' (Foucault 1986), the irony being that it is full of human remains. These sites are 'socially constructed' and juxtaposed against 'real sites.' By showing what we are not (dead) they strengthen our understanding of what we are (alive). So in this ideal space, there must be room for celebrity. This power play functions to remind us of what we are not (famous) and locate ourselves in a specific time and place (Sydney). We are made to feel that this is where we truly belong. Sydney has been designed for us, and we have been designed for Sydney; we deserve to be a part of its remembered history. Future generations will think of those buried here as they look out across the familiar cliffs to the ocean. That is the closest thing possible to immortality as a commodity, and it is history that is up for sale.

This conclusion leads to the contemporary Sydneysider being left in a theoretical hole. At once modern and postmodern, security and stability are sought in institutions. Yet these institutions and their supposedly objective bodies of knowledge are commoditised and politicised, quite malleable in the hands of the highest bidder. Visiting the cemetery gives power to the ideas modernism generated, as well as to the fallacies postmodernism pointed out. We are left believing in a system that is destroying itself from the inside. According to Latour (1993), 'by playing three times in a row on the same alternation between transcendence and immanence, the moderns can mobilize Nature, objectify the social, and feel the spiritual presence of God.' Though we may lose faith in these institutions and the

knowledge they provide, without examination, consumerism and celebrity culture will lead to our destruction. In critiquing modernism we are not digging our own graves. Rather, we are already in them, trying to dig our way out. What is needed is a new way of thinking that can fill the holes and help explain how death has become a commodity.

Notes on contributor

Emily Meller studies law and communications (writing and cultural studies) at the University of Technology, Sydney. She is currently in her second year, and hopes to use the knowledge she has gained throughout her study of ideas throughout history further on in her career.

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