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# **The Material Presence of Absence: a dialogue between Museums and Cemeteries**

## **Abstract**

This is an exploratory paper that aims to stimulate a dialogue between those interested in two particular spaces in society: the museum and the cemetery. Using empirical evidence from two research projects, the paper considers similarities and differences between the two sites, which are further explored through theoretical ideas about the social life of things and the agency of absence. Examining the materiality of these spaces, the paper addresses the role of objects in these two spaces and their respective associations with death, either through the dead themselves or the representation of those who have once lived. In particular, it explores the 'presence of absence' through three key points: its spatiality, its materiality, and its agency. Museums and cemeteries are, in this sense, directly comparable, as both spaces are shaped by and built upon the practice of making the absent present. Called 'heterotopic' by Foucault (1986) in that they are layered with multiple meanings, this paper will also argue for an understanding of museums and cemeteries as being able to transcend absence. Underpinning this is the belief that there remains much scope for future connections to be made between these two sites, theoretically, politically and practically.

**Key words:** Museums, cemeteries, objects, absence, presence

*"Beyond time, place, and all mortality.*

*To hearts that cannot vary,*

*Absence is present,*

*Time doth tarry"*

(John Donne)

## **Introduction**

1.1 This investigative paper considers similarities and differences between two particular contemporary spaces: the museum and the cemetery. As two spaces

that are simultaneously public (in the sense of being highly visible, shared, and governed by rules and regulations) and private (in the individualised activity that takes place within them), cemeteries and museums have much in common. Both are regimented spaces. Physically bounded, they are clearly demarcated from other spaces and reveal a strongly ordered and organised 'interior'. Objects in these spaces are made meaningful through the expectations associated with their separation from everyday society; and visitors' practices are organised through a mixture of specific rules and unspoken norms of behaviour. Furthermore, both contain meaning that accumulates over time; as a result they can be understood as 'heterotopic' in their ability to transcend the 'here and now' (Foucault, 1986).

1.2 For Foucault, a heterotopia offers a place 'outside of all places' (Foucault, 1986: 24), and in the case of the cemetery specifically, Foucault (1986: 26) noted that "the cemetery is indeed a highly heterotopic place since, for the individual, the cemetery begins with [...] the loss of life, and with this quasi-eternity in which her permanent lot is dissolution and disappearance."

1.3 The list of similarities between these two sites continues. Both are visited by people for a wide range of reasons: to connect with ancestors; as tourist destinations; for education; for enjoyment; or perhaps even for shelter (see Francis et al, 2005; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1988; Macdonald, 2006). In addition, they can both be seen as 'political' in that the decisions made within them – on what to conserve, what to preserve, and indeed, how these terms are interpreted – impacts on the usage of the site (Hussein, 2006; Macdonald, 1998). Finally, both of these sites are connected to death: the cemetery as the location of where bodies are disposed of and memorialised; the museum as a sepulchre for dead objects (Adorno, 1981) or more broadly as a space of death (see Lord, 2006). In this way – and this will be our main concern in this paper – both the museum and the cemetery are places where the *absent is made present*. Both are sites defined by *praesentia*, that is "[...] a way of knowing the world that is both inside and outside of knowledge as a set of representational practices [...] Both a form of *the present* and a form of *presencing something absent*" (Hetherington, 2003b: 1937).

1.4 While making connections between these sites in both a practical and theoretical sense, the purpose of this paper is to stimulate discussion and future research on connecting these two spaces. We compare these two sites because one site can serve as an opportunity for exploring features in the other. In this paper we have chosen to use a comparative, conversational style to “render visible features of a domain brought into focus through its differences from a comparison domain” (Knorr-Cetina, 1999: 22). Importantly, this allows our dialogical analysis to travel ‘between’ and ‘within’ the two settings (Knorr-Cetina, 1999: 22). In other words, we are using a metaphorical reverberation that allows us to consider and compare these two sites back and forth.

1.5 The first section of this paper addresses just what the similarities between the two sites allow us to see. Building on this, the latter sections of the paper question the idea of existence itself, through the absence and presence of the dead, represented and reflected in the materiality of the two settings.

1.6 The empirical data that underpins this paper has come from two research projects undertaken by the respective authors, one focusing on knowledge production in a museum of natural history (Meyer, 2006); the other on the landscape of the contemporary cemetery (Woodthorpe, 2007). Both of these projects were qualitative explorations of the life-worlds of these two spaces, and were interested in how people interacted and place negotiated on a daily basis. Necessarily, this involved exploring the role and function of objects in these spaces, both materially and metaphorically.

1.7 Let us provide a brief outline of the research that underpins this paper. Both of these were three year projects that were driven by a range of interests. Woodthorpe’s study of the contemporary cemetery landscape was an ethnographic examination of the range of people, practices, policies and perspectives that intersect within the cemetery environment. It was undertaken at the City of London Cemetery and Crematorium in Newham, East London. One of the key components of the research was the material and embodied environment of the cemetery setting; it was as much about the people under the ground as the people at the surface (Woodthorpe, forthcoming). The project was thus based on the

understanding that we, as embodied human beings, experience the world in a physical way – we know it through ‘being’ in places and spaces. In the cemetery, the marking of the location of the remains of dead people are a highly significant feature; what is placed on top of their location as a marker for the dead is a crucial feature of the cemetery landscape. From a theoretical perspective, this was particularly interesting in seeing how dead people were both absent (in that they were no longer *actively* interacting in an embodied sense with other people) and present (in the use of objects on graves, which many people visit to ‘be’ with them).

1.8 Meyer’s study explored the roles and interrelationships of amateurs and professionals in the production of scientific knowledge at the Luxembourg Museum of Natural History. For those readers that are not aware, Luxembourg is a very small country sandwiched between France, Germany and Belgium. The study looked at how the boundaries of science are made and unmade, paying particular attention to their materiality and heterogeneity. One of the aims was to analyse how a ‘museum without walls’ was made. That is, how boundaries, both material and metaphorical, were crossed through the use of objects, the creation of certain spaces (‘boundary encounters’), and via different kinds of practices (such as decentralisation and brokering). In another paper – which drew on Latour’s seminal paper *Give me a laboratory and I will raise the world* (Latour, 1984) –, Meyer (2007) further explored how museums might ‘raise the world’. This paper theorised how, through certain reconfigurations and translations, a museum of natural history is capable of ‘raising the world’, in that it stages, disciplines, and eventually ‘brings home’ the ‘natural world out there’.

1.9 Using data from these two projects, on the one hand, our paper is very situated, since the examples we discuss are taken from our respective fieldwork in the Luxembourg Museum of Natural History and in the City of London Cemetery and Crematorium. Yet, on the other hand, this specificity of the fieldsites does perhaps not matter that much, as the scope of this paper is experimental and somewhat abstract: its aim is to explore the theoretical ‘in-between’ features of those two spaces in more symbolic and general terms.

1.10 In order to engage with both these substantive and symbolic qualities, the paper is divided into three sections. First, it focuses on the 'social life of things'. Grounded in the relationship(s) between individuals and objects, we consider their value, their role and what they make present. We take examples from each site to discuss these issues and the differences between the two sites in how objects are interpreted. Second, the paper theoretically examines the spatiality, materiality and agency of absence, asking the questions, just what/where is absence? Is there a particular kind of absence that is made present in these two spaces? Exploring the 'stuff' of absence, these queries are expanded in the final section of this paper in a discussion about the relationship between absence and presence.

## **2. The Social Life of Things**

2.1 It is evident that both the cemetery and museum space contain 'things' that are both inanimate and animate. In the cemetery, these objects are central to how people's grief and mourning practices are presented, performed and understood (see Hallam and Hockey, 2001). The museum's primary function is to represent 'things' as an institution "which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits, for purposes of study, education and enjoyment, material evidence of people and their environment" (International Council of Museums, 2008: upd; see also Hudson, 1999).

2.2 There is a significant difference in how the objects in these sites are interpreted. By drawing upon the notion of the 'social life of things' we can begin to explore this disparity in more detail. For this to happen, it is necessary that we "follow the things themselves, for their meanings are inscribed in their forms, their uses, their trajectories" (Appadurai, 1986: 5). Furthermore, we need to appreciate how institutions constrain both the world of things and the world of people simultaneously and in the same way, constructing *objects* as they construct *people* (Kopytoff, 1986: 90). This, then, means that objects and subjects, the material and the social, are *co-produced*: "Objects need symbolic framings, storylines and human spokespersons in order to acquire social lives; social relationships and practices in turn need to be materially grounded in order to gain temporal and

spatial endurance” (Pels, Hetherington and Vandenberghe, 2002: 11). In order to explore these ideas in more detail, we can turn to our empirical data, in the cemetery first, and the museum second.

2.3 Let us take a very real example of an object we can find in a cemetery: toys. What is illuminating about these objects is that they are simultaneously ‘public’ and ‘private’ objects. Highly visible in the cemetery landscape, toys are framed by collective (and potentially) conflicting ideas of what is appropriate grieving behaviour (see Francis et al, 2005). For some people toys are a loving and acceptable part of publicly showing that the deceased person was cared for. For other people they may come to represent the type of person the deceased person was. However, for other people they can be distracting, messy and ‘ruin’ the look of the cemetery. In contrast to the museum, where there are more shared understandings of what objects ‘do’ and stand for, objects such as toys in the cemetery thus not only have the potential to create tension, they also have the potential to be more mysterious, as there are no labels instructing people how to interpret them or *why* people have placed them in a cemetery, as the following quote illustrates:

“There was one [grave] over there you just couldn’t see the flower area of the part of the grave, it was just covered in toys. And people used to come over and they’d count each one, and I think she had something like 200 and 50 odd of these little china toys on there, or little cars, or various other things. And she’d come over and she’d count them all” (staff member)

To this day, no one knows why this one visitor chose to cover the grave with this number of toys. With no label to guide the spectator, visitors are left to hypothesize and guess why (and, in this case count) the toys that were left. Ultimately, however, no one will ever know why the woman chose to mark the deceased person in this way.

2.4 Toys are a particularly useful example of how people inscribe value on to objects in the cemetery. Usually connected to children and consequently seen as a joyful or educational element of life (see Seiter, 1992), when in the cemetery, toys

move beyond this conventional usage and can come to be extremely potent symbols of death. This is complicated by the problem that there is little shared understanding of what a toy might actually represent in this particular environment. It could be that the overriding purpose of placing toys on graves is to create some form of social continuity for the deceased person, as if they were still alive (see Mulkay and Ernst, 1991). On the other hand, toys could serve to forever identify the deceased as a child, representing an absolute separation at the point of death.

2.5 Depending on what the toys mean to the people leaving them, their meanings can also change over time. On a grave of a four year old boy who died twenty years ago, there might still be many fire engines, cars, and lorries, forever reflecting the age at which he died. In contrast, on a nearby grave of a similar instance of a youngster dying, there may be toys that reflect a would-have-been ageing process, from childhood, to adolescence, into adulthood. Gone are the Transformers and in come the beer bottles.

2.6 These types of practices reflect the ambiguous state and status of the dead, and their relationship to the living (this has been explored elsewhere, see Bennett and Bennett, 2000). Rather than being framed by a dominant discourse (that is, a typical shared understanding), objects in the cemetery tend to be shaped by normative expectations of behaviour about bereavement. These markers reflect how survivors deal with death (see Bachelor, 2004). However, in relation to this paper, what is particularly interesting is that by using toys at the site of the grave, the dead are made to be 'present'. From some psychological perspectives, however, and according to more medicalised understandings of grief, this may be seen as pathological and indicative of an inability to 'let go' (Woodthorpe, 2007).

2.7 This example demonstrates the ambiguous nature of the cemetery space and the range of perspectives and interpretations that can exist within it. One significant reason for this is a lack of guidance on what 'stuff' in the cemetery means (stuff in this context is the material objects such as the toys). With a lack of signs and markers to guide the visitor, a lot of guesswork is involved when visitors (inevitably) compare and contrast what others are doing. The objects in the cemetery become multi-faceted, relying on visitors' personal and independent perspectives and



interpretations, rather than guidance provided by those that run the site (see Bradbury, 1999). This is in sharp contrast to the contemporary museum.

2.8 On this note, let us turn to objects we can find in a museum of natural history to illustrate further some contrasts between these two spaces. A mounted lion, for instance, can be found in most museums of natural history. Highly public, owned by the State or the museum itself, visitors are given a lot of guidance on how to 'read' this lion. Close to the animal itself, we will usually find a label. On that label, we can find 'hard facts': the vernacular name (lion) and Latin name of the animal (*Panthera leo*); its current distribution and habitat around the world (sub-Saharan Africa and Asia); its scientific classification (Kingdom: Animalia, Phylum: Chordata, Class: Mammalia, Order: Carnivora, Family: Felidae, Genus: Panthera); and maybe some other facts and figures about its evolution, biology and behaviour.

2.9 Another object we might find in a museum of natural history is a fossil of an Ichthyosaurus. What we would be able to learn about this animal is that it is also currently known as "The Fish Lizard" and that it first appeared in the Trassic seas some 250 million years ago. Next to the fossil of the animal we might find a model which tries to show how it probably looked liked, which, you might be interested to know, is a bit like a dolphin.

2.10 Thus within a museum of natural history we see objects framed by scientific discourse. By looking at these objects we are supposedly 'learning' something about nature and science; we learn 'through' the objects exhibited. Within museums in general, scientists usually work hard to give artifacts and objects singular, consistent and 'stable' meanings (Schaffer, 2000: 71). Objects are supposed to provide factual data for narratives of human evolution (Dias, 1997: 45), indeed, here "truth is one" (Shapin, 1994: 79).

2.11 While similar to the cemetery in that the public nature of the display means that the lion or fossil can be seen as belonging to the community who use the site, what these objects represent is different. In the museum the objects are deliberately exhibited and managed centrally by the institution to (re)present (natural) history and to provide evidence about the past. In the cemetery, however, visitors are left to create their own interpretation. Hence, one of the key disparities

between how museums and cemeteries operate is the issue of institutional control versus personal control (and care) over objects. Museums are places where the meanings of objects are structured institutionally and through formal learning mechanisms, while cemeteries are places where non-formal and experiential learning takes place, offering people, perhaps, the opportunity to learn about others and their everyday and ordinary practices (see La Belle, 1982; Kolb, 1984).

2.12 A museum of natural history is a place where the discipline and practices of natural history are performed through the objects on display. In effect, efforts are deployed in order to catalogue, classify, and order the world. The keepers of a museum prepare, conserve, preserve, stuff, and mount natural objects. In fact, animals “become natural objects through the social and cultural activities of the scientists who ‘discover’ them, recognize their value, classify them, and put them into specific visual displays” (Dias, 1997: 34). In doing so, the world is frozen and immobilised; it is transported, remade, represented, aligned and put on show (see Asma, 2001: 46). As a result, objects in natural history museums are ‘dead’ in at least three senses: by having been transformed from natural and living beings into cultural and inanimate objects; through a separation and distance between visitors and objects (through glass cases, for instance); and since only staff members are entitled to care for, touch and handle objects. In cemeteries, however, objects left on graves are somehow more ‘alive’ in that they can be more ‘natural’ and subject to change (for example, in the weathering of toys). In a cemetery, objects are inscribed with personal meanings and memories, and visitors are allowed to touch them and care about them.

2.13 In both the museum and the cemetery objects can reveal their “cultural bibliography” (Appadurai, 1986; Kopytoff, 1986) that influences how they are interpreted. In this sense, we use cultural bibliography to refer to the social and cultural context of the objects: how we know what they are and what they might mean based on our own understanding and assumptions of a society’s culture. What differs is the role of the institution in guiding the visitor’s experience of interacting with these objects. In the cemetery visitors are free to independently interpret as they wish; in the museum, visitors are communally encouraged to see the objects as part of the institution itself, as the experts behind the scenes of the museum interpret them. Interestingly, in the museum, however, similar to the

ambiguity of meaning in the cemetery, the stories that go into making these expert perceptions are often invisible.

### 3. Spatiality and materiality of absence

3.1 So far this paper has highlighted some similarities and differences between the museum and the cemetery, through examining some of the objects that can be found within the respective spaces. In this second section of this paper, we move onto a theoretical discussion about the nature of absence and presence in these spaces. Here, we will see that, in a sense, both the museum and the cemetery are spaces *full of, or filled with*, absences. To complicate matters, these absences are not simply *absent*. Indeed, *absence can have some kind of presence*. In trying to make sense of this, Law (2004) has distinguished between two versions of absence: manifest absence (what presence acknowledges and makes manifest; absence which is absent but explicit) and Otherness (absence that is not acknowledged and that cannot be brought to presence). Law (2004: 84) further writes: “*Manifest absence* goes with presence. It is one of its correlates since presence is incomplete and depends on absence”. In both sites, the *manifest* absence of the dead, or rather those-that-once-lived, and of the meaning of the objects used to represent them affects the real, visible, present display of the museum/cemetery. Our discussion here is threefold: first that absence can be spatially located; second, that absence *can* have some kind of materiality (some kind of ‘stuff’); and, lastly, that absence can have agency (it ‘acts’ or ‘does’ things). We deal with each of these features in turn.

3.2 Making connections between cemeteries and museums is not a new venture; Foucault (1986) famously introduced the concept of ‘heterotopia’ to make sense of their temporal similarities. Both the cemetery and the museum are heterotopic places since they offer a place ‘outside of all places’ (Foucault, 1986: 24). The cemetery, in particular, ‘*begins with [...] the loss of life*’ (Foucault, 1986: 26, emphasis added).

3.3 However, Foucault's theorisation of the cemetery and the museum neglects the embodied, material environment. Essentially, this means that Foucault's analysis overlooks the dissolution and disappearance of living beings (and their substantive remains), which are deeply embedded (both symbolically and physically) in the setting of the cemetery landscape and represented in the museum through the objects they have left behind. These spaces are physical, they materially exist. People can enter and leave them. This material environment that reflects the absence of people is *continuous*. One way of interpreting this may be that a cemetery and/or a museum is a 'fire space' (Law and Mol, 2001: 616) in which a landscape/shape *achieves constancy and continuity* in relation to both presence and absence. In Law and Mol's words, "continuity as an effect of *discontinuity*; continuity as *the presence and the absence of Otherness*; and [...] continuity as an effect of a *star-like pattern* in this simultaneous absence and presence: this is what we imagine as the attributes of shape constancy in a topology of fire" (Law and Mol, 2001: 616).

3.4 Articulating and theorising the relationship between presence and absence is not an easy task. To translate these above points, perhaps the interesting point here is that a fire space like a cemetery or a museum is characterised by a *simultaneous presence and absence*. Drawing upon this simultaneous 'feature', we can see that the sites of a cemetery and a museum 'contain' absences, and if we physically enter these sites we are connecting with, or relating to, this absence. Hetherington has argued: "The absent has a geography – a *surrounding* that implies both presence and present" (Hetherington, 2003b: 1941). In short, in a material environment such a museum or a cemetery, *absence occupies a space*.

3.5 To take this line of reasoning one step further and build on our earlier examination of objects we can argue that absence has a material presence through the objects in these spaces. So, where this takes us is to question just what do these objects *do*? What do objects do *in* or *to* space, in relation to what is absent from this space?

3.6 We see that, in relation to ideas about presence and absence, objects do at least three things. First, they bring a space to life. In the case of a cemetery, they

create a social existence and therefore possible 'life' for deceased people. In the case of a museum, they can bring nature 'to life' for the visitor. Fossils, for example, are not merely carbon and rock, they bring to life creatures that once lived: "... fossils, which are our *memories of the past*, give *testimony to the forms of animals and plants* that suddenly appeared and prospered for some time before disappearing. In parallel they allow us to *reconstitute lost worlds*" (Luxembourg Museum of Natural History, 2008, emphasis added).

3.7 Second, objects take their meaning, value, and form from a specific context – a context which exerts control over these objects by classifying and arranging them (see Kirshenblatt-Gimblet, 1988: 21-3). In this case, the context is the expectations that come from the site being a 'museum' or a 'cemetery'. This context is unspoken, yet becomes visible and public through these objects, and one which people draw upon when they are in that space. In addition, these objects are inherently fragmented, in that "the object is a part that stands in a contiguous relation to an absent whole [...]" (Kirshenblatt-Gimblet, 1988: 19). In other words, objects are *a present part of an absent whole*.

3.8 Third, as we already alluded to, objects can make the absent present. Inanimate objects, be it museum artifacts or mementoes left on graves, are thus a kind of vehicle. However, this may only partially be the case, for an object can never fully translate the 'natural world out there' into the museum, just, if you will, a *version* or *representation* of it. A stuffed lion in a museum becomes a spokesperson (see Callon, 1986); it represents all other lions, those that have lived, those that are living 'out there', essentially those *not in the museum* (Meyer, 2007). In a cemetery, objects represent the absent dead, creating an ongoing physical presence for all those who have lived before us. Death is thus both absent *and* present in these spaces (see Hallam and Hockey, 2001: 84-5) and the presence of objects represents the absence of the once-living (Urbain, 1989: 237).

#### **4. Agency of absence**

4.1 In sum, we suggest that absence occupies a space, that absence can be made present through material objects, and that it has some agency. This resonates with Hetherington's discussion of the 'agency of the absent' (Hetherington, 2004: 168; Hetherington, 2003a: 109). In an insightful quote, he has argued that, "the absent can have just as much of an effect upon relations as recognisable forms of presence can have. Social relations are preformed not only around what is there but sometimes also around the *presence* of what is not [...] Indeed the category of absence can have a significant presence in social relations and in material culture" (Hetherington, 2004: 159; see also Hetherington, 2002: 196).

4.2 In a museum and a cemetery we can 'feel', 'see', and 'hear' absence. In cemeteries, we are confronted with absence in the loss of people, (re)presented through the commemorative practice of using toys for example. In museums, we are confronted with the absence of the 'world out there' and/or the 'world that once was'. Both sites, hence, do something *to* and something *with* the absent – transforming, freezing, materialising, evoking, delineating, enacting, performing, and remembering the absent (these concepts have been discussed elsewhere in relation to death, see Roach, 1996). Thus, absence has agency, in some guise or form.

4.3 What makes these spaces special is that in their manifestations of absence *something* lives on; something that is inherited from the past, maintained in the present and bestowed for the future. It is through the museum and the cemetery that the past is represented and brought to life. Maybe there is, then, an essential feature that means museums and cemeteries are more intimately related than we first thought: both spaces are shaped by - and built upon - a specific practice, that is, the practice of making the absent present.

4.4 The complexity of these two spaces is reflected in their simultaneous existence as mundane, everyday spaces, and sacred, heterotopic places. However, to repeat the intention of the paper, we do not seek to 'answer' the possible paradoxes, dichotomies, intersections and connectedness that can be found in these spaces. Indeed, there may be *no* answers. Rather, our aim is to stimulate, provoke and rouse further discussion and academic work into making more explicit connections

between these two distinct spaces. The final question, then, is where to go from here?

## **5. Where to go from here?**

5.1. This paper has argued that the spaces of the museum and the cemetery are full of life, contradictions, similarities, opportunities, discourses, time and objects. Theoretically, both spaces have been, and can be, interpreted as 'heterotopic' in their ability to *transcend absence*, in making absence present.

5.2 Cemeteries and museums can offer us some sense of continuity when faced with the temporality of our mortal condition. By further exploring these spaces alongside each other, we have sought to develop an appreciation of connections between them. There is much scope available for further research examining these spaces, both separately and together. Recent research has, unfortunately, tended to identify them in either 'heritage studies' or 'death studies'. Yet by isolating them in this way, both materially and metaphorically, we ignore their very real, physical co-existence in the social world. Consequently, we argue that much can be learnt from researching the heterotopic spaces of the museum and the cemetery together.

5.3. While this paper is based on two particular spaces, a cemetery and a museum of natural history, it would be interesting to further examine how the ideas developed here ring true for other places, be it other kinds of museums, hospitals, or memorials at the roadside, for example. Nonetheless, museums and cemeteries are interesting places to explore the relationship between objects and people. Examining these two spaces together is perhaps one way to be able to move beyond the debate of whether 'things make people' or 'people make things', and whether or not objects have social lives, in order to focus on the way in which this happens (Pinney, 2005: 256). This can shed light onto how different objects tell *different* stories and how they make the absent present *differently* in different spaces – or, conversely, to what extent they perform similar roles. At the same time, we also need further theoretical tools to be able to tackle the complex issue of

making sense of absence and to be able to see how different kinds of absences are made materially present.

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