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Behind the bearers, the black mourning wearers.... The funeral parade as a symbol of regeneration

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Abstract

This paper contends that the funeral procession has, throughout its history, been a way of theatrically representing the structure and the core values of the society in which it takes place. The funeral procession articulates two contradictory themes: the tragedy of death and the ability of the social group to transcend it. Funeral processions are thus a way of reinvigorating the bereaved community, celebrating shared values and reaffirming communal pride, even when participants focus on their bereavement and describe the event as “a sad obligation”.

The paper considers three very different funerals to demonstrate how the pageantry of a funeral parade (re)naturalises some of the tenets of social life which death has challenged. It also suggests that functionalist explanations of funerary behaviour might be combined with Barthes’ theory of visual symbolism in order to explain the emotional response that funeral processions can still evoke, even in those not personally bereaved.

The paper concludes by reflecting on the future of the funeral parade and the possibility that a different constellation of visual symbols may be drawn into service to reaffirm both the poignancy of loss and the resilience of the bereaved community.

Introduction

When someone dies, the social group they belong to is shaken and destabilized. As well as experiencing fear and grief, bereaved individuals may come to doubt the truth and validity of the organizing principles of their society. For the anthropologists and sociologists of the early twentieth century, funerary rituals were the mechanisms through which social stability and hope were restored (Parsons and Lidz, 1967: 57f). One of the ways in which this was achieved was through the theatrical presentation of the dead and their relationships as symbols of perfected humanity and the ideal community. This paper will argue that the spectacle of the funeral parade has historically invited the bereaved community to unite around a vision of key societal values; values which are inscribed upon the person of the deceased and naturalized through their presentation as visual symbols.

Funerals as theatre

Funerals can be analysed from two distinct perspectives: either by considering the intentions of those who organise them, or the perceptions of those who observe them.

Analyses of the assumed purpose or *intentions* of funeral processions have pointed to

- the wish to elicit prayers for the dead (Cunnington and Lucas, 1972: 143)
- self-promotion and the pursuit of social or political power (Puckle, 1926: 253, Taylor, 1983: 19f, Fritz, 1981: 76)
- efforts to appease the dead (Puckle, 1926: 178) or allay the guilt of the survivors (Bowman, 1959)
- The wish to “make good” the death through a “piacular rite” (a rite of atonement) which diminishes the stigma of death, the corruption of the corpse and connection that Christians make between death and sin (Fulton, 1994: 300)
- The need to formally transfer roles and titles to the next generation and in so doing maintain existing power relations (Gittings, 1999: 159)

All of these explanations might provide motivation for dramatizing and celebrating the virtues and status of the deceased, but they fail to account for the impact of the experience upon the audience.

Dramaturgical analysis shifts the analytical focus towards what the observer sees and understands by using the metaphor of theatre to understand human behaviour in everyday life” (Turner and Edgely, 1975: 377, 389). Focusing on the audience helps to avoid two common but problematic suppositions. The first is that meaning arises in the mind before being enacted in behaviour, the second that there is a straightforward transfer of meaning from the actor to spectator. In death ritual both of these assumptions are suspect.

As Childe (1945) points out, the emotions aroused by bereavement may be conveyed in “passionate acts...[which are themselves] ideas, not expressions of them”(1945: 13). Over time, the most satisfying acts are repeated until they become recognized as rites, but such rites do not express theories, they constitute them (1945: 13). In other words, behavior may happen first and be rationalized later, by both the participants and their audience. The creation of meaning in a social situation is interactive and uncertain and a ritual form or symbolic act may persist while the meanings ascribed to it change. Dramaturgical analysis allows us to accept that social rituals may be staged with a particular audience in mind, and may consciously attempt to influence them, while remaining sceptical about both the prior existence of a fixed “meaning-agenda” and the clear and linear transmission of messages.

Turner and Edgely (1975) have suggested that modern funeral directors see themselves as the directors of dramatic productions (1975: 384) and consciously set out to stage, for each bereaved family, a drama which is meaningful (1975: 379), perceived as “a respectful tribute to the life and memory of the deceased” (1975: 380) and which will lead to customer satisfaction and repeat business (Turner and Edgely, 1975:379, Naylor, 1989). Yet, in providing what clients appear to demand; tradition, formality, conspicuous consumption, references to the spiritual and facilitation of emotional expression (O'Rourke et al., 2011: 746); what funeral directors end up creating is a “morality play”. This draws attention to the good character of the deceased, the way in which he or she conformed to approved identities (Turner and Edgely, 1975: 388), and uses emotional “triggers”, such as music and symbols that connote

both the identity and the absence of the deceased, to engage the mourners in an experience which is both cathartic and bonding.

The funeral's dramatic elements encourage the mourners to accept that their community and institutions are venerable and that, in adhering to the principles of that community and fulfilling the roles it imposed, the deceased earned the right to be remembered as a hero. Frequently the deceased is compared with a culturally specific ideal type – the hero, the genius, the loving parent, the martyr. Today this is largely achieved through narrative elements of funerary behaviour – the eulogy, the epitaph, the stories told by mourners – but historically it has also been dramatized in the procession. It is no coincidence that there is often a strong resemblance between a funeral procession and a victory parade.

Funeral audiences

What about the audience? Why are they so receptive to such enactments of social myth? Surely the close family will know the real biography, and the wider community are unlikely to be interested? The mood of the audience can best be explained through reference to some of the classical sociological writers.

Van Gennep (1960) described death rituals as rites of passage for both the deceased and those left behind. Both groups were lifted from their original situation through rites of separation, and spent time in a "liminal" (transitional) state where social norms were suspended, or even inverted, before being installed in a new role through rites of incorporation. The suspension of social norms

"signals the necessary presence of chaos before it can resolve itself into a new universe of meaningful relationships" Grainger (1979: 78):

and is a way of re-affirming current social arrangements by implying that their opposite is meaninglessness and disorder. The funeral parade marks the end of the liminal period between death and disposal: we might thus expect it to be characterized by mechanisms for the reinstatement of order, and the audience to be particularly attuned to these.

Turner (1969) argued that the removal of social norms generated "communitas", a sense of 'comradeship and egalitarianism' (1969, 360) between people sharing a transitional state. Bereaved populations behave as "expressive crowds" (Blumer, 1946, Cox, 1980) assembling in the hope of finding comfort, information and understanding. Once the crowd has assembled, emotion spreads from one individual to another and a strong sense of rapport emerges (Cox, 1980: 131). Again we have a group which is emotionally sensitized, somewhat disoriented, and collectively seeking meaning. The assembled mourners may then experience a sense of transcendence (Durkheim, 1915) which is "in effect, the human experience of 'society'" (Davies, 1997: 13f): this shared sense of exposure to a higher reality, while in an active phase of communal meaning-making, serves to translate the dead into totems of societal values.

Durkheim defines a totem as an item which serves as an emblematic representation of kinship, based upon a perceived relationship between the kin-group and the totem itself: association with the totem gives the people their identity and renders them sacred (Jones, 1986: 56f). While the idea initially feels slippery and abstruse, it can be clearly understood when a group describe themselves as “the people of the book” or “the family of the dear departed”. Here, the book or the deceased is a totem; the bond that unites the group, the key to their self-understanding and the symbolic representation of that bond. In turning the deceased into a totem, a bereaved community make him stand for all that they share and hold dear: the idealization of the dead tips over into myth-making and ancestor creation.

Schwartz (1991) argued that Abraham Lincoln was idealised by American people after his death, becoming for them an enduring totem in which the core values of the society were invested. Trujillo (1993) similarly noted that the images and narratives associated with the assassination and funeral of John F Kennedy are deployed by the mass media to evoke a sense of loyal nationhood to this day (Seale, 1998: 67).

To reiterate the argument so far, in mourning rituals the bereaved experience themselves as a community united around a set of shared meanings (Charmaz, 1994: 46) which come to be represented by an idealised memory of the deceased. The sense of comradeship and transcendence experienced by mourners not only restores the community but leaves it but reinvigorated and charged with hope (Bloch, 1992: 19, Davies, 1997). Through this shared experience the deceased is installed as an ancestor who represents community ideals which can be reanimated at any time through rites of remembrance. It is the funeral procession that has historically mediated this transformational process to the widest possible number of people, though we could argue, of course, that in the television age, this is starting to change.

The first part of my argument is thus that funeral parades are theatrical events in which an audience, conditioned into receptivity by grief and the experience of liminality, are presented with a tableaux of shared beliefs and values. In the process these values are inscribed upon the person of the deceased to render them a totem, while the mourners come to experience themselves as a rebonded and regenerated community. The second part of my argument is simply that some of Barthes’ insights into visual symbolism help us to understand precisely how witnessing a staged presentation of corpse-disposal can reinvigorate communal beliefs about life.

The spectacle of the funeral procession

By the middle of the medieval period the act of transporting the corpse to the place of burial had become more than a functional journey; it had become a solemn procession, rich with meaning (Ariès, 1985: 116): “the crowning moment of the funeral ritual” (Ariès, 1985: 120). Frequently the funeral procession would take a circuitous route in order to display its specific set of visually coded symbols to the greatest possible number of people. Whether the deceased was a king or a labourer, this showy element of funeral practice was felt to be worth spending money on.

As long as they had not personally lost anybody close, people enjoyed funerals: they brought drama and excitement to life. There may even have been a sense in which people anticipated their own funeral procession with something approaching satisfaction, for:

'the average man or woman can claim public attention only at marriage and burial, and on each of these occasions a nonentity becomes the centre of attraction in a ceremonial procession to and from the church.' (Puckle, 1926: 112)

Reading funeral processions

Now let us consider how Barthes' ideas of symbol and myth might help us to "read" a procession and understand their ancestor-creating power. For Barthes "any material can be arbitrarily endowed with meaning" (1973: 110) and stand as "a token for something else" (1973: 111): together, the token (*signifier*) and the thing, or idea, which is *signified* are understood as a *sign*. This is what Barthes describes as primary or simple sign. When we decode a simple sign we are aware of our own decoding activity and the range of meanings we select from is narrow and consensual. The situation changes completely when we decode a "second order" sign (1973: 114). In second order signification the composite sign (*signifier+signified*) points beyond itself to a further level of meaning, the *concept* (1973: 115). Interpreting second order signs involves personal as well as socially agreed meanings, permits multiple readings of the same signifier and involves us in a decoding activity so intense, complex and particular that we overlook our own decoding activity and see our interpretation as revelation.

Visual imagery presents an exceptionally influential "second order" signification system. The visual symbol "impose[s] meaning at one stroke, without analysing or diluting it" (Barthes, 1973: 110). In its sensory appeal, the visual symbol is uniquely compelling (1973: 117) and, argues Barthes, presents the observer with a meaning that appears to be evidential, "natural" and "true". Moreover, visual images have mythical power in that they inscribe socio-cultural values upon the thing of which they speak, they declare it good or bad, natural or unnatural, prestigious or stigmatized: they demand an emotional and moral response. Visual imagery thus tells the observer how to react to the world, while implying that no other response is appropriate: it naturalizes certain ways of the looking at the world (1973: 143), usually those favoured by the powerful and the privileged (1973: 148f). Thus at a funeral parade we have a particularly sensitized audience, confronted with an almost overwhelming barrage of sensual imagery from which they are likely to infer a hegemonic and culturally specific truth. The individual experience may be one of revelation or insight, "the penny dropping" or simply a reassuring reaffirmation of belief, but most participants will be emotionally moved as they encounter what appears to be the materialisation of shared values and beliefs.

While the messages encoded in the funeral pageant may be hegemonic, the parade is not necessarily an effective or reliable medium for political messages: this is because the messages about this family, that administration, or this religious doctrine which are consciously articulated by funeral organisers tend to be read as primary signs: the spectator remains fully aware of both his own interpretive activity and the signaller's intent. It is the "deeper" messages, often reproduced through tradition, etiquette and the failure to imagine alternative forms, which strike the observer as a moving revelation. Such messages include, life is meaningful, life is ordered by moral principles (which we believe the deceased fulfilled), we are united by our loss, this death connects us to the ancestors who went before us and foreshadows our own demise.

In the next section I will demonstrate how visual symbolism operates in three very different forms of funeral.

Funeral type 1: The Heraldic funeral

Let us begin at a time when the College of Heralds organised funerals for the nobility. The College of Heralds was established as part of the Royal Household in 1484. Heralds had originally been responsible for organising knightly tournaments, introducing the contestants and keeping the score, but the knowledge of heraldry, lineage and etiquette acquired through these tasks led them to become organisers of ceremonial and keepers of genealogical records (College of Arms, 2015).

Codifying pre-existent traditions, and with a clear mandate to preserve the power of the Tudors and their allies (Fritz, 1981: 76), the College of Heralds created a template for the funeral procession which – despite some significant rebellions – remains influential today.



Figure 1. Hearse of Robert Devereux, third Earl of Essex. © The Trustees of the British Museum

This template included

- The display of heraldic devices and symbols of power associated with the deceased (Cunnington and Lucas, 1972: 129). These were known as “hatchments” or “achievements” and would include pennants, a surcoat painted or embroidered with the arms of the deceased, helmets and crests: after the funeral these would be donated to the church in order to provide a permanent memorial display (Cunnington and Lucas, 1972: 130).
- The use of specific mourning wear (frequently the mourning cloak)
- The inclusion of as many people as possible in the parade (many of them paid or given mourning clothes as an inducement to attend (Cunnington and Lucas, 1972: 144))
- The arrangement of processors into rank-specific groups
- The hearse being used as elaborate focus to the parade which sometimes featured an effigy of the deceased
- The replication of traditional forms in order to make a visible link between the deceased and his ancestors (Gittings, 1984: 161)
- The inclusion of religious symbols as a leit motif. For instance the cross was depicted many times on hangings and flags, the mourning cloaks evoked monastic garb (Cunnington and Lucas, 1972: 153), but these signifiers were generally subordinate to secular motifs.

Items that were common but not ubiquitous within this template included

- The covering of the coffin with a “pallium” or “pall” – a richly embroidered piece of fabric which represented an older, battlefield, tradition of covering a dead body with a cloak (Cunnington and Lucas, 1972: 134f)
- The inclusion of something that signifies the presence/absence of the dead person (frequently a hat, a cloak (Cunnington and Lucas, 1972: 132f) or their riderless horse)

There were several deliberately encoded messages here, and they were, almost without exception, secular messages. The use of lifelike and richly dressed effigies, sought both to trigger an emotional response in the observer (Cunnington and Lucas, 1972: 143) and to demonstrate that the power of this king or statesman had not expired with the earthly incumbent (Gittings, 1984: 169, Finucane, 1981: 46). The deceased remained associated with all the symbols of power until the very moment that his successor assumed them. The procession of many black-cloaked followers (the number determined by the rank of the deceased (Gittings, 1984: 159)) was intended to legitimize this very transfer of power by signaling the subordination of the people to both the deceased and the deity (Cunnington and Lucas, 1972: 152).

Despite the link that was later assumed between the wearing of black clothing and personal grief, this was not present in the heraldic funeral; most mourners were hired for the occasion and the close family were rarely present. The grief expressed by a heraldic funeral was a “ritual attitude” (Durkheim, 1976: 397), and the deeper significance of mourning outfits lay in their ability to signify group solidarity and subordination to authority and tradition.

Clearly the heraldic funeral did not achieve its aim of maintaining the political status quo (both the Tudors and the heralds themselves are long gone); nonetheless, the “second order” signification of the heraldic funeral – its power to reassure the audience that death does not destroy communities or obliterate the meaning of life – has made the choreographed and symbol-laden funeral parade an enduring feature of communal life.

Funeral type 2: Working class funerals in the 19th century

Between the medieval period and the Victorian age, the pattern of the heraldic funeral parade spread from the nobility to the lower classes, and some of its key features became replaced by vestigial markers: signifiers, if you will, that pointed back in time to a respected form. The hooded funeral cloaks once provided for male mourners were replaced first by a cloak with a hood – or simply excess cloth – slung over one shoulder, and then by a mourning scarf or sash (Taylor, 1983: Chapter 3). The clerics, the knights, and the representatives of various esteemed organisations who had followed noble coffins were replaced by relatives (still dressed at the expense of the bereaved) and the local poor who were paid for their participation through “doles” of money or food (Richardson, 1987: 9).

The heraldic devices carried in the medieval parade were replaced by a set of conventional signifiers that pointed to the identity and relationships of the deceased. These included the use of white scarves and white trimmed palls at the funerals of bachelors (Cunnington and Lucas, 1972: 135); the display of union

or guild flags, or symbols of a profession, at working men's funerals; the carrying of special chaplets or garlands at the funeral of a young girl. Such chaplets, intended to confirm purity (Picart, 1733) and referred to by Shakespeare as "virgins' crants" (Cunnington and Lucas, 1972: 139), were often hung in the church as a memorial, just as the achievements of knights used to be – at least until the church objected to the potentially pagan origins of the tradition (Bromley, 1747). The people chosen to carry the coffin were often a part of the same social group as the deceased, and this again was a powerful signifier of both social identity and relationships. Children's coffins were often carried by children, women's coffins by women, and a report in 'the Old Whig' in 1735 notes that the coffin of a head cook was carried by men dressed in in cooks' aprons and hats (Cunnington and Lucas, 1972: 136).

The importance attached to a long procession did not diminished over time. A "good turnout" was seen as an indication of the social worth of the deceased (Rugg, 1999: 222) and there was a general commitment to creating this appearance of high civil worth wherever possible. A rich man unable to attend a funeral might nevertheless send his carriage to take part in the procession (Taylor, 1983: 32); unions often fined members who failed to attend the funerals of workmates (Taylor, 1983: Chapter 1), even poor families might hire more than one funeral carriage in order to create an impressive parade (Parsons, 2001).

With the emergence of professional undertakers, other elements of the heraldic funeral became available to ordinary families. An elaborate hearse and a pall were provided for customers and the pages who had carried the achievements of the noble dead were replaced by hired mutes and feathermen (Parsons, 2001: 7), who carried "hatchments" which were no longer related to the genealogy or biography of the deceased, but signified simply death and sorrow.

All this was hugely expensive: a funeral often cost more than a wedding (Roberts, 1989: 202) and in the mid nineteenth century money put aside for "a respectable funeral" probably accounted for nearly a third of all bank deposits (Morley, 1971: 12). The poor often prioritized paying their subscriptions to a funeral club over healthcare for the living (Chadwick et al., 1843). So why did people do it? What was this display intended to symbolise? And what message did the audience take away?

Articulation of the identity and worth of the deceased was paramount, for both social and religious reasons. Social identity was no longer a matter of birth but something that had to be displayed through compliance with etiquette, allegiance to particular groups, and material culture. This was the case in death as well as life. Thus high funeral expenditure in the nineteenth century is usually explained in terms of the demonstration of social worth and respectability (Taylor, 1983: 19f, Rugg, 1999: 222, Richardson, 1987, Richardson, 1989) and the development of a funerary etiquette (Rugg, 1999: 221) which may have been elaborated unnecessarily by avaricious undertakers (Chadwick et al., 1843, Dickens, 1850). On the religious front, the disappearance of purgatory meant that the living could no longer aid the dead with their prayers. The funeral parade was thus no longer used to elicit prayer, but rather to reassure the bereaved that the deceased had lived and died well enough to win their own place in Heaven. The articulation of social value and the demonstration of spiritual virtue frequently use the same signifiers; thus the respective influence of social aspiration and religious anxiety remains

unknowable and frequent slippage between what the funeral director intended to convey and what the audience inferred must be assumed.

Behind the deliberately encoded messages of social worth, virtue and the deceased's conformity to culturally approved identities, lay other meanings for the audience to access, as an example from the fishing village of Staithes on the Yorkshire coast will illustrate. Although Staithes was not a wealthy community, funeral processions were impressive and highly choreographed. Not only did mourners have to wear specific clothes, they also had to take a place in the procession that made them part of a complex symmetrical pattern. The coffin was always carried by bearers of the same sex as the deceased (Clark, 2000: 7) and the women who would serve the funeral tea

“walked in pairs, one wearing her sash diagonally from the left shoulder and the other wearing hers from the right in order to form an inverted V pattern.” (Clark, 2000: 5f)

Other villagers completed the monochromatic symmetry with persons grouped according to type (be it gender, role in the ritual or relationship to the deceased) just as had been the norm in medieval parades.

“Male coffin bearers wore small white bows or rosettes in their lapels, three men with them on the right side and three on the left side. The bows had to be worn on the side near the coffin. Women bearers wore black skirts white shawls and white hats. Behind the bearers came the men, wearing sealskin caps or bowler hats, dark blue jerseys and serge trousers. Then came the women, all in black.” (Clark, 2000: 6)

While symmetry implied structural order and shared local knowledge, the use of dark colours now keyed into an established cultural association with grief while remaining a strong signifier of group membership, differentiating sharply between who was entitled to mourn and who was not (Cecil, 1991: 17). The parade was structured so that the bereaved were both connected to their neighbours through the shared symbolism of dark clothing and marked out (by their special position in the parade) as in particular need of social support.

It seems likely that the effect of these visual messages on the audience would have been to reinforce the impression of a social order that was fine-grained, non-negotiable and capable of responding effectively to the disruption caused by death. In short, death was disempowered and the potential for change delimited. The liminal period is closed down by the re-imposition and legitimation of the original social norms, death having failed to destroy – or even significantly damage – the social organism. Yet while the funeral procession returned the mourners to an unchanged (but revalidated) world the status of the deceased has changed entirely. Having been for a moment, the focus of a parade and object of reverence, part of an enduring ritual form, the deceased has been translated into a revered being: he has been aligned with his ancestors and can now be regarded as, perhaps a totem or an ancestor.

Once again, a close reading of the signifying capacity of the funeral parade reveals it to be a mechanism for reaffirming that life is ordered and meaningful, that the established order is good, that the dead are not forgotten but held close as moral exemplars.

Funeral type 3: the televised parade

In the twentieth century the funeral procession for the man in the street experienced something of a decline. The development of extramural cemeteries led to the replacement of the walking procession first with horse-drawn and later motorised convoys. Small, geographically dispersed families found it easier to meet at the church or crematorium than to process there together. Although there is some evidence of recovery, due perhaps to the influence of immigrant groups (Parsons, 2001) or to what Walter (1994) has dubbed the “revival of death”, processions for the common man are the exception rather than the rule. Funeral parades are now associated with three types of funeral: state and military funerals, the celebrity death and the shocking death, yet while parades are fewer, they are seen by more people, as elaborate ceremonial attracts media attention.

State and military funerals keep the heraldic format more or less intact. In the state funeral the death of a high profile figure is mythologised at great expense in the hope of minimising the disruption to society (Garlick, 1999: 231). The funeral events are designed to explain to the public how they should feel about the death, how they should respond, and what they should remember: hegemonic values are likely to be powerfully reproduced (Bauman, 1992: 54), with interpretive activity being supported by the interjections of a solemn-voiced newscaster. In many ways, the funeral celebrations arranged for Winston Churchill, the Queen Mother and Margaret Thatcher functioned just like the heraldic funerals of old, both reinstating and romanticizing established myths of the blessed nation under wise rule.

Military funerals also stick closely to the heraldic format, with arms displayed, comrades marching behind, the flag over the coffin and military headdress displayed on top (Puckle, 1926). Thanks to the precedent set by Armistice Day and televised repatriation rituals, such processions now evoke feelings of national loyalty and pride and an assumption that the deceased was a “hero” even when the cause of death is unknown.

The celebrity funeral phenomenon is a little less predictable, but such events frequently manage to evoke an emotional public response by using visual symbolism to align the deceased with an approved cultural myth or stereotype. This was well illustrated by the response to Jade Goody’s death in 2009. Jade came to public notice as a Big Brother contestant in 2002: she was derided for being overweight, uneducated and uncouth, but won sufficient popularity for her openness and lively nature to make a career in popular entertainment viable. Jade died of cervical cancer aged 27. Media coverage of Jade’s life presented drew on myths of becoming and overcoming, of the ugly duckling who became a swan, the pauper who became a princess, yet in deference to the modern interest in self-improvement it was Jade herself rather than luck or magic that was credited with the transformation. She was unfit, so she lost weight, made fitness DVDs and opened beauty salons. She was uneducated, so she trained as a beautician, wrote books and magazine columns and sent her children to private schools. She had cavorted naked and drunk but she erased this memory with a fairytale white wedding. At the end of all these stories, if not at the beginning, Jade was perfectly attuned with public morality. She also died well, having used the knowledge of terminal illness to raise awareness of the importance of cancer screening and to live as fully as possible in the time left to her. Her funeral parade therefore closed a long-term

process of myth construction and finally rendered her a totem of cultural values, while implying that she had also shown others the path to self-realisation.

Jade was hailed by the publicist who arranged her funeral as “the Princess of Bermondsey” (Valler, 2009) and among the floral displays in her funeral procession were ones that alluded to her origins and her original unreformed state: “Jade from Bermondsey” and “East Angula” a reference to her famous misconception that East Anglia was a foreign country. The length of the parade, however, the expensive cars, the lavish flowers, the drive across Tower Bridge were all signs that pointed to what she had achieved, to “royal” status. A message on one of the floral tributes summed it up “Jade, the girl from Bermondsey, did good”.

The intentionally encoded messages were all about Jade herself, but the messages that inspired observers may well have been unintentional. In reactivating the cultural myths of the outsider who wins love and the ordinary girl transformed, the celebration delivered messages of great hope: hope for other individuals who might also be transformed and hope for a society which has proved itself wise and just in (finally) recognizing the value and potential of a derided individual.

The final type of funeral that merits a parade – again often a televised parade – is the shocking death. Examples include the funerals of Hannah Smith who, apparently killed herself as a result of online bullying (BBC, 2013), and Angel Pitts, a toddler killed by her father’s reversing car (Enoch, 2014). These deaths do not conform to our ideas of how life ought to turn out and thus the symbolic content of the parade is different, aimed at making bad deaths good. These parades articulate how highly the dead one was valued, how beautiful and perfect they were (in a defiant idealization that says they did not deserve what happened to them, anticipating and deflecting narratives that may blame the victim or their community); they stress the strength of bonds between the mourners and the deceased – bonds that death will not be allowed to break. Such funerals often take a form which would have pleased the deceased (in what appears to be a rite of atonement) and they may include a call to action, a demand for justice or for the prevention of future deaths.

Both Hannah’s funeral and Angel’s included decorative coffins and hearses which alluded to their youth and their “specialness”, both featured a fancy dress parade that both united the mourners and would have appealed to the girls in life: Hannah’s funeral in particular included a highly publicized anti-bullying message. Such funerals appear to have a mythic function in the sense that they instruct the public how to evaluate and react to what has happened – but rather than using a well-established myth of heroism or virtue, they go out on a limb to offer a mythical rationale for an unacceptable death. This myth is, in fact, a theodicy – an explanation of evil despite an assumption that God, or life, is in itself good. The most commonly offered forms of theodicies are “out of this death came something good” and “death cannot separate us/death is unreal”, both of which may be symbolized in funeral parades by aligning signifiers of life and joy (balloons, flowers, bright colours) with items that represent the personality of the deceased (toys, photographs, favourite things and unusual mourning outfits).

In conclusion

In this paper I have argued that funeral processions, throughout the ages, have sought to present the deceased as a perfected individual whose life was meaningful and influential, and the bereaved community as vigorous and undiminished. These messages of hope lie beneath the deliberately encoded messages which tell us about the biography of the deceased and any religious and political affiliation. Because such meanings are teased out of structural properties of the parade and activate multiple cultural and personal associations the observer tends to experience these associations as revelations – overlooking both his own interpretative role and his eagerness to discover consolatory meaning.

I have noted that the funeral parade has become less common for the “routine” death, and would like, in closing, to suggest that alternative ways are being found to articulate some of the messages previously carried by funeral parades. I would suggest particularly that the idealization of the deceased and the insistence upon their continuing connections with specific identifiable communities are now represented in the decorated grave which is becoming an increasingly common feature of British cemeteries. I would further suggest that dramas of social cohesion and ancestor creation are also being enacted through the creation of spontaneous shrines to both the local and the famous dead and through online memorial pages.

The need to change the status of the deceased and reaffirm communal bonds and beliefs using cultural myths activated through visual symbolism is an enduring human need, and when one outlet disappears, another will certainly be found.

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