

Envisaging Death

Envisaging Death:
Visual Culture and Dying

Edited by

Michele Aaron

CAMBRIDGE
SCHOLARS

P U B L I S H I N G

Envisaging Death: Visual Culture and Dying,
Edited by Michele Aaron

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INTRODUCTION

MICHELE AARON

Reverence or repulsion but always taboo shroud death in modern times. Where once our neighbours and our loved ones died amongst us, the “triumphs” of industry, urbanisation and, of course, medical science have carried them ever further from the home, the community and even from the regular workings of life itself. For Philippe Ariès, the principal historian of death and mourning practices in Western Europe, death was “tamed” by these advances: “so omnipresent in the past...[it has instead] become shameful and forbidden.”¹ It has also, therefore, become increasingly invisible or distorted in its visibility. This book attempts to return some shape and context to the treatment of death in contemporary visual culture.

The dramatic historical and socio-cultural shifts characterising the practices and proximity of death and dying in the late nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first century are readily illustrated (not least via the burgeoning academic interest in them since the 1990s.)² For the Victorians, for example, the private rituals surrounding death were often enacted in heavily stylised ways that rendered it romanticised. Funeral and mourning practices reflected this with the fashion for black mourning attire and the “weeping veil”—both made popular by Queen Victoria herself—and for increasingly grand funerals and graves...for those who could afford them.³ Suburban or garden cemeteries built in the mid to late 1800s in Britain, when city churchyards could take no more, provided a new stage for these heightened expressions of grief—and wealth—and one that moved death even further away from the centres of public life. However, the sheer

¹ Ariès, *Western*, 85.

² In 1993, Goodwin and Bronfen declared that “interest in death has mushroomed in virtually all academic disciplines during the past two or three decades” (*Death*, 5.) An even greater and wider growth has happened since then, with an explosion of interest in the twenty-first century. As Bradbury put it “[d]eath hidden and denied has become death discussed and analysed” (*Representations*, 1.) For a list of works from this period, see my bibliography in Aaron, *Moving*.

³ See Stamper and Condra, *Clothing*, 306, and for a discussion of ostentatious funeral practices, and their reform, see Jalland, *Victorian Family*, 194-202.

scale, indeed the incommensurability, of loss in the First World War and of atrocity in the Second, would put the lid on such accessorised performances of mourning. In their place, came sombre if not dumbfounded mass sentiment. These horrors made death somehow “unspeakable,” according to certain philosophers at least: it was not just hard to talk about, or to give words to, to comprehend and articulate but potentially “barbaric” to do so through art.⁴ Death or atrocity as a topic of representation and debate was mired in difficulty. At the same time, death as an event was once more relocated elsewhere. In the second half of the last century, and since then, breakthroughs in the treatment of illness along with the increasing medicalisation of dying meant that the majority of deaths took place not at home or in some distant battlefield but in hospital. Dying, in the Global North at least, came to be thought of as something treatable and deferrable and perhaps even survivable: the domain of doctors or “service providers” rather than intimates.⁵ Professionalised and, in various ways, sanitised, death had retreated not only from conversation, or public discourse, but increasingly from “nature,” from the very mud of everyday life.

Though this “progressive spatial and cultural marginalisation of death” is readily illustrated, there are by now familiar grooves to this illustration with social, economic, national and even geo-political aspects being the lesser noted.⁶ Broad strokes paint the prevailing picture of death as Western experience framed by its denial on one side and its sensationalism or “pornography” on the other, or by what John Tercier has called a “paucity of experience but surplus of representation.”⁷ But what of the specifics of death’s marginalisation; what of its experience as local rather than

⁴ Lang, *Holocaust*, 16; Adorno, *Prisms*, 34. For the various debates about Adorno’s so-called “dictum” against art in his own work and in Holocaust Studies and western philosophy, see, for example Adorno, *Can One* and Foster, *Abstraction*.

⁵ Football player Fabrice Muamba was dead for 78 minutes following a cardiac arrest on the pitch in 2012, but through the intervention of a consultant cardiologist in the crowd, and specialist equipment at the London Chest hospital where he redirected the ambulance, Muamba made a full recovery. See, for example, Mark Ogden, “Bolton Wanderers to offer Fabrice Muamba chance to work at the club following retirement announcement,” *The Telegraph*, 15 August 2012:

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/sport/football/teams/bolton-wanderers/9477161/Bolton-Wanderers-to-offer-Fabrice-Muamba-chance-to-work-at-the-club-following-retirement-announcement.html>.

Accessed online: 20 January 2013.

⁶ Townsend, *Art*, 8.

⁷ See Becker, *Denial*, Gorer, “Pornography” and Tercier, *Contemporary*, 22.

universal; what of the precise relationship between the context and the cultural mediation of death?

For many in the world, of course, death is rife within the everyday rather than removed from it: death's taboo status is relative in other words, and its denial is revealed as a luxury, one of many similar symptoms of both late-capitalism and global disparity. Though this book does not address such inequities directly, the political and transcultural dimensions to the literal and figurative marginalisation of death are paramount nevertheless. In 1997, David Field, Jenny Hockey and Neil Small emphasised how "[w]orldly inequalities are in no way levelled at the time of death but persist, permeating every aspect of death and dying."⁸ In other words, who and where you are has a great deal of influence on how and where you die and are mourned or remembered. What is more, and what is key to this collection of essays, who and where you are has a great deal of influence on how your death is marked, imaged and imagined, within contemporary culture. The media or mediation of death and dying is, thus, socio-culturally and geo-politically wrought as well. This book, then, addresses the "worldly" factors permeating and styling the visual and inevitably material treatment of death and dying.

Visual culture has provided an ever more dominating forum for society's depiction of and dealings with death but its various takes on mortality or memory or loss offer little stable meaning for "death," even as they confirm its enduring socio-political, aesthetic and philosophical resonance. "Visual culture" is rendered similarly unfixed here. As the essays that follow will attest, it refers to a vast swathe of texts, to those that "are" images—like photographs and paintings and film—and to those that incorporate them or other types of visual symbolism—like art practices and advertising and memorials—and to those that confound or expand the meaning of "visual culture" not least through the interaction of the two terms comprising it. Film is image, sound and temporality; art is made but also experienced; screen media sculpt the urban landscape and script our days, cemeteries convene both memories and sociality; still or moving images can be considered haptic, and fiction bound to the gaze.

Envisaging Death enters the broadening field of Death Studies and connects some of its key interpretive frameworks—such as issues of funerary or internment practice, personal or national trauma, and palliative care—to visual culture, and more than that to visual culture's socio-political, geographic and aesthetic specificities. Charting important new interdisciplinary terrain, scholars and practitioners from a range of fields

⁸ Field et al. *Gender and Ethnicity*, 1.

address an array of cultural mediations of real, fictional or fictionalised death. Divided into three sections essays have been grouped according to theme rather than approach: historians brush shoulders with queer theorists, media criticism with area studies, and philosophy with art. What is being prioritised here is the productivity of cross-disciplinary exchange amidst an urgent need to rethink the dynamic between Western understandings of death and dying—be they socio-cultural, therapeutic or governmental—and various crises of current times connected to them. These crises are economic and logistical: associated with aging populations and the increase in dementia, and Health or End of Life Care reforms. They are political and ethical: from the controversies surrounding gene therapy or pensions or war or even the hyper-mediation of suffering as entertainment. And they are social, even psychosocial: they foment in the silence, be it from awe or shame, trauma or distaste, which surrounds the taboo of death. Such crises provide the backdrop to this book and its emerging picture of the socio-political, national and creative coordinates of the visual treatment of death and dying.

Part I, “Memorial and Material Culture,” addresses the processing of death and dying in a range of contexts to scrutinise the relationship between “art” form, “political” context and remembrance. These terms have an assortment of implications here, as they will in later chapters. Felix Schulz examines the visual culture of death in East Germany after 1945. Tracing historical transformations in the cemetery landscape, he comes to focus on the quintessential socialist element of sepulchral culture, the *Urnengemeinschaftsanlage*: the anonymous communal area for the internment of urns. Physically apart from the traditional family and individual grave plots, and characterised by its own culture of visualising death and commemoration, these areas represent the strong currents of secularisation and modernisation, and a clear ideological thanatology. Marcel Reyes-Cortez also explores the cultural specifics of the cemetery landscape, but this time in Mexico City. Focusing on the complex levels of sociability found there, he argues that the embrace of material objects and especially of the photograph within the cemetery extends individuals’ relationships and communication with ancestors, whilst at the same time cemetery officials and workers have used the dead to extend and expand political boundaries.

Where the first two chapters of Part I bring questions of socio-politics and iconography to cemeteries’ representations of the dead, the second two bring questions of mortality and memorialisation to the politically loaded *creative* treatment of dying. The photographic series, *Perishables* (2002-2004), by Turkish-born artist Pinar Yolaçan provides the subject of

Rosemary Deller's chapter. Yolaçan's images, which present older white women clad in Victorian-esque dresses of offal, are provocative comments on mortality and fleshly decay. At the same time they invoke enduring taboos surrounding ageing femininity and the abject, intertwined with questions of colonial history and our relationship to animals. In chapter four, Monica Pearl emphasises how AIDS, from its inception as a health crisis, has been caught up in the demands, and politics, of representation and especially in the dynamics of looking at dying. Interrogating these dynamics within art's but also fiction's constructions of bodily decline, she argues that these AIDS texts' visual economies afford a profound negotiation of both distance and intimacy with the dying other.

In Part II, "Mortality and Media Event," the life and death of the individual takes on sensational proportions as mass and popular culture come under scrutiny. Exploring recent history's public deaths—media representations of assassination or national disaster—the cultural, and entertainment, value of killings are framed by the individual's social, national and racialised worth. In chapter five, Cath Davies examines the posthumous representation of John Lennon. Where the majority of deceased celebrities are embalmed within comforting discourses that sustain their alive-ness, Lennon, Davies suggests, is different. Analysing the recurring motifs of fragmented identity, disembodiment and liminal spaces in images of Lennon, especially posthumously, Davies argues that there is an ongoing aesthetic confrontation with Lennon's dead body. For Graeme Abernethy, Malcolm X is another famous person for whom we are exposed to an ongoing confrontation with, rather than displacement of, his dead body. This, however, is not the product of the exceptional status of the celebrity but speaks instead to the unexceptional history of racial violence in the U.S. Where the visual treatment of Lennon could evade visual convention, Malcolm X's could only reinforce it. As Abernethy argues in chapter six, the fate of Malcolm X, like that of Martin Luther King, Medgar Evers and others, is inseparable from North American racial politics.

In the final two chapters of this section, the conventions of the photographs under discussion, and of the more "random" deaths they represent, are absolutely culturally specific. Christopher Hood looks at the visual treatment of the crash of Japan Airlines flight JL123 on 12th August 1985. Through images published at the time, and documentaries, books and films from subsequent years, he explores their resonance for understandings of Japanese society and its religious practices. Where Hood builds a picture of a specifically Japanese relationship to grief and death through the visualisation of the disaster, Tal Morse, in chapter eight,

reveals the national, religious and racial politics behind the images of the dead in Israeli Media. Analysing Israeli newspapers' reporting of death events, Morse finds that the visual representation of the deaths of non-Israelis is significantly different from the coverage of Israelis' deaths. The former are more explicit, the latter mostly restrained and respectful and sometimes even aestheticised. The cultural and visual conventions governing the representation of dead bodies serve as a means of defining and confirming the boundaries of Israeli society.

In Part III, "Mediating Life and Death: Theory and Practice," we move beyond questions of representation or identity geo-politics. The foregrounding of context relaxes and attention turns instead to the encounter with dying through art or visual culture, and its philosophical, therapeutic or even ethico-political significance. For Katrin Joost photography intimates our experience of the world beyond the visible. Not only can it represent dead objects but also it disrupts the temporal structure of perceptual experience and therefore brings into consciousness the finality of being. Photography can express the belonging of death to life and show that living being is, with Heidegger, "being towards death."⁹ Film rather than photography is centralised within Paul Fung's similar interest in death as always already haunting the field of vision. For Fung, and via a Lacanian reading of visibility, death tames cinematic vision and constructs subjectivity. The systematic exclusion of the dead body de-traumatises, and ensures the stability of, the seeing subject.

Where Joost and Fung explore the psychic promises of mortality in the still and moving image, Naomi Richards and Tracy Mackenna take art's rupture of the logic of death as a potential source of therapy. *Rosetta Life*, a charity that supports individual artists to run creative projects in hospices around the U.K., is the subject of chapter eleven. Focusing on one filmmaker's attempts to represent people's "biographies-in-illness," Richards asks what difference it makes, and personal or socio-political purpose it serves, to record or witness dying in this way. Mackenna's chapter also explores the relationship between art practice or medium and questions of life and death. Here, however, it is the author's, and her partner's, own art practice and its interaction with their personal experience of assisted suicide that come under scrutiny. Their 2009 exhibition project, "*Life is Over! if you want it*," focussed on how artists have interpreted death throughout history, how objects and images impact on people's ideas around death and the role that art can play in mediating

⁹ Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 235.

issues of morality. Mackenna recreates and critically responds to the exhibition.

In the final chapter of the book, John Horne critically analyses an art exhibition as well, and the community initiative, run by NHS West Midlands, that gave rise to it. At the same time, he re-complicates the “stability” offered by the absence of the dead or dying body from the visual field that Fung noted: the silence and distance surrounding death are imbued here with ethical and even governmental import. The community initiative, “Saying the unsayable: opening a dialogue about living, dying and death,” responded to Health Service strategy, which sought to deinstitutionalise death, and end of life care reforms, which aimed to counter taboos surrounding it. Exploring both the intent and the content of this initiative, and revealing the dying individual as the “structuring absence” of the exhibition, Horne considers the potential, and potential pitfalls, of employing visual material to produce attitudinal shifts.

The three sections of *Envisaging Death* are not discrete, far from it, for various themes recur, in particular the relationship between art and death—or between artefacts and memory, or representation and politics—which threads through the entire book. This is not, however, a book about aesthetics or remembrance or responsibility. Rather, it is about how artefacts and images in their conjuring or recording of death reflect and determine contemporary attitudes towards it, and how context is compulsory for interpreting these attitudes. At the same time, this is also inevitably a book about extending our understandings of these attitudes and potentially shifting them. The need for such a shift arises in response to those large-scale economic, ethico-political and (psycho)social crises surrounding death and dying, noted above. The need also arises to ease the personal and inter-personal, or human, cost of cordoning off death and dying from the mud of everyday life in order that “we” may live more fully and fairly. All the essays in this collection navigate in different ways the fraught, policed, and always relative, distance between the living and the dead. They all negotiate the structuring absence or necessary distortion of death in contemporary life, an absence or distortion (or marginalisation) that works to reassure and re-secure those supposedly untouched by death and dying and to bolster the socio- or geo-politics which affords them that position. Finally, while visual culture provides an ever more dominating arena to reinforce this state of affairs, countless examples of, and increasing possibilities for, its disruption instead are also to be found, as the essays in this collection will now make manifest.

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PART I

MEMORIAL AND MATERIAL CULTURE

CHAPTER ONE

THE DISAPPEARING GRAVESTONE: CHANGES IN THE MODERN GERMAN SEPULCHRAL LANDSCAPE

FELIX ROBIN SCHULZ

There is a revolution taking place in Germany's cemeteries; fewer people are being buried in sites marked by gravestones. In some places, like the East, Protestant parts of the country and some urban areas, it is happening more swiftly, in others, like the South, Catholic regions and some rural areas, it is happening at a lesser pace. Nonetheless, one can speak of a very strong and sustained trend, namely that the traditional norm of the clearly delineated plot of land within the specific confines of a cemetery and rounded off by a marker remembering the identity of the buried is providing less appeal. This means that alternative forms of disposal and burial have gained in interest considerably since re-unification. Most of the initial impetus came from two geographical directions, the East and the North of Europe, where we find established cultures of communal burial.¹ However, the trend is increasingly altering the fabric of the German cemetery and subsequently to some the anonymity of many communal burials is actually a spectre that is haunting them. In 2006, a poster campaign was started by the *Verein zur Förderung der deutschen Friedhofskultur* (Society for the Advancement of German Cemetery Culture)—an outfit largely representing the interest of those professionally tending graves—encapsulating the rather sceptical view.² The first release of the poster uses the stark image of a man looking at an empty grassy area in a cemetery, holding limply a bunch of flowers under the headline of “Mother where are you?” and the statement: “Anonymous Burial is no solution: family members need a space for mourning.” The view expressed in these captions sees the lack of an explicit and personal spatial focus to

¹ For some comparison, see Worpole, *Landscapes* and Yolan, *Resting*.

² All translations from the German are those of the author.

commemorate the bereaved as an anathema. This campaign stressing the importance of the locality to remembrance and the importance of continuing the tradition of the gravestone as a maker of the sacred space was further underlined when the same wording was used in a second poster campaign. However, this time there were three different versions: one using flames to denote cremation, another depicting a patch of grass without a gravestone to represent anonymous burial, and the picture of the sea to allude to the burial at sea. In short, these posters provide telling comment on what some clearly consider disruptive challenges to the sepulchral status quo.³ This chapter explores the phenomenon of the disappearing gravestone in Germany and shows that it has its roots in three entangled historical developments: a) changing attitudes to death, dying and disposal; b) the changing role of cemeteries and graves; c) the introduction and propagation of modern cremation. In the unified Germany, these ultimately combined to produce change that has accelerated over the last two decades resulting in something that indeed should be called revolutionary—a less regulated and pluralist sepulchral culture of Germany.⁴

Despite death being a societal constant, much of modern sepulchral culture was born when the city became the centre of economic growth and the motor of innovation. The expansion of the urban population and its density highlighted problems in sanitation and hygiene and led directly to a fundamental change in the sepulchral culture through regulation and the setting out of rules. The first step and basis for much of the coming changes in the burial culture in Germany can be seen from the middle of the sixteenth century when the traditional burial side of the churchyard declined in favour of the new cemeteries found outside the city wall: for instance, in Freiburg (1511); Nürnberg (1519); and Leipzig (1534).⁵ It was the city governments that continued to drive this process. The change of location away from the churches in the city centre as well as the urban wealth made new designs possible—leading to the development of the different aesthetics of cemeteries. The eighteenth century saw a further wave of moving cemeteries away from the living, ultimately moving them outside everyday life in the process that Andrea Gerhardt has called making cemeteries “ex-clusive places”—places that are removed from

³ A selection of the posters used for the campaign can be found at: <http://www.vffk.de/aktuelles.html>.

⁴ A current research project at Leipzig University is in the process of untangling the individual motivation for the trend towards the anonymous burial, see Sachmerda-Schulz, “Der Trend zur Grünen Wiese.”

⁵ Sörries, *Ruhe sanft*, 101-29.

everyday life and represent their own world apart.⁶ Moreover, not only did this further the remoteness of the burial ground but it also meant that cemeteries swiftly became the realm of bureaucrats. In 1715, the Elector Joseph Clemens had ordered that burials should be moved out of the city of Bonn and a new cemetery should be built nearby. In Münster in Westphalia, there were similar plans in 1729, when the ruling Bishop Clemens Augustus of Bavaria complained that corpses were often buried less than a foot deep, which, he noted, caused a terrible smell and led to contagious diseases.⁷ This resulted in an order that bodies should be buried no less than six feet deep, and led to the planning of two new cemeteries outside the city walls. However, in both cases these plans were not realised because of heavy resistance from local citizens against the resting places being moved away from churches. But this kind of resistance only delayed regulation. Further impetus came from Joseph II of Austria's partially successful burial reform in 1785, which tried to remove the control of the Catholic Church over secular matters. It prohibited internment in town centre cemeteries and tried to establish a civic authority to oversee cemeteries.⁸ The Austrian reforms were seen as the model of enlightened thought in regard to death and disposal and were adopted in many European countries. In Munich in 1789, they were successfully implemented because of prior consultations and agreeing compromises. The opening of the new central cemetery outside the city on 26 June 1789 had a marked effect on German sepulchral culture. The idea of a new central cemetery was made possible by the compromise which retained the old differences between the rich and the poor. The graves were classified with family crypts at the top of the hierarchy and simple holes in the ground marked with a wooden cross at the bottom. Prices were fixed accordingly, thereby retaining the hierarchy, exclusivity, and status with regard to each grave category and location.⁹ The door had been opened for the municipal government to increase legal and administrative control over burials.

With the desire to improve public hygiene and levels of sanitation, the involvement of the government or state in the organisation of disposal grew. The 1789 edict stated three rules for any burial: a grave had to be 6 feet deep, a burial space could not be reused for at least 12 years, and the

⁶ Gerhardt, "*Ex-klusiv*" *Orte und normale Räume*, 31-40.

⁷ Dethlefs, *Zur Geschichte*, 45.

⁸ Boehlke, *Wie die Alten*, 232-33.

⁹ Mortuaries improved hygiene and were based upon increased scientific knowledge of disease. Laying-out at home had become a thing of the past and removal to the mortuary became compulsory in most cities. See, for example, Rädlinger, *Der verwaltete Tod*, 63-86.

body should be dead for at least 36 hours, ideally 48 hours, before burial.¹⁰ The state took increasing responsibility for and control of appropriate forms of disposal, and this included the organisation of all its technical details by specialists. Munich was able to reconcile religion and modernisation once more, for it had also pioneered another development: the building of one of the first mortuaries in Germany.¹¹ This meant that from the second half of the nineteenth century, death in urban areas became a professional domain increasingly removed from its association with the churches and religion. While most mortuaries had an annex for the celebration of burials, they were municipal buildings. This provided essentially non-denominational space for the removal of the body as well as a space for the funeral ceremonies in most urban areas.

The growing concern for hygiene, the emphasis on public health and general tendencies of regulation, legislation and centralisation (at least in the urban environment) led to an overall sanitation of death as a social occurrence in the nineteenth and most of the twentieth century. A key component in this process was the emergence of professionals who dealt with the logistics of a death. Administrators were needed to oversee the system for the disposal of the dead for the local government; the local cemetery needed management as well as staff. In short, a whole ecosystem emerged. Chief amongst all of those concerned with the system of disposal were the modern funeral directors. As dispassionate professional organisers they began to provide a service. Practical neighbourly assistance, such as washing the corpse, became more rare through the incremental processes of professionalising death. Although professional undertakers at first complemented customary neighbourly assistance, in due course the help, expertise, services and products provided by professionals and a whole industry became the norm. Consequently, the practical aspects of dealing with the dead body were removed; they took place behind the closed doors or in the funeral parlour or the mortuary. If one adds to this the profound shift in the locality of death from the home to the hospital, the perception and reality of death became more remote.¹² In turn, municipalities added to this by regulating to an ever-growing degree the professional funeral industry. For example, in the GDR it became the explicit rule that the last farewell to the deceased be conducted from behind a glass wall and not in person.¹³ The key effect of this development

¹⁰ Ibid., 69.

¹¹ Fischer, *Wie wir unter die Erde kommen*, 80-93.

¹² Hänel, *Bestatter im 20. Jahrhundert*.

¹³ Institut für Kommunalwirtschaft, *Katalog der Bestattungsdienstleistungen*, 13-14.

is what Philippe Ariès described as the “forbidden death,” or what Tony Walter better described as the hiding of death.¹⁴ By the middle of the twentieth century death had become something that was increasingly dealt with as an organisational, technical and administrative challenge. Moreover societal change, such as secularisation, meant that the individual had become increasingly alone in facing death or coping with loss and mourning, but well catered for in terms of a complex system of disposing of the dead.¹⁵ Death had become a peripheral phenomenon until this view was challenged initially by the post-material counterculture of the 1980s and then by the ending of the Cold War in the 1990s.¹⁶

Industrialisation and ever expanding cities in the nineteenth century necessitated further cemetery space, and what emerged was the cemetery landscape that we see today. Civic-minded local governments had established grand landscaped park cemeteries with even stricter regulations. These were built even further away from the city centre, on the city’s outskirts. To make the new cemeteries accessible to the public, tramlines were laid in such cities as Munich, Bielefeld, Leipzig and Magdeburg. Nevertheless, the new location meant that cemeteries assumed an altogether different and slightly unexpected role of being used and seen as recreational spaces, offering greenery and space to saunter. The park cemetery, characterised by broad, tree-lined, axial avenues, was born. The cemetery had become a domesticated cultural space (*domestizierter Kulturraum*). This meant that the construction of dedicated cemeteries has to be construed as a space displaying an ever-changing societal understanding of death.¹⁷ Central to this development in Germany were two cemeteries that would set the tone and become the models for large urban cemeteries in Germany and beyond.¹⁸

Wilhelm Cordes planned and supervised the construction of Hamburg-Ohlsdorf between 1879-1914. Ohlsdorf is a vast park cemetery incorporating natural features such as hills as well as constructions such as artificial lakes. Cordes created an enthralling symbiosis of architecture, sculpture, and landscape design that also addressed a need for order—a term that would gain great significance.¹⁹ The idea was that the individual grave needed to be part of the overall appearance. This meant that the idea of combating the excesses of bourgeois expression within the space of

¹⁴ Ariès, *Attitudes*, 85-108; Walter, “Taboo,” 293-310.

¹⁵ Elias, *Civilizing*, 229.

¹⁶ Inglehart, *Revolution*; Feldmann, *Tod und Gesellschaft*.

¹⁷ Francaviglia, “The cemetery,” 501-09; Koch, “Geschichte und Bedeutung,” 131.

¹⁸ See, for example, Felicori and Zanotti, *Cemeteries of Europe*.

¹⁹ Schoenfeld, *Der Friedhof Ohlsdorf*.

cemeteries took root. The advocates of reform believed that many cemeteries suffered from either aesthetic eclecticism often in combination with an overabundance of kitsch, or the cold characterless efficiency in form of chessboard layouts and mass-produced cheap gravestones. Cordes was successful in outlawing both oversized marble sculptures of angels as well as mass-produced polished marble gravestones with gold leaf inscription. Ohlsdorf was important, but an even stronger counter model became Hans Grässels' *Waldfriedhof* (1905-07) in Munich, designed around the maxim: order is already beauty.²⁰ In addition, Munich served as the basis for the Wilhelmine ideal of the "*Waldfriedhof*"—the woodland cemetery encompassed a semiotic order: German trees, German nature, Germanic traditions, and later the German oak became symbols of heroism in the World Wars.²¹ So the natural backdrop of woodland was combined with clear rules. The reform movement's main aspiration was to achieve the idea of an aesthetic integrity achieved through order and homogeneity. The new regulations increased insistence on order, imposed manifold regulations and introduced processes of supervision and prior approval of the design of any grave plot. Most of Grässels' rules formed the very basis of what the central organisations of cemetery directors (founded in 1921) advocated and in turn these ideas became formally codified in 1944. This strong normative force was further aided by the fact that most German cities to the present day operate the cemeteries that were built and opened between 1870 and 1930.²² After 1945 and due to the damage sustained in the war, the first challenge was to return the burial services and the cemeteries to normality. However, swiftly after this was achieved the new organisations set up in East and West to coordinate matters in regard to the burial services returned to the promotion of the reformist ideas set in law in 1944. Therefore, we saw in both German states the continued propagation of homogeneity and uniformity until the 1960s, if not the 1980s.²³

The prominence and persistence of the cemetery reform deals meant that disposing and burying the dead in Germany became an ever more complicated matter. To this day, most aspects of the modern German sepulchral culture are highly regulated and regimented. This is especially true when comparing them with the more liberal practices in the United Kingdom or the United States. The legal frameworks that the states, the local councils, the owners of the cemeteries, that is, the municipalities and

²⁰ See Krieg, "*Schon Ordnung ist Schönheit.*"

²¹ Lehmann, *Von Menschen und Bäumen.*

²² Sörries, *Ruhe sanft*, 184.

²³ Schulz, *Death in East Germany.*

the churches, have drawn up are very complicated. This means that for example six German states have laws explicitly prohibiting open caskets at the funeral ceremony; only one state allows for cemeteries to be owned by anybody except a municipality or a religious entity; three states allow the private ownership of woodland cemeteries and two states still outlaw its citizens to choose a burial at sea.²⁴ Moreover, all states operate the legal requirement of the inhumation of the corpse or the cremains. In practical terms, this means it is illegal to keep an urn with the ashes on the mantelpiece. Everywhere, bar one specific plot of the central cemetery of the city of Rostock and in Berlin, it is legal to scatter the ashes. The remnants of German particularism and the decentralised nature of Germany are one explanation for the persistence of these inconsistent rules. The second explanation is that legislation got regularly added to but hardly ever reviewed, thus most cemeteries are simultaneously regulated under state, regional, ecclesiastical and local by-law. It took until the mid-1990s for this to be even publically discussed.²⁵ However, these debates have regularly become caught up in party interests, in the views of the churches and the technocratic specialist that administer and regulate much of the burial system. The interests of those who administer the cemeteries have been the third reason for the state of cemetery regulation. In 1963, an East German handbook for the care of cemeteries made this clear by stressing that “[w]ell designed cemeteries and sections demonstrate clearly to everybody the right order of plants and gravestones.²⁶ It has been the duty of those in charge to determine what is “right,” therefore, most cemeteries to this day require gravestones to follow specific requirements as to minimum and maximum dimensions as well as many very specific rules.²⁷ The following is an example taken from the twenty pages that govern the cemetery of a small town in Thuringia:

Materials, Form and Workmanship

1. Grave markers are only allowed to be made from natural stone, wood, forged or cast metal [iron or bronze].
2. The form of the grave marker must take into account the material, and it has to be simple and balanced.
3. Grave markers must be made as one object.

²⁴ Deinert and Jegust, *Todesfall- und Bestattungsrecht*.

²⁵ For example, Adolph, “Gitarre aus Stein,” 179.

²⁶ Institut für Kommunalwirtschaft, *Gestaltung unserer Friedhöfe*, 69.

²⁷ Spranger, *Die Beschränkungen des kommunalen Satzungsgebers*.

4. Grave markers must be finished to the same standard on all sides as well as necessitated by the material.
 5. Polishing and a reflective finish is only allowable as a design feature for inscriptions, symbols and ornaments, and these are only allowed to make up an area that is appropriate in regard to the overall size of the grave marker.
- (...)
7. All materials, additions, designs, and methods not mentioned above are not allowed, but especially the use of concrete, glass, plastics, photography, engraving of images, plaster, porcelain, and aluminium, etc.²⁸

The following paragraph covers the exact remits of the inscription, and the next section covers what is the allowable choice of design and selection of plants—explicitly outlawing gravel, plastic flowers, ornaments, or any plant over one and a half metres. Due to the persistence of the reformist agenda and a pronounced technocratic paternalism in regard to nearly all matters sepulchral, the modern German cemetery has become a highly regulated space. The resistance to change, even if it is only the change in the burial preferences of the population, as is the case with the spread of anonymous burials, is seen thus by some involved in the running of the burial system as disruptive.²⁹ Yet, the German sepulchral culture is far from homogenous. Due to the multitude of regulation and the decentralised nature of government there was always space for plurality and, thus, change.

Historically, the foremost reason for the pluralisation of German sepulchral culture lies in the introduction of modern cremation. Germany is the motherland of modern cremation; while the first crematorium in Europe was built in Milano, the first cremation of a body occurred in the new crematorium of Gotha in Thuringia on 10 December 1878. This historical event signalled the dawn of a new era and was entirely the result of the liberal and tolerant views held by the ruler of Saxony-Coburg-Gotha, one little state of the Thuringian Union. The Gotha crematorium, like others in the late nineteenth century, had been proposed by a private cremation society which advocated a far more pragmatic approach to the problem of disposal. This dynamic idea stemmed from an initially bourgeois, deeply secular and reformist agenda that based its reasoning on the principles of the Enlightenment and rationalism. The first German cremation societies were formed in the early 1870s in the predominately protestant cities of Gotha, Dresden, Berlin, Hamburg and Frankfurt/Main.

²⁸ Friedhofsordnung für den Friedhof der Ev.-Luth. Kirchgemeinde Falkenstein/Vogtland, 1 July 1994.

²⁹ For a discussion of the impact and the factors, see Happe, “Zwischen Anonymität,” 747-54; Sörries, *Alternative Bestattungen*.

These societies used their influence and their publications to promote cremation. They had little initial success. The second crematorium was only built in Heidelberg in 1891, a further one in Hamburg in 1892. In reaction to the largely secular nature of the cremationist movement, the Catholic Church decided to ban cremation for Catholics in 1886 by the use of Canon Law.³⁰ The Catholic Church argued that cremation as a practice was contrary to Christian funeral tradition. Priests were, therefore, not allowed to administer the last rites nor take part in the burial of the ashes. This ban was not lifted until 1963. The Protestant Churches took a more plural and more liberal view. The Protestant Church due to its decentralised organisation soon discarded an initial scepticism, this meant that well into the 1930s cremation was a viable alternative to traditional inhumation only in cities in predominately protestant regions.³¹ However, the success of cremation in Germany was due to the dual nature of the propagation of cremation. A second social class saw the systematic propagation of the idea of cremation—the working class. A number of labour leaders and the Social Democrats (*SPD*) supported the idea of cremation because it represented a new secular form of dealing with death. This political party emphasised the pragmatic rather than the dogmatic aspect of cremation. Despite being well structured, the *SPD* was initially slow to propagate the idea of cremation. In conjunction with the unions, the *SPD* and the Freethinkers (who promoted logical and secular thought), which all viewed cremation as atheistic and egalitarian, the *Volks-Feuerbestattungsverein von Groß-Berlin* (People's Cremation Society of Greater Berlin) was founded in 1913. When the party leader August Bebel died in August 1913, his body was cremated in Zürich. His precedent was to have strong reverberations for many decades to come. By the end of 1917 the *Volks-Feuerbestattungsverein* had 3,600 members, and by 1925 it had a staggering 600,000 members. The percentage of workers amongst the cremated rose from roughly 12.5 per cent in 1920 to 45 per cent in 1926.³²

Burning the body opened new aesthetic avenues. Some cemeteries opened columbaria, more augmented the traditional burial plots by downsizing them, some explored new ideas such as overground urn cemeteries, but the real change came from the ability to bury many remains in communal plots. In December 1925, the local chapter of the Freethinkers in the city of Magdeburg succeeded in convincing the local

³⁰ Davies and Mates, *Encyclopaedia*, 107.

³¹ Stadtarchiv Bielefeld, FW 152.

³² Fischer, *Vom Gottesacker zum Krematorium*, 116-7.

cemetery to create the first mass urn burial site (Urnenhain) in Germany.³³ This site comprises a central memorial encompassing a large grey stone torch, a bench made from red brick, but there are deliberately no markers where the individual urns are buried, nor are the names of the individuals recorded. How radical a step this was becomes clear when one sees the inscription on the central memorial. It boldly states “Neue Deutsche Bestattungsklasse” (New German burial class). This new form of burial challenged the conservative and conventional ideas so inherent in the time-limited lease of a normal burial plot. Thus, the anonymous burial, with its egalitarian and atheistic overtones, was created. In Magdeburg it proved so successful that the designated field did not last the intended thirteen years; the space was filled in less than five, and a second site was created. For the whole of Germany the idea needed the formation of the GDR, because it was there that the idea really took hold and saw widespread usage.

While West Germany saw a moderate annual growth in the cremation rate, East Germany saw the active propagation of cremation. By the early 1970s cremation had become the predominant form of disposal and with it came the steady rise of the anonymous communal area for the interment of urns (*Urnengemeinschaftsanlage* or *UGA*). By 1985 around 140 *UGAs* had been opened in cemeteries throughout East Germany.³⁴ Moreover, *UGAs* were established in urban cemeteries, and thus served large communities with cremation rates of well over 50% and thus the number of burials was considerable. For example, by 1989 around 40,000 urns had been buried in one of the largest *UGAs* on the *Heidefriedhof* in Dresden.³⁵ Moreover, by 1993 the full capacity of 50,000 urns had been reached (despite the initial post-unification slump in the cremation rate). The site was closed and a new *UGA* opened. Dresden, in many ways, was an exception as not all *UGAs* were that large, but most sites were designed for more than 10,000 urns and for long periods over which burials could take place (generally more than twenty years).³⁶ By the 1980s most experts considered the ideal but ultimately achievable figure to be for any *UGA* to absorb about 50% of all cremations (thus catering for about 30-35% of all deaths).³⁷ In Plauen, for example, 71% of all burials took place in an *UGA*,

³³ Krenzke, *Magdeburger Friedhöfe*, 101.

³⁴ Kramer, *Planung*, 7.

³⁵ Happe, “Die sozialistische Reform,” 203.

³⁶ The first large *UGA* in Leipzig had been planned for 20,000 urns. Stadtarchiv Dresden, Rep. 9.1.14, Nr. 825: *Umgestaltung Städtischer Friedhöfe – Am Beispiel Leipzig*, 50.

³⁷ Stadtarchiv Dresden, Rep. 9.1.14, Nr. 137: *Rednerweiterbildung*, 1 November 1989.

while it was 61% in Weida, and 55% in Erfurt and Altenburg but for the north of the GDR, rates did not exceed 30%.³⁸ The *UGAs*' main attraction to the state was that it was by far the cheapest option to dispose of the dead: between 16 to 25 urns could be buried per square metre of the burial area of an *UGA* with minimal costs. Moreover, the idea of a communal grave fitted the ideals of socialism. For East Germany the *UGA* was one part in the administrative reevaluation of the role of the cemetery, a process that increasingly made cemeteries sites of collective commemoration as well as recreation.³⁹

These two aims in themselves might sound contradictory, especially given that anonymity might amplify the remoteness of the modern cemetery. In a study of Denmark, however, Tim Flohr Sørensen combined the ideas of material culture (and the absence of the body) with an in-depth study of the changes in the rise of cremation and urn burials in Denmark (in many ways a comparable development to that in the GDR) and joined them to the theoretical framework of what Marc Augé has called “non-places”—the rise of places that are merely the location for transience, not having enough character to be a place outright.⁴⁰ Sørensen's argument is that the combination of cremation and the anonymous burials of urns and their spread beyond the urban have made it “possible for the relatives of the deceased to be spatially distanced from the grave yet still close to the loved one.”⁴¹ Augé's idea of the non-place is inverted and ultimately it is the lack of a specific place that allows the bereaved to commemorate independently of a specific “sacrosanct” locality. With this argument Sørensen challenges the notion that the rise and spread of anonymous burial above all is a sign of disruptive individualism.

Furthermore, this argument begins to explain why in the re-unified Germany the concept of communal burial has continued to be attractive not only in the East. Like cremation it has migrated westward. In 1999, the last reliable study financed by the confederation of German cities found that the cremation rate for the whole of the country was 40.3% (with the former East having risen to 75% and former West to 31.8%).⁴² Following this trend cremation is or soon will be the most popular form of disposal in Germany. Estimates for the popularity of anonymous burials for 2006/7

³⁸ Barbara Happe does not offer any dates for these rates, but they must be around 1985, see Happe, “Die Nachkriegsentwicklung,” 223.

³⁹ Bundesarchiv Berlin, DO 1 34.0, Nr. 48678: *Analyse des Friedhofs- und Bestattungswesens der DDR (1975)*, 3.

⁴⁰ Augé, *Non-Places*.

⁴¹ Sørensen, “The presence,” 110–135.

⁴² Deutsche Städtetag, *Presseinformation*, 17 May 2001.