LATE CAPITAL: NEGOTIATING A NEW AMERICAN

WAY OF DEATH

By

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Scenes from a Funeral

"To understand a cultural epoch, study its frivolities" (Abbas 1996:291).

The first funeral I can remember was for my grandfather who died when I was 12.
The visitation was held on a weekday evening and the actual funeral service took place
the morning after. The event also marked the first time I recall ever entering a funeral
home—a dank, ill-lit space. The impression I was left with was that the funeral director
was a little creepy and his "home" was even more so. It contained a distinctive reek that I
would later recall in my middle school biology class.

Everyone had lined up to see the body of my grandfather at the beginning of the
funeral. His body appeared similar to that of a mannequin—plastic (though when
everyone else commented most said that it appeared "waxy"—a common complaint of
embalmed and heavily made-up bodies).

The funeral itself was long and rather uneventful and I became fidgety and
restless much like any kid would. We sang three hymns including "I'll Fly Away," which
stands out even today because of its sprightly nature when compared with the rest of the
service. There was a sermon. And while I don't remember the topic of the minister's
eulogy I am told it had to do with the edifying, Christian life my grandfather led and how
this should serve as an example for the rest of us in the audience.

At the end, the casket was shut and my grandmother's back bent over and she hid her eyes and cried. She and my grandfather had missed celebrating their 50th wedding anniversary by a mere three weeks.

After the service, everyone gathered at my grandparents' house to eat up much of the food that neighbors and church members had brought over during the previous three days. The mood was conversational but a little heavy-laden with talk about the appearance of my grandfather, the location of his final respite, and the sermon and eulogy. I recall that it was nice to visit with cousins and aunts and uncles, but I do not really remember what I said to anybody save for one thing: When someone in a crowded room remarked that it was my first funeral (as if these rites of passage were for me rather than for my grandfather) and then a second person asked what I thought of the whole matter, I replied that it was "pretty boring."

If you have attended a funeral once in your life, and that funeral occurred before 1995 or so, you probably share a similar experience. You may have even thought it was boring. However, it is growing increasingly difficult to find a standard "greet 'n' weep" like my grandfather's, especially one that people might label "boring." Funerals today are profoundly different. And they are not different simply because they are more casual, laid back, and informal (though they are typically each of these things). Funerals are more social. They are louder and more boisterous. In the past, funerals were quiet and somber affairs where typically one prayer, speech, or song, preceded another, slowly unfolding; such that only one event was taking place or only one person was speaking at any given time. Today, funerals can have multiple events taking place simultaneously and those can include both people and things like video screens, scrapbooks, memory boards, and tables

with memorabilia. Nowadays, rather than a clergy member or funeral director offering a theological message and/or a eulogy, there are typically several different laypersons who lead the services, and the messages are less likely to be religious in nature. Also, since more and more Americans are opting for cremation rather than burial sometimes there is not even a body present. Too, the music is less likely to be sacred and more likely to be popular. Sometimes funerals even resemble parties complete with balloons and cake as if it were someone's birthday rather than their death day. Occasionally, gifts are given out. Gimmicks and novelty items are becoming more apparent in funerals and these events oftentimes take on coordinated themes.

Funerals these days can even be *fun*. They can be a source of recreation or entertainment. Of course not all funerals are fun. In fact, only a few are. My focus in this dissertation is not on the so-called "fun" funerals, however**.** Rather, my focus is instead on a kind of fissure that has appeared between how different actors in the funeral industry understand the creation of these important social rituals. I ask questions such as: How do different actors understand the changing nature of funerals and how do these different understandings get manifested in the manufacture of mortuary rituals? How do forms of amusement enable the production of goods and services and contribute to changes having to do with the means of consumption? In what ways do economic actors create a new commodity form? How do these varying discourses, ideas, and perspectives impact the ways funerals can be understood, orchestrated, and situated more broadly in society, by those within the funeral industry?[1] And why is this taking place now? *Why, after roughly 100 years of little change both with regard to the funeral industry itself and its primary*

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[1] I prefer the term "funeral industry" over the more encompassing "death care industry"—the latter of which might include actors and organizations not directly implicated in the delivery of funerals such as tissue and organ banks, morgues, etc.

product—the funeral—have things begun to recently change? Given the interminable march of capitalism and the incessant obsolescence that is intrinsic to this mode of production, why have things remained fairly stable for this long only to change dramatically in such a short period of time? Where are the holdouts to this change and how might one think about stability in the face of change? In addressing these questions, I seek to offer an explanation for the monetization of sacred economies, and the subsequent ability of economic actors to produce, market, and sell hallowed goods much like other goods comprising an amusement culture.

Funerals, historically events of deep sadness and mourning, can contribute to the ways those who participate in them and those in attendance understand their own lives, understand the (lived) lives of the deceased, and make sense out of "heavy" concerns like mortality, memory, and the supernatural. Indeed, this has, for many centuries, been the function and focus of funerals (Aries [1977] 1981). And for some, this remains both the focus and the function of funerals today. However, funerals can also contribute to a culture of amusement, something I illustrate in this dissertation. Amusement, which for me signifies *a pleasant diversion*, is, according to Neal Postman ([1985] 2005), a kind of cultural medium—one that "directs us to organize our minds, and integrate our experience of the world, it imposes itself on our consciousness and social institutions in myriad forms" (p. 18). News lite, edutainment, retail therapy, celebrity scandal, and the like, all contribute to a culture of amusement. But in fact, amusement is playing an ever greater role in the culture surrounding death care: from funeral industry participants' experiences to festivals and celebrations only *funereal* in name; from mainstream media's portrayal of funeral products to industry participants' own accounts regarding their

treatment of death and ritual; and from the funeral home locations and spaces to the kinds of advertising that are more and more a part of the funeral industry. Many elements that make up this shift to a culture of amusement would have been considered crass and disrespectful only twenty years ago and many in the industry still resist the encroachment of amusement into their sacred domain. In fact, resistance by actors in the industry is integral to understanding the way humans make sense of antagonistic, contradictory, or competing cultural forces and claims. Indeed, as important as the shift towards a culture of amusement is in understanding the production of commodified ritual, it is equally important to understand the struggles to resist such a shift. In short, *I argue that the funeral industry, as an aggregate of individual and institutional actors, is currently positioned between a culture based on moral discourses and a culture of amusement.*

Negotiating the New Political Economy of Death

This dissertation focuses on the means by which the actors in the funeral industry make sense out of changes in wider society and thereby create a new American "way of death"; one that can contribute to a culture of amusement. My own use of the phrase— "way of death"—is intended to hearken to an important artifact of consumer studies. When, in 1963, Mitford published *The American Way of Death*, the work quickly became a bestseller. In it, she made the claim that there is something unique about the way Americans "do" funerals (and, by extension, death)—in part a consequence of the fact that nearly all post-mortem activities are controlled by market-driven actors and organizations. This American exceptionalism is no less prevalent today and has been

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explored in the work of French historian Philippe Aries, for example. According to him there is a "unique American relationship between death and money" (Sloane 1991:175).

It is precisely this relationship—between money and death—that forms the empirical backbone of my research. There are contradictions in equating sacred funerary rites with a commodity form. On the one hand, society is compelled, at the very least by tradition but perhaps by something much more transcendent and philosophical in nature, to honor the dead and to acknowledge the limits to human *being*. On the other hand, economic actors strive for unceasing profit by employing various measures to ensure continuous expansion. These different demands can conflict with one another resulting in any number of deleterious consequences for both funeral producers (e.g., factory-line embalming, de-skilling, bad publicity, etc.) and funeral consumers (e.g., higher costs, perfunctory ceremonies, overwhelming choices or even too little choice, and so on).

The American funeral industry has, throughout most of its history, attended to these contradictions by *moralizing* its role in society. This is beginning to change. The industry is increasingly focusing on amusement to deal with these contradictions, and there are two fundamental reasons for this. First, amusement is a useful form of distraction both from the painful realities of death and mourning, as well as a tool to "disguise the basic transaction of money for commodity" (Beardsworth and Bryman 1999:247). Amusement can serve as a kind of *quid pro quo*—consumers can overlook the profit-motivation of an economic actor so long as she gets something in return, namely one that makes up for the pecuniary *and* emotional costs that emerge from the transaction. That is, in order to tolerate the financial burden of the funeral, the unsettling emotions that can arise from paying too much or too little to celebrate the life and death

of a loved one, the tedious paper work and the sales pitches, the exhausting rigmarole of

decision-making, and the simple aversion to being surrounded by people and things that

are constant reminders of morbidity and tragedy, the funeral industry can provide

something to the consumer in exchange—amusement. Funeral consumers and visitors,

then, may not have to endure fire-and-brimstone sermons, waxy, made-up corpses,

morose funeral directors, or depressing soundtracks, and may instead opt for a different

set of provisions that are more lively, more hopeful, or even entertaining and fun. This

exchange can be thought of as a modification of the "Barnum principle" in which

consumers can play the role of the "dupe," just so long as they know that it is a contrived

performance *and* they are getting something in return (Ibid.).

I will argue that there is a second reason the funeral industry is adopting elements

from a culture of amusement. Amusement is cognizable and thus the event of death can

be reframed to look like other forms of quotidian consumption. American consumers

have grown accustomed to eating and shopping in themed environments, conflating

politics and news with celebrity spectacles, demanding around the clock entertainment

options, and otherwise partaking in the celebration of vacuous "pseudo-events" (Boorstin

1985). Amusement, then, when applied to the funeral industry makes its products more

recognizable, more appealing, and thus more consumable. The funeral industry can be

seen to appear like so many other spaces of social consumption. In this way,

distinctiveness, which when applied to funerary rites typically has negative associations

(i.e., sadness, grief, dread, anxiety, etc.), can be made *more* banal and *less* distinctive; the

strangeness of funeral businesses can give way to environments with which consumers

are more familiar and (ostensibly) more comfortable. Rather than heighten the awareness

that death is special and deserves to be treated as such (i.e., *not* commercialized), efforts can be made to attenuate the distinctiveness of death and its highly commercialized care-takers.

Empirical Inquiries

The foundation for my research of the funeral industry lies in a multi-sited ethnography, a methodology which seeks to "examine the circulation of cultural meanings, objects, and identities in diffuse time-space… a strategy or design of research that acknowledges macrotheoretical concepts and narratives of the world system but does not rely on them for the contextual architecture for framing a set of subjects" (Marcus 1995:96). That is, I observed situations, interviewed individuals, and collected artifacts from the field and I did so over the course of more than four years and in many different locations. My goal was to understand the variety of ways abstract notions like economy, politics, popular culture, and religion are articulated by human subjects without wholly determining these subjects. Rather than reducing the production of subjects to any one of these institutions or fields, I adhere to the idea that subjects both produce and are produced by overlapping institutions and fields and that these processes are ongoing. My goal in this dissertation research has been to provide a "tracing of associations," to use Bruno Latour's (2005) phrase, between human actors and non-human things such as capital, lifeless bodies, brands, discourses, products, spaces, landscapes, and manufactured technologies. These non-human entities "act" on subjects by making

available some behaviors and decisions while excluding others, in addition to providing humans with the ability to make sense of or create order from reality.

I draw on a variety of perspectives from sociology's ever-expanding theoretical toolbox: critical theories of political economy, sociology of culture, symbolic interactionism, and sociology of religion's understanding of ritual and the sacred. More detailed descriptions of my specific methods and my epistemological assumptions can be found in Appendix I. In short, I have conducted more than 50 in-depth and open-ended interviews with funeral directors and their staff, mortuary school students, teachers, and administrators, trade organization representatives and lobbyists, consumer advocates, writers, marketing professionals, and industry entrepreneurs. My research also led me to enroll in a mortuary services college where I was given a good deal of latitude for my data-gathering process. Supplementing my interview and observational data, I also conducted extensive document analysis of trade magazines, textbooks, and corporate financials.

Following Wendy Griswold (1986), a fundamental query in my project is: "[H]ow does the subject, a human being, interact with the predicate, a cultural object, to produce meaning?" (p. 4). How do individuals in the funeral industry make sense out of their situations via their use of material objects and goods as well as their interactions with other people (be they customers or colleagues)? I examined how these individuals utilized the "raw material" of their surroundings to create meaning or do the work of culture (Clarke, Hall, Jefferson, and Roberts ([1976] 1990). My understanding of the "raw materials" of culture led me to inquire into and observe interactions with everything from the technologies that delegate labor to the customers who are ostensibly served.

These materials also encompassed physical spaces, textual media, discourses (rationales, justifications, and explanations), merchandise, and, of course, other people.

The processes of making sense out of this sort of interaction between people and raw materials is typically described by sociologists as one of "negotiation," or the coordination of understanding, meaning-making, and goal-accomplishment that occurs through language, practice, interpersonal connection, and human interaction with objects (i.e., material culture). Analyzing the social worlds of fetal surgery, Monica Casper (1998) writes: "Negotiations are conceptualized as emergent, contingent, constrained, and fluid—hallmarks of interactionist approaches" (p. 31). Anselm Strauss (1978) notes that negotiation could occur at any level, be it a "person, group, organization, nation, and so on" (p. 11). He also writes that, when analyzing negotiation, it is important to avoid allowing macro-processes to linger as taken-for-granted, background "noise" (my term). Rather, "Negotiations always take place within social settings. The various structural conditions of the settings affect the actions of the negotiating parties, the aims they pursue through negotiation and alternative modes of action, their tactics during the negotiations, and, undoubtedly, the outcomes of the negotiations themselves" (Ibid., p. 235). In other words, since the work of negotiation is never a-contextual, the situations and contingencies that influence the work of negotiation must be accounted for on some level.

Thus, I address how an aggregate of actors makes sense of, or meanings out of, the changes wrought by late capitalism. A useful metaphor to talk about the transformation of the funeral industry is in terms of a rift in which new relationships (between producer, consumer, and commodity) are being created alongside new

practices, discourses, and meanings that must be re-negotiated. I have found that industry participants have contended with the processes of rationalization (e.g., disembedding mechanisms, corporatization, globalization, secularization, and the like) by re-shaping their primary product (i.e., funerary ritual) and its delivery. That is, through adopting profit-motivated, utilitarian approaches currently available to participants in the funeral industry, the production processes and the products are changing. The ways these negotiations take place is the theme of this dissertation. I argue that a culture of amusement is promulgated at the expense of a culture of tradition and religious moralizing, and that commodified forms of amusement have become the primary means the industry realizes its expansion.

This project contributes to an understanding of how people in other industries make sense of similar dynamics (i.e., those of balancing emotion and instrumentality) and it also provides an understanding of corporatization's role in cultural production and the commodification of ritual. Service industries and service occupations have become principal in today's post-industrial society. This dissertation examines some of the means by which actors accomplish unusually demanding labor in light of corporatization and other mechanisms of rationalization in our contemporary (political) economy.

Furthermore, this work sheds light on the shifts toward the centralization and standardization of care. The importance of such an issue will inevitably become magnified as the baby boom population ages into a life-stage in which eldercare becomes necessary. Should the neoliberal ideology continue, the strain on the welfare state would likely make further privatization of such care a given. Furthermore, in an age when the self is reflexively constructed to fit her ideal version of self (Giddens 1991), the market

for self-care (i.e., everything from cognitive therapies to body care to body modification) will likely also become progressively more significant in society.

Thus, I ask: What does care look like when it is uprooted from traditional, highly localized, morally-situated foundations and re-planted in profit-motivated, secularized, and product-mediated contexts? How does a consumerist environment refashion care? When care is standardized across time and place, does care get redefined? Hochschild (1983) examined the ways the interior lives of workers become colonized and managed by the demands of rationalizing work demands. Care work is imposed on the lives of many service workers, creating what can often be an inauthentic and contrived performance. On the other hand, my respondents report that, in spite of the fact that they have historically viewed their work in terms of care, are limited in their ability to provide multiple kinds of care.

Finally, the funeral industry is responsible for managing and producing cultural goods and symbolic relationships. Throughout the dissertation I reveal the ways this work is impacted by ever-shifting, macro-social forces. One such way can be found in the funeral industry's contribution to, and management of, the relationship between consumers and the sacred. Religion is another culture industry that is responsible for producing symbolic goods and maintaining the relationship between its "consumers" and the sacred (Wuthnow 1987). So one may find many parallels between the American funeral industry and contemporary religion (most especially with regard to Protestantism). What does the commodification of the sacred look like? How does corporatization become a dominant model and what consequences ensue for the delivery of service? How does this impact the means of consumption or the way these services

(and goods) can be delivered to consumers? What effect does this have on the kinds of goods that are made available and how does it change what products and spaces look like? Here, too, one can see how Americans' relationship with the sacred is changing in ways that often parallel the changes in the American funeral industry—religious services are becoming more spectacular (Peck 1993), churches more rationalized (Stark and Finke 1992), and theologies less gloomy and more pleasant (or even amusing) (Wuthnow 1998). I explore some of the accounts for this change and describe the ways the sacred is being reframed and renegotiated by industry participants.

Amusement, then, not only becomes a means by which the funeral industry can expand, but the means through which many areas of commerce and civic life can (and do) grow. In fact, I would argue that amusement is important for the expansion of capital generally and that this is an outgrowth of the transition from a producer society to a consumer one. According to Zygmunt Bauman (2007) the producer society can be characterized as: "[A] society... which put its wager on prudence and long-term circumspection, on durability and security, and above all on durable, long-term security" (p. 31). This is in stark contrast to a consumer society in which

> [T]he human desire for security and dreams of an ultimate 'steady state' are not suitable to be deployed in the service of a society of *consumers*... since consumerism, in sharp opposition to the preceding forms of life, associates happiness not so much with the *gratification* of needs... as with *an ever rising volume and intensity* of desires, which imply in turn prompt use and speedy replacement of the objects intended and hoped to gratify them... New needs need new commodities; new commodities need new needs and desires. (Ibid.)

Since, as Bauman points out, consumer society demands that needs not be satiated but perpetuated, amusement, with its endless capability for providing pleasant diversions from less appealing aspects of life, fits the bill.

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This parallels a much broader shift from an industrial to a post-industrial economy or, in the words of Baudrillard ([1972] 1975), a shift from a metallurgical society to a "semiurgical" (sign-producing) one. Whatever words one uses to describe it, the shift necessitated new forms of operation and new means of rationalization to manage those operations. The expansion of capital necessitates that individuals hold particular sets of beliefs and values are articulated in certain sets of behaviors. When the US was primarily a producer economy, the protestant work ethic that Max Weber described served the country well: hard work, intent on re-investment, saving money, pinching pennies, and so on, all served as normative guidelines for individuals' behaviors. Now however, we are a service economy, not an industrial one; we live in a consumer society rather than a society of producers. And with the "ongoing commodification of everything" as Wallerstein (1983, 1998) puts it, the citizenry is encouraged to spend, to consume.

The social proclivity for consumption is apparent in many areas of civic life, not the least of which could be found in the advice given to us by our president shortly after September 11th 2001. Americans were advised to not be daunted by terrorist attacks but to instead go out and shop. A similar logic applied in 2008, when amidst a period of stagflation, $600 checks were distributed by the IRS to (most) American taxpayers. Again, citizens were encouraged to use the money, to consume, and thereby to provide the country with a much-needed "economic stimulus."

Thus, in the producer society, asceticism was the order of the day—Weber said there was an "elective affinity" between asceticism and the expansion of capital. Today, I would argue that the *affine* is not asceticism but amusement. And as Bauman's statement from above suggests, in order to consume more and more, we require an unceasing

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supply of fresh stimuli. We eat in themed restaurants, we buy our wares at wondrous big

box retailers that woo us with their expansive aisles of merchandise stacked twenty feet

high, we attend increasingly extravagant amusement parks, and we glory at the marvel of

online shopping which allows us to connect to other shoppers, rate our experiences, and

await the arrival of our sundries straight to our doorstep. Amusement, in short, supports

this consumptive paradigm. Quite simply—shopping is a pleasant, if sometimes escapist,

activity. The event of death, on the other hand, has rarely been a cause for similar forms

rejoicing, which consumption can so readily bring. Now, however, that is beginning to

change. Examining the strength of the commodity form to transform the socially

constructed meanings and the nature of social behavior following the death of a human

being is the goal of this dissertation.

Outline of the Dissertation

In this dissertation, I analyze the contemporary funeral industry in order to place

in relief the following: the taken-for-granted nature of the ongoing "commodification of

everything"; the contradictions between the rationalized demands of treating the event of

death as an exercise in pecuniary remunerations and treating the event as a sacred rite of

separation that are created because of this commodification of everything; the means by

which these contradictions are redressed; and the role amusement plays in these

processes. After two chapters (2 and 3) that contextualize the industry and its

contradictions, each subsequent chapter focuses on one important area in which

negotiation takes places: at work, through communication with the consumer market, in

the goods and services that are created, and in and around the spaces and places where all

of this takes place. Thus, Chapters 2 and 3 both serve to situate my case historically

(Chapter 2) and theoretically (Chapter 3).

It is therefore important to situate these contradictions and the industry's

responses to them within a chronological framework. The historical context of the funeral

industry is the primary subject of Chapter 2. There, I discuss at some length the ways the

industry has legitimated its services, especially with regard to the manner in which

contradictions emerge and are addressed. I situate the industry along a timeline of

evolving discourses and practices. In doing so, I show the various justifications

participants in the industry provide to the public for their goods and services. The ways in

which the participants in the industry give account of the industry's social functions play

an important role in shaping the funeral industry's products, practices, and people (i.e.,

workers and consumers). Thus, one can see the long history of appeals to moral precepts

that impact how both consumers and workers make use of the funeral industry's goods

and services.

This history, however, is neither continuous nor predictable. So, in this chapter I

discuss the break that appears in the 1990s, in part, due to a widespread crisis in capital

accumulation. The industry begins to refashion its role and purpose in society as a

consequence. Thus, after more than 100 years of existence, the funeral industry began to

undergo a transformation from a service and sales industry to what can best be

characterized as a culture industry focused on "producing and selling meaning" (Gibson

and Kong 2005). Where the industry once emphasized material products (i.e., caskets,

headstones, and burial plots), it is increasingly turning to symbolic goods like tribute

DVDs, "preneed" planning, themed funerals, and cremation disposal events as its primary, money-making merchandise.[2] In part this is a consequence of a number of changes in society at large—among the most important of which are the rise of so-called "late capitalism," a de-standardization of the life course, and secularization. While I describe each of these in some detail in subsequent chapters, the following paragraphs will serve to introduce the reader to my understanding of these three important phenomena.

By "late capitalism" I simply mean the trend towards consumer-centered, globalized/transnational capitalism and away from industrial economies in a context of restricted trade (Mandel [1972] 1975, Jameson [1991] 2005). The digitization of capital combined with fewer trade barriers has made capital more fluid and mobile and therefore able to cross-national borders more easily and quickly than ever before. This has become important for American funeral companies as they attempt to serve an international market as well as adopt a consumer-centric model of operations in order to meet the needs of a highly heterogeneous market in the US.

The second macro-social change that is essential to my understanding of the transformations taking place around the funeral industry is de-standardization of the lifecourse. More families live further apart and this affects the ways funerals are constructed and conducted. This demographic shift towards people dying older and dying in institutional settings affects who the funeral industry's customers are and what kinds of arrangements need to be made since former emphases on familial obligations to bury their own dead are no longer as strong as they once were. Like dying, which has been

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[2] "Preneed" refers to a product that is purchased in advance of the actual use of the product. For example, a forty year old may buy a funeral package, by paying it off in installments, only to make use of it decades later. "Pre-need" is opposed to "at-need" in industry parlance.

rationalized in total institutions, disposal too had to be rationalized. Disposal then may be thought of as a pragmatic matter rather than a spiritual one.

The third macro-social change that has significantly impacted the funeral industry's functioning in the US has to do with shifts in religiosity. Secularization, another form of rationalization, further attenuates theological obligations to dispose of one's dead in a particular manner. Crouch (2004) writes,

> Belief, where it still exists, does not any longer guide much of social practice. When it comes to death, there is little evidence now of a conviction that trial of initiation to the spirit world await the deceased, and that ghosts exists and may be malignant; the loss of such convictions lessens the demand for both magical precautions and religious ritual. (p. 126)

Death is no longer the supernatural event that necessitates participation of clergy members or the inclusion of a theological inflection to the services. In short, the authoritative nature of religion to influence meanings outside of the religious sphere of life is on the decline.

The financial difficulties that I alluded to above, combined with the rise in consumer capitalism, the de-standardization of the lifecourse, and secularization contributed to creating a crisis for the funeral industry. As Stuart Hall (in Weinbaum 2004) writes: "Crises occur when the social formation can no longer be reproduced on the basis of the preexisting system of social relations" (p. 1). The response to this crisis has been an overall re-figuration of the funeral industry into a culture industry. In other words, in order to address the challenges presented by consumer capitalism, de-standardization of the lifecourse, and secularization, the industry displaced the unifying theological message altogether and substituted it with an emphasis on the consumer. That is, the funeral industry now manufactures goods that encourage bereaved consumers to

express themselves. This allows funeral services to highlight the living and the stories they have to tell about the dead, and to de-emphasize the dead themselves. However, this re-figuration revealed a whole new set of contradictions, explored in Chapter 3.

In Chapter 3, I elaborate on the nature of these contradictions and explain why it is important to both recognize and address them in some fashion. I draw on Daniel Bell's (1976) notion of cultural contradictions. He argues that for any single individual, there are competing logics that place different demands on her. Regarding the cultural contradictions in the funeral industry, one finds that workers are expected to earn a living, sell as many goods as they are able, and maximize profit for their respective firms, with little regard to the contingencies and economic limitations of their customers. They are expected to be rational, non-emotional economic actors. On the other hand, their membership in a community of mortals places a different set of expectations on them: to honor the living and the dead, to recognize the universality of this tragic coil, to sacralize the processing and disposal of the dead, and so forth. As one funeral director told me (and his sentiments were echoed in numerous interviews): "I have always believed that my calling in life was to be a service to others. It's not unlike being a minister." Doing business, though, can sometimes be inimical to the values, or simply the emotional needs, of human beings. This, then, is the core contradiction in the contemporary funeral industry and it is the basis from which other contradictions arise.

Sociological precedents for examining cultural contradictions via specific "cases" include, for example, Sharon Hays (1996). Her research on motherhood led her to conclude: "The same society that disseminates an ideology urging mothers to give unselfishly of their time, money, and love on behalf of sacred children simultaneously

valorizes a set of ideas that runs directly counter to it, one emphasizing impersonal relations between isolated individuals efficiently pursuing their personal profit" (p. 97). Eva Illouz (1997) similarly explored the role of romantic love in late capitalism: "[R]omance has become interwoven not only with the pleasures, images, and dreams of the sphere of consumption but also with the economic rationality of entrepreneurial capitalism" (p. 188). For each of these scholars, the root of the cultural contradiction lay in the tension to honor norms established around profit-motivations and norms established around care.

In this dissertation I assume that capitalism necessitates a highly rationalized commodity form. Thus, the relationships among capital, workers, consumers, and commodities, are arbitrarily defined. Because they are socially constructed, they require ongoing legitimation to avoid instability. One means of stabilizing the commodity form is via social mechanisms that emphasize predictability, calculability, and efficiency rather than individuality, inexplicability, and spontaneity (Weber [1904] 1958). However, rationalization, because it removes many vital human qualities from humans is irrational, and thus contains its own contradictions (Holton and Turner 1989).

In Chapter 3, I argue that the commodification of the sacred (e.g., funerary ritual) provides a convenient entry point to examine these contradictions for a simple reason. The ubiquity of commodification undermines, or is otherwise oppositional to, the Durkheimian notion of the sacred, which refers to that which is set apart and untouchable. On the one hand, commodification is almost as taken-for-granted as it is ubiquitous. Because these forms are practically everywhere in one's life and because this fact is accepted as rather banal and unexceptional, one might characterize this as "profane." On

the other hand, according to Durkheim ([1912] 1995), while the profane is ordinary, "The sacred thing is, par excellence, that which the profane must not and cannot touch with impunity" (p. 38). The sacred is set apart as special.

Thus, the commodification of funerary rites creates a contradiction. The profane (monetization processes) represents a kind of trespass into the realm of the sacred since "A rite can have sacredness; indeed there is no rite that does not have it to some degree" (Durkheim [1912] 1995:35). Sacred ritual, then, is leveled, or made equal with, a pecuniary structure. Some might suggest that this *reduces* sacred ritual, especially one that is intended to mark human mortality, generally, and the end of an existence, specifically. In short, the funeral industry equates rites of passage to an economic cost which engenders an important contradiction: the desire and expectation to reap financial rewards in a rationalized mode of production versus the desire and expectation to mark the passing of a person's existence.

I argue that a number of possible resolutions can arise to address contradictions that emerge from sublimating rites of passage into the commodity form. Historically, the funeral industry adopted a moral framework to resolve these contradictions. Funeral directors legitimated themselves as "moral entrepreneurs" (Becker 1963) in charge of providing a moral good to their communities by facilitating the transition between life and death. That is to say that the celebration of death and the treatment of the dead were no mere commodities. The trespass of capital into these sacred domains was mediated through the moralization of the industry's contributions to society. Funeral work was deemed special through the discourses and practices of the participants in the American funeral industry. So, while traditionally morality has been the means by which

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contradictions were redressed, this is currently changing. Morality is still present, as I show in Chapter 3, but increasingly the trope of amusement, like that of entertainment, which can often be *amoral* (Sayre and King 2003), has emerged as a critical means by which these contradictions can be managed.

One of the sites where the tension between morality and amusement is both contested and negotiated can be seen at the customer-worker meeting point. Funeral directors have historically viewed themselves as moral entrepreneurs whose charge was the maintenance and preservation of norms. In Chapter 4, I explore the history behind these accounts and analyze current negotiations. Because a moral entrepreneur may be viewed as an "enforcer" of socially valuable traditions and norms, such an enforcer must accomplish two functions, according to Becker (1963): "[F]irst, he must justify the existence of his position and, second, he must win the respect of those he deals with" (p. 156). I therefore describe in this chapter the legitimating discourses many in the funeral industry have traditionally used to earn the respect and trust of the consuming public and the shifts these discourses have taken: moving away from one that contributes to the social good (a "moral economy" discourse) and toward one that is largely absent of individual choice. These new logics can be described in two ways. Funeral producers are merely giving the consumer what the consumer "wants" (which is amusement). Or funeral producers are rationalized workers, "cogs" in a corporate machine.

Many funeral workers perceive a present loss of respect and trust and are accustomed to having been embedded in their respective locales and very active and visible in civic life. As one funeral director in my study said, "I think that when I first got in the business I saw the gray haired funeral director and when he walked in to the room

to start the funeral people got all quiet and he was in charge. He was *directing*."
Nowadays, funeral directors frequently report that they are not as well esteemed in their communities and are viewed less as moral entrepreneurs and sage caregivers and more akin to "ordinary" event planners in the service of amusement. This, of course, transforms the kinds of goods that workers are able to provide. In the past, workers could rely on personal and intimate knowledge of one's customer who herself exhibited trust that organically emerged as a consequence of being embedded in local networks (Polanyi [1944] 2001). At present, the rationalization of funeral work standardizes both the kinds of services and products that are available to the public and it also creates a depersonalized relationship between the customer and worker (Ritzer 1999).

The transformation of the identities of funeral workers stems, at least in part, from the corporatization of the industry, which has served as a kind of rationalizing mechanism. Where care necessitates an individual who can demonstrate empathy and self-sacrifice, and act on these qualities, rationalization typically precludes the possibility of working outside one's own self-interest or the interests of one's organization. With corporatization, industry participants "studied the death market like any other economic market" (Aries 1981:598) and thus cost-cutting and efficiency become driving strategies for the operation of firms. Not surprisingly, then, the corporatization of deathcare has directly affected those who work within the funeral industry. The qualities and characteristics employers seek in their workers have changed dramatically in the past twenty years. Now, rather than focusing on bereavement care as was traditionally the case, workers who excel in sales or engage in creative events planning are sought. Body-

work (i.e., embalming) has largely been consigned to one particular technician at a firm (or even one per cluster of firms).

Corporatization engenders its own set of contradictions but also its own means of diversion, and this is accomplished via the brand. Corporations are able to co-opt moral frameworks, which are decidedly human creations, and integrate these frameworks into their brands. Thus, an abstract entity, the corporation, can signify its humanness, as well as its goodness, to boot. A leading marketer who has been in the industry for decades told me that, in times past, "[W]henever the funeral home got a call, Mom, and I do mean *Mom*, would bake a cake or a pie or something… [but] there's no way corporations can incorporate Mom to cook fried chicken." One very important way of communicating the putative personhood of corporations to consumers is through the use of branding. This works by appeasing the consumer market through the substitution of a trope that is sufficiently pleasant (a hypostatized brand) for themes that are altogether unpleasant (death, corporate behemoths, and negative publicity), a process I discuss at length in Chapter 5.

Branding, though, is another rationalizing mechanism for consumption (and consumers) by providing a narrative that can be read and understood by consumers. I examine the operations of branding in the industry and argue that both morality and amusement can organize company's branding efforts. I also look at the role of iconic, or widely recognized, brands in the funeral business. Because these brands are typically drawn from non-funeral companies that are involved in the production of commodities that emphasize leisure, entertainment, or recreation, I argue that brands are an efficient means of the rationalization of amusement since they allow the consumer to situate

herself along a continuum of values and lifestyle choices (Zukin 2004). Increasingly, however, I demonstrate that consumers are opting for themed funerals (often utilizing iconic brands) that accomplish the similar work of emplotment and I query the progressively more apparent use of theming both within the funeral industry and the overall marketplace. According to sociologists such as Mark Gottdiener (2001), theming, also the subject of Chapter 5, conceals the instrumental nature of the financial transaction by providing the consumer with a value-added sense of recreation or entertainment.

However, theming also abstracts the consumer from her unique context or situation and provides a new context or experience that is less unique and more widely recognizable. That is, it is a disembedding mechanism, or a reliance on the market rather on an individual's personal ties for the articulation of self. One might, for instance, construct a funeral service around a golf theme (presumably, a relatively common theme for white, upper-middle-class men as far as themed funerals go). The deceased in this case is situated according to an activity, one that is fairly global and broadly historical in nature. The locally-derived and unique attributes that might otherwise serve as the focus of the funeral are instead de-emphasized and mediated through the theme.

Theming and other disembedding mechanisms abstract distinctive characteristics of individuals and consign them to categories of consumers. Individuals then are constructed as consumer-types by the funeral industry, the topic of Chapter 6. This construction of the consumer (as a category) is made possible by the emergence of new marketing instruments and the subsequent segmentation of consumers. Funeral businesses are increasingly working to provide their customers with an entertainment experience that gets conflated with traditional funerary ritual. So, too, the novelty market

generates products and services that are quite nontraditional in the funeral business and often unconventional in the broader society. Because the funeral industry has constructed the consumer as desirous of unique and individualized goods, the novelty market often relies heavily on highly specified niches. The novelty market has received a great deal of attention from the mainstream press, which often lampoons this component of the trade as being bizarre and/or trivial. Funeral companies have taken note of the success of the novelty market, however, and are beginning to incorporate techniques and practices into mainstream services in order to provide "personalization" (albeit a mass-produced version).

Another important shift in this corporatization process has to do with the heightened role of marketing in the funeral industry and the subsequent reification of the consumer. By this, I mean that "ideal customers" are constructed out of marketing ideals and become commodities themselves around which a sizable marketing industry has emerged. Based on values, lifestyle, and income segments, among other things, individuals are targeted and assigned an identity based on a given permutation of market niches (e.g., zip codes, income, occupation, credit rates, percent of income spent on outdoor versus indoor leisure activities, and the like). Funeral directors and other staff then target particular individuals and subsequently understand and interact with these customers on the basis of the consumer segment they occupy—thus ascribing those customers an identity based on their consumptive habits. This disembeds the customer from the identity she claims by substituting it with one based on her "fit" to a consumer profile.

There are an enormous number of options available to today's funeral consumer. More and more of these products are fun, entertaining, and even funny. Funeral products can be also be ironic or satirical. Some products can start out as gimmicks and quickly become ordinary. A funeral director for a major corporate chain described a necklace that holds cremated ashes: "We had a pendant that started out as a sort of novelty item but now people are calling for it quite often…It's become an accepted thing but we [he and his colleagues] used to laugh and joke about it." And funeral services can be cinematic in their capacity to provide an immersive and engaging experience. Funerals can resemble parties and funeral directors sometimes even refer to themselves as party planners. Visitations are often themed and there is a smorgasbord of video and music available to the consumer, sometimes approaching the spectacular.

At the very least, many funerals are fast becoming a form of amusement, which serves to divert the subject from that which is unpleasant. In the funeral industry there is much that is conventionally considered unpleasant. Death, of course, being foremost, but one should also include dead bodies, sadness, absence, bereaved people, workers who spend their days with dead bodies, *memento mori* (didactic reminders of human mortality), and so on. Other unpleasantness can be found in the cost of the business transaction. These costs are typically viewed as financial but they can also be social in nature. Amusement distracts attention away from those social costs and not just the financial costs.

All of this must be accomplished in physical spaces and material environments. Thus, the current manifestation of the American funeral industry in the US necessitates that the funerary landscape be both literally and figuratively altered. So, in Chapter 7, I

discuss how personalization, and amusement more generally, create the need to re-figure

spaces in/of the funeral industry. This is accomplished in a number of ways: the

incorporation of kitchens and bars, or high-end multimedia equipment; the renovation of

funeral homes to make them appear less "funereal"; the renaming of funeral homes to

reflect an emphasis on non-funeral events; and the inclusion of non-funeral business in

funeral firms. I also discuss the eradication of *memento mori* from the broader

topography of the funerary landscape. Here, I discuss the case of funeral homes, and also

burial grounds, and the rise of specialty stores and virtual retailers. I also discuss the

ways these environments contribute to the amusement culture.

Spaces and things take on particular significance in an environment that has such

an aura of morbidity (Smith 1997). This is evidenced by a textbook writer who instructs

mortuary students to "Lead the family into the room and proceed right up to the casket in

as natural manner as possible," adding that the family will invariably experience "an

initial shock" (Klicker 1999:39-40). Klicker's suggestion to make the funeral home

resemble what can best be described as a middle-class suburban household, has in fact

become dated. Instead, funeral producers are increasingly likely to turn towards a

different kind of template: shopping centers.

Reminiscent of a period when funeral homes were in fact, actual homes in which

funeral directors resided, very few funeral homes staff their facilities around the clock.

And the spaces themselves have become literal manifestations of a culture that

compartmentalizes death and consigns funerary rites to shopping excursions. In order to

accommodate customers who wanted to personalize their funerals with multiple speakers

and make their funerals more informal, inclusive, and participatory, chapels and visitation

rooms were outfitted with multimedia systems. Additionally, many funeral homes have begun to make their spaces appear less distinctive through the removal of wallpaper, furnishings, and architectural elements in order to distance themselves from conventional funeral home appearances. Instead of caskets in a display room, many firms only display corner pieces or catalogues. Some funeral homes have added coffee shops in their buildings. Many funeral homes remove iconography that suggest adherence to one cultural or religious tradition over another to appeal to a multi-ethnic and religiously diverse clientele.

Finally, there is the insertion of funeral goods into non-funerary environments further evacuating the morbidity of funeral products. Cremation niches can be found at sports stadiums, country clubs, and golf courses. Caskets can be purchased at Costco or in a local strip mall. Conversely, funeral homes and burial grounds can serve purposes extending well beyond their traditional goals of memorializing the dead. There are funeral homes that also serve as facilities for business meetings and funeral homes that hold parties. Cemeteries are also hosting parties, dinners, tours, and performing arts. All of which suggest a turn towards an amusement culture that privileges distraction over remembrance.

Chapter 8 serves as a very brief summary of my findings and amplifies my theoretical arguments from the dissertation. Here, I also demonstrate the connections between the transitions in the funeral industry and ones in the broader culture. However, I mostly focus on the role of the funeral industry in shaping funerary rites. While many of my arguments are applicable to a wide variety of circumstances, I believe it is nonetheless important to discuss how all of the changes I describe in the previous

chapters both constrain and enable celebratory and mourning rituals that connect past and present, and the living and the dead. Thus, I use this concluding chapter as an outlet for a discussion on funerary rites as they are situated within a consumerist society.

As geography, kinship networks, and religious inclinations lack the traction they once did in providing funeral staff with a way to appropriately connect consumers with particular goods and services, amusement increasingly fills this gap. Rather than selling a funeral based on the identification of a customer's religious background, for example, she can be matched to options based on her taste for leisure and recreation (e.g., the inclusion of baking-related paraphernalia for the cooks, or a minimalist-inspired coffin for the design-minded set, etc.). In the US, amusement provides a universally recognized canopy of meaning. That is, a common assumption is that almost everyone is familiar with the experience of being entertained and almost everyone is an adept shopper. In contrast to identifying consumers based on religiosity, since it has become highly privatized (Roof 1996, Wuthnow 1998), it is comparatively easy to understand consumers via their entertainment and shopping decisions. Most importantly, amusement is able to serve as a form of "institutionalized prestidigitation" whereby the historically specific processes of rationalization are concealed.

Some of the effects of the transformation of the American funeral industry I consider to be deleterious (e.g., standardization of service, de-moralizing and de-skilling of labor, the reification of the consumer, self-interested extraction of profit to the detriment of consumers, disembedding forces, and various corporate externalities). Some effects, though, may be interpreted in multiple ways. Here, I consider two such

consequences that are intertwined: consumerism and the shifting meaning of funerary ritual.

I offer a reconsideration of consumer ritual and sacred funeral; or the conflation of the two. Given the need to respond to the death of a loved one combined with the funeral industry's largely accessible, extant apparatus, the consumption of funeral goods may be a means of containing the emotional drift imposed by death. Consumption provides a fairly straightforward way to reconnect with something familiar and recognizable in a time when reality can feel tenuous at best. Noted funeral scholar Vanderlyn Pine with co-author Derek Phillips (1970) claims:

> Our view is that because people increasingly lack both the ceremonial and social mechanisms and arrangements that once existed to help them cope with death, monetary expenditures have taken on added importance as a means for allowing the bereaved to express (both to themselves and others) their sentiments for the deceased. (p. 416)

Consumption, in this light, becomes sacralized within the broader funerary ritual. That is, the point of purchase transcends its immediate utility by serving as an outlet for expressing our emotional attachments. Burying someone is hard. Customers often want to give one last gift before they let go and thus it should come as little surprise that some desire to spend lots of money on loved ones' funerals out of a genuine longing to continue to provide for a friend, spouse, or relative, even after they are gone. Less an empty signifier, a cipher created to superficially mark one banal occasion in a life-long series of occasions, the act of buying something might be a transcendental bridge consumers create in an effort to reach out to those for whom one is attached, in life and death.

CHAPTER II

ANAMNESIS

Introduction

"It is no longer in the interplay of representation that economics finds its principle, but near that perilous region where life is in confrontation with death" (Foucault, [1970] 1994: 257).

As with other industries, the funeral industry is a social product that, through the process of institutionalization, begins to disguise its own constructed nature to become more or less taken for granted by the public. Because there is nothing intrinsically necessary supporting the existence of the funeral industry, one of the fundamental creations of the industry is its own *raison d'etre*. In this chapter I argue that the funeral industry has gone through three historical periods, each reflecting a different set of claims concerning the necessity of its own existence: "Every historical epoch has distinct ways of organizing time, space, behaviour and subjectivity" (Langman 1992:40). As the discourses founded on these claims change, so do the identities of the industry participants and the products and services made available to the public.

These three periods are distinguished most fundamentally as successive periods of history. And the kinds of discourses that are generated from them are crucial to understanding each period. Each "discursive formation" (Foucault [1969] 2002), makes possible different aggregations of truth claims surrounding the importance of funeral

goods for the consumer marketplace. By examining these three formations, one can interpret and understand the shifts in the funeral industry, the mechanisms that connect the industry to a broader political economy, cultural fields, and philosophic and religious discourses. These are revealed as mutually constitutive and dialogical. One might argue that the funeral industry as an *institution* has undergone transformation. Indeed the institutional properties, defined as "webs of interrelated rules and norms that govern social relationships" (Nee 1998:8) have changed. But I am especially interested in the ways the institution has changed with respect to the funeral industry's relationships with other institutions and created internally consistent discursive realities for participants in the funeral industry. There is an "order of things" which changes over time and which I examine throughout the dissertation. Why are some things produced and not others? Why are some things valued more than others? What meanings support the things in the funeral industry? How are these things and the thinking around these things co-constitutive? Simply, how are things ordered? The answers to these questions depend largely on which period one is asking but rather than addressing these inquiries structurally, one might instead emphasize the discontinuties offered a fairly comprehensive conceptualization of process that highlights knowledge and discursive realities that ground craft, technology, and organization.

Each of the three periods in the funeral industry differs with respect to a wide variety of characteristics. Among these characteristics are: recruitment and training of staff; goods produced; the dissemination of knowledge; marketing and selling strategies; ownership; means of production; and the type of consumer that is imagined and created. Each period also has a set of dominant, legitimating discourses. The funeral industry,

which is an aggregation of claims-makers, justifies the kinds of goods it produces in accordance with a combination of factors, not least of which can be two very different perceptions: first, its own revenue flows, and second, the perception of the public's needs.

The three periods can be distinguished not only by the kinds of products the funeral industry makes or the kind of ownership structure that is most prevalent, but by the truth claims participants in the funeral industry rely on to justify its products, its most prevalent *modus operandi*, and so on. These truth claims rely on disciplinary, often scientific, knowledges to establish the value, and even the necessity, of the continued existence of the funeral industry. In other words, subjects within the trade are disciplined through the disciplines of which they are a part.

Serving as natural bookends, I examine the emergence of the American funeral industry around the time of the U.S. Civil War through the present moment. Each period contains its own "strategic apparatus which permits of separating out from among all the statements which are possible those that will be acceptable within… a field of scientificity" (Foucault 1980:197). Each, then, is an expression of the funeral industry's reliance on a different scientific discipline to support its truth claims and its worth. In the proceeding passages I will the ways individuals in the funeral trade draw on other well-established disciplines with their corresponding knowledges and discourses to support their claims regarding the necessity of their goods and services.

Truth, or the Formation of the Industry

The American funeral industry originated shortly after the Civil War (1861-1865) as families of dead soldiers demanded the return of the bodies for funerary purposes. Farrell (1980) writes: "The idealization of the family… encouraged kin to stay together after death, a sentiment that combined with massive mobility to guarantee the shipment of bodies and the market for an effective preservative process" (p. 10). However, the time it took to collect, identify, and transport the dead to their loved ones combined with the fact that the shipping containers were poorly sealed created badly deteriorated corpses upon arrival. Embalming, which had long been used as a way to transform corpses into medical cadavers, quickly became a means of temporarily preserving bodies until they could be interred.

Thousands of soldiers were embalmed during this period, providing visual and olfactory evidence for the practice's potential. When President Lincoln was assassinated in 1865, his body was embalmed so that it could be displayed in towns and cities across several states. The journey his body took also served to educate a wide public on the effects of embalming. Thus began the transformation in which "the modern human corpse became an invented and manufactured consumer product through the industrialization of the dead body in mid nineteenth century America" (Troyer 2007:23).

The American funeral industry emerged around the practice of embalming, and thus the discipline of medical science became a reference point for the legitimation of the trade. Physicians were largely responsible for battlefield embalmers and embalmers were for some time thereafter referred to as "embalming surgeons." There emerged an

understanding between the public and industry participants that embalming was done for health reasons. Indeed, the training of embalmers emphasized public health and sanitation. Some of the earliest training manuals illustrate this:

> If interred without disinfection, the spores of the bacteria are not destroyed, and, as they will retain their vitality for a long time in either earth or water, they remain a constant source of danger. Our water supplies may become contaminated by streams running though or near cemeteries, which receive the drainage therefrom, and take up the spores and convey them to any distance, thus spreading the disease. (Myers [1897] 1900:252)

> Could one for a moment look about him with eyes equaling in power and strength of a microscopic lens, he would behold a world hitherto unknown to him, an unseen world of minute organisms known as bacteria or germs. (Dodge 1908:96)

Similarly, the titular shift from "undertaker" (which was previously synonymous with "businessman," and could thus refer to a wide variety of persons hired to perform a task) to "mortician" occurred in part to appeal to a scientific discourse—"mortician" aurally evoking "physician" (Smith 1997:5).

The funeral industry appealed to the burgeoning science of germ theory to account for the necessity of embalming dead bodies. Foreman (1974) writes: "H. S. Eckels stated, in the January, 1905 issue of *Embalmer's Monthly*, that 'sanitary science, disinfection and hygiene, form the keystone of our professional ambitions'... And so there is the implication that the funeral director views the care of the body as more essential to the reputation of his putative profession than the actual direction of the funeral" (p. 233). Events like the flu pandemic of 1918 likely bolstered the public's acceptance of such justifications. Likewise, the products of the funeral industry were not merely processed (i.e., embalmed) bodies, but the "proper" disposal of these bodies and the guarantee of continued public health standards. Thus, the expertise of embalmers gestured toward the truths asserted by practitioners in the disciplines of biology and medicine.

Such truth, Foucault (1980) argued, is less important for its ability to accurately reflect empirical verity (as opposed to falsehood) than it is for its power to regulate and normalize human thought and behavior (p. 133). The "discursive formations" within any given period frame reality and thus make possible some thoughts and actions which become taken-for-granted and "factual." No longer was it appropriate for a dead body to occupy the familiar spaces of familial homes. Dead bodies had to be quarantined from the living and were viewed as harmful, dangerous, and filthy. In sum, Steiner (2003) notes that compartmentalization, which became prominent in so many other areas in society:

> [C]reated an entirely new context for disposing of the deceased. Bureaucratization stressed the value of institutions in coping with a vast array of social and personal problems. The movement, which found its strongest impetus among the middle-class, transformed American values in the final decades of the nineteenth century by shifting attention away from the inner man to outward activities... The result for death culture was a dissociation of the living from the dead. As death was removed from the home, to institutions and the final disposition of professional funeral directors. Americans lost intimate contact with death. (p. 130)

So as urbanization gripped the country and the number of Americans in cities grew from 10 million to 54 million between 1870 and 1920, the death care industry grew in proportion. Rather than non-professionalized members of small communities mobilizing to provide funeral services in response to a death, a rationalized system developed to remove death care from the organic collective. Caring for the dead was subsequently made invisible and thus easier for funeral professionals to control and regulate.

Beauty, or the Industry's Second "Age"

The introduction in 1897 of formalin (formaldehyde) into embalming procedures accomplished two things. First, it did away with the discoloring caused by earlier

preservatives. Second, the toxic fumes formaldehyde produced necessitated the displacement of embalming out of the houses of the deceased and the creation of professional funeral homes (Mayer 2000). Also significant was the widespread wiring of businesses for electricity. This made possible embalming machines, which, with regard to dead bodies, resulted in a more even distribution of formaldehyde. Demi-surgery, or the "restorative arts," began in the 1930s and became fairly widespread in the 1940s. These factors contributed to a move towards an aestheticization of the dead body by the funeral industry. This reflects a shift within the industry that began taking place in the 1940s, which meant new disciplines of expertise, new justifications, and new products made available to the public.

Visuality and presentation became a selling point for the mainstream only when restoration and cosmetic technologies had sufficiently developed.[3] Additionally, the widespread shift from the anthropoidal *coffin* to the abstracted, rectangular *casket* in the late nineteenth century also contributed to the transformation of the funeral product. (In fact, "casket" is etymologically derived from "jewelry box.") While the invention occurred some time prior to the turn of the twentieth century (in 1859), the strategy even then was deliberate: "'[T]o obviate in some degree the disagreeable sensation produced on many minds'"(Shively 1988:340). Thus, one might realize how the casket, along with the flower arrangements, serves as a kind of frame to the centrality of the "precious contents" (i.e., the dead body).

This ability to create a holistic presentation during the funeral service, one that was less fearsome, progressively became the "product" the industry was manufacturing

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[3] Some examples of these include: putties, eye caps, mouth closures, embalming machines, dehydrating fluids, and various forms of make-up.

and selling. To be sure, the primary elements (i.e., the processed body, service, burial container) produced by the funeral industry have largely remained unchanged throughout the history of the industry and this certainly applies to this particular period. What has changed are the ways these elements are perceived, thought about, and discussed. This new product was termed the "memory picture" in order to suggest that the last image the bereaved has of the deceased ought to be sanguine, peaceful, and even pleasant. As noted by Strub and Fredrick ([1958] 1967) in their embalming textbook from this era: "It is the duty of the embalmer to create a memory picture... an illusion of pleasant, normal, restful sleep which will make the transition from life into death more majestic and easier for the family and friends to accept" (p. 11).

In earlier times the funeral industry's product utilized the discourses constructed in biology and medicine. While industry participants continued to draw on these disciplines to give account of themselves, they increasingly turned to the discipline of psychology which was increasingly seen as a legitimate discourse with which to order reality. This psychologization of the funeral trade was, according to Farrell (1980) merely an outgrowth of an individualized populace in search of self actualization: "The privatization of death accompanied the privatization of the family, and substituted the formal patient-therapist relationship for the informal community relations that accompanied the public funeral" (p. 133). The privatization and thus sequestration of grief made it an easy target for pathologization (and thus in need of "healing"). A 1940 statement by Melanie Klein, a famous British psychoanalyst of the era, supports the putative need for grief therapy: "'In normal mourning early psychotic anxieties are

reactivated. The mourner is in fact ill'" (in Gilbert 2006:256). Grief therapy, then, became the funeral industry's ideal product for the "sick," bereaved consumer.

Death, as an event, continued to be consigned to medical institutions and was thus increasingly segregated from the populace. The peri-mortem period as symbolized by the death bed was more often taking place in hospitals rather than the familiar familial settings as was generally the case in previous eras. As Balk (2003) writes: "Throughout the 19th and into the 20th century, the great majority of persons (over 80%) in the United States died in their homes. From the middle of the 20th century, the great majority of persons (nearly 80%) have died either in hospitals (approx. 63%) or in nursing homes (approx. 17%). Less than 18% have died at home" (p. 833). The dispersion of American families combined with the deconcentration of cities in the second half of the twentieth century necessitated the peri-mortem stage to more concealed spaces. This attenuation of the salience of death concentrated its effects to the "immediate" survivors, rather than the extended family or community as a whole. Death and its effects were an individual concern, rather than a collective one.

Also contributing to the transition into a new era for the funeral industry was the concurrent shift in American religiosity. Whether one trusts the argument that Americans became more and more secular (with regard to the loosening of religious authority in other areas of civic life) during the second half of the 20th Century (Chaves 1994, Lechner 1991) or the claim that Americans are just as religious, only more diversely so (Gorski 2000, Stark 1999), the funeral trade responded. Previously, New Testament tropes were pervasive in the themes and images of funeral products and services.[4] Furthermore, clergy no longer held the dominant role in the funerary rituals (Emke 1999).

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[4] This is certainly true for funerals and was even the case for many non-Christian funerals.

It was now the funeral director who often controlled the services. As Stephenson (1985)

writes, "Consolation is no longer found in the Book of Job, but in grief therapy" (p. 210).

Funeral directors viewed themselves as being better equipped to provide this kind of care

in an increasingly empiricist culture. This is, of course, because the dismal traders who

were originally embalming surgeons were identifying with a new discipline—that of

psychology. "[The funeral director's] duty lay in the helping of others to accept the

tragedy of death" (Foreman 1974:239). In order to accomplish this, the memory picture

was "manufactured" to accompany the change in occupational roles. In other words, the

funeral director became a "'beautifier' and 'sympathizer, a concerned person who creates

a beautiful memory picture in order to assuage the grief of those who mourn the loss of

the deceased" (Ibid., p. 231). In appealing to the discipline of psychology, funeral

industry participants refashioned their status as professionals. Now, funeral products and

services were marketed on their ability to ease the suffering of the bereaved and assist the

consumer through difficult times.

In response to this psychologization of the funeral consumer, the industry began

providing the public with a new product, the "memory picture" (Cahill 1995), which an

embalming instructor informed her class is "A mental photograph that is imprinted in our

heart and on our minds of those who are most significant to us." In the memory picture,

the body appears to delicately float in a plush container. The casket, with its minimal

ornamentation and sturdy structure, frame and present the body.[5] Cosmetics rouge the

cheeks, the eyes are filled or capped, and the jaw is stapled or sutured shut. This

combination of procedures is meant to reanimate the otherwise moribund demeanor while

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[5] The memory picture also served to perpetuate funeral homes' place as a product retailer in addition to
being care providers.

impressing on the viewer a sense of stillness rather than rigid fixity. Together these elements combine to produce the memory picture, reminding us that our loved one is indeed in "a better place" and hence we can rest easy in this knowledge.

The memory picture served as a product through which funeral directors facilitated healing. While the memory picture is no longer in vogue as a descriptor, funeral directors even today attest to the putative necessity of providing all of the elements that constitute what was previously termed such. Seeing the body, something that can only be accomplished with aesthetic technologies and techniques, is still viewed by some in the trade as necessary by funeral workers even today. As one funeral director told me: "I've had people do direct cremation [without seeing the body] and it hurts them. It's hard for them to heal. They keep expecting the dead to come back through the door. What we do in preparing the body for the funeral service is make the death real." And a funeral textbook claims: "It is… necessary that we in funeral service rededicate ourselves to the fulfillment, to the very best of our ability, of the American way—the funeral with the body present and viewable" (Mayer 2000:591).

Thus, there is no single cleft dividing these three periods but rather an accrual of factors that contributed to this shift. Therefore, the qualities and characteristics of one period can be found in the others, though there are ideal typical traits. For example, even though the primary justification given for embalming during the first period, as I described it, had been sanitation and public health, funeral workers even today consider this to be a reason for embalming though it is by no means their *raison d'etre,* and they appeal to medical discourses for legitimation. As Cahill (1995) writes with regard to the education received by mortuary school students: "In part at least, its apparent purpose is

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to persuade students that they are becoming scientifically informed and trained professionals comparable to physicians" (p. 127). Likewise, historically falling well within the second period of the American funeral industry, Myers ([1897] 1900) foreshadows the second episteme that highlights the aestheticization of funeral products when he wrote: "To put a mass of putrefying animal matter into a fine plush casket, or an elegantly finished metallic casket, lined with the finest of fabrics, could not be thought of" (p. 251). And Emke (2002) notes that many funeral workers are still very much concerned with providing a kind of grief therapy evidenced by the frequent use of terms or phrases such as: "closure," "healing," "coming to terms," "expressing support," or "comforting the bereaved."

The Logic of Late Capitalism in the Third "Age"

Beginning in the 1990s, the funeral industry saw a widespread crisis of capital accumulation. Jessica Mitford, who had originally written a scathing and widely read critique of the funeral industry in 1963, died. Her passing, in combination with a release by Alfred A. Knopf of a new edition of her book *The American Way of Death* in 1998 inspired many in the mainstream media to revisit themes of mortuary malfeasance and underhanded undertakers.[6]

The second major factor that contributed to the financial crisis during this time was the decline in the death rate as evidenced by the table below.

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[6] Not helping the reputation of funeral industry participants was the 2002 discovery of over 300 uncremated bodies by EPA officials in Noble, Georgia.

Table 1. U.S. Death Rates, 1940-2000 (*Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*)

Year	Death Rate[7]
1940	1,785.0
1950	1,446.0
1960	1,339.2
1970	1,222.6
1980	1,039.1
1990	938.7
2000	869.0

Americans continued to live longer lives and the members of the baby boom generation were only just beginning to bury their antecedents. The decline in the overall death rate in conjunction with a relatively stable number of funeral homes in the U.S. (about 22,000) meant fewer bodies and thus less business on a per firm basis (Smith 1997, Grow 2003, McWilliams 1998).

Finally, as was made famous by the popular HBO TV series *Six Feet Under*, the funeral industry underwent a heavy period of mergers and acquisitions. In the 1990s conditions such as low interest rates and high levels of investment capital, were favorable for rapid expansion on a national and even international scale. Smith (1997), an economist writes, "Investors have been as attracted to the investment promise of consolidation in the death care sector as they were to the promise of returns through earlier consolidations in other industries" (p. 295). The so-called "death stocks" represented by publicly-traded companies were providing healthy returns for shareholders. Service Corporation International (SCI) became a multinational as it expanded into the Canadian, Australian, and European markets. Stewart expanded into

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[7] The CDC provides an age-adjusted death rate (per 100,000) that weights age groups based on the proportional distribution of the population for the age groups. The most recent rate released by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2006) is 816 per 100,000, demonstrating a further decline.

Australia and Mexico. However, as this acquisitive stage progressed, corporations incurred a great deal of debt.

At least partially related to the rise in corporate consolidation was the increased negative publicity funeral practitioners began receiving. FTC investigations of market monopolies and allegations of mishandled bodies led many of these companies to significantly restructure their businesses and scale back expansion plans, if not completely divest themselves of individual firms. One such casualty is Loewen Group, which was once the second largest funeral provider in North America and the largest in Canada, but in 2002 declared bankruptcy.[8]

As these economic crises continued, a new era emerged. In this era, the industry altered the products it offered as well as the occupational roles of industry participants. Just as importantly, the disciplinary legitimation used to justify these two things (i.e., the identities of actors and the kinds of goods) also changed. While I analyze all of these dimensions, I begin with the epistemic foundation that naturalizes these identities and masks the mechanisms and work needed to achieve them.

The most recent shift is towards an articulation of a new "science"—the logic of late capitalism. The contemporary synthesis of globalization and consumerism reflects new market dynamics. Furthermore, there are now American casket companies with factories in Mexico and Chinese casket companies exporting their wares to the US. Funeral corporations are now multi-national. Additionally, late capitalism denotes the shift toward a consumerist society constituted by "mass participation in the mass-industrial market" (Ewen 1976:54). The funeral industry is not excluded from

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[8] It eventually re-emerged as Alderwoods. However, Alderwoods was subsequently purchased by SCI in 2006.

globalization and consumerism and has had to rapidly adapt to these macro-structural changes. By re-figuring itself as a culture industry, the funeral industry has accomplished this by becoming a consumer-centric, flexible, and niche-oriented producer of symbolic goods and services. The dexterity to serve an increasingly diverse market is important in an incredibly diverse public. The consumer is increasingly put under the microscope, ascribed niche identities, targeted for highly specialized sales tactics, and subjected to the processes of "mass pseudo-demassification" (Farrell 1980) wherein increasingly homogenized products are tweaked and tinkered with to appear as though they are unique only to the buyer. The funeral industry now, like other culture industries, relies on marketing instruments that continue to grow both in number and complexity, in order to reify the consumer, seemingly creating her *ex nihilo*.

This also creates the perception that the locus of control lies with the consumer who is able to manage her identity via her purchasing choices. This ostensible shift in control implied the possibility of a novel form of ritual, one that represents a self-referential approach to funerary rites and thus a rejection of authoritative discourses. Hallam and Hockey (2001), two preeminent sociologists who study death, call this the era of the postmodern funeral, as it is characterized by celebrants' desire to eschew so-called experts who give voice to "proper", "appropriate," or "ideal," means of celebrating deaths.

Not surprisingly, the funeral industry responded by introducing "personalization" to nearly all of their products and services en masse in the 1990s. Indeed, "personalization" became a much-hyped buzzword that remains ubiquitous in the trade. As Garces-Foley and Holcomb (2006) write:

The postmodern funeral is characterized by personalization, informality, and participation, which together create what is experienced as a more authentic and thus satisfying farewell than the somber, standardized, and theologically focused funerals of the past. The postmodern funeral is ultimately about choice, allowing for considerable more autonomy than either the traditional or modern funeral forms. (p. 216)

While Garces-Foley and Holcomb accurately portray a general tendency towards increased options, linking consumer choice with agency is highly problematic for reasons I will discuss in Chapters 6 and 8.

Nevertheless, it was in the late 1990s when individual companies, and the industry as a whole, began to produce a wider variety of goods and services. Even as late as the mid-1990s, an economist who studied the death care industry in the 1990s declared: "Few new mortuary services have been introduced by funeral homes" (Smith 1997:116). This expansion not only addressed a diversified consumer market by offering more options for personalization, it also provided the industry with the means of overcoming certain, built-in constraints imposed by biology. This becomes evident with an analogy. In economics, one can distinguish between rival and non-rival goods. Rival goods are those goods that, when being used by one party, cannot be used by others. The shoes I am wearing are rival goods since, when I am consuming (wearing) these shoes, no one else can use them. Non-rival goods can be used (or consumed) by multiple individuals or parties simultaneously. Knowledge, the airwaves, and many immaterial goods are examples of non-rival goods.[9]

Raw material or resources are, for producers, either rival or non-rival goods. Since there are only so many to go around, dead bodies are rival goods for firms in the funeral industry. Thus, as the number of bodies drops and the number of funeral homes

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[9] There is a caveat in this example. Funeral consumers do not in most cases *sell* dead bodies as input resources to funeral firms. Thus, my use of rivalry is more analogical than strictly empirical.

remains stable, per firm revenues will decline unless either prices are raised or new internal cost-saving practices are discovered.[10] The former option is considerably more problematic given the heightened negative publicity surrounding the industry as a whole. So, steps toward the latter were inherently more favorable. Furthermore, consumer demand is problematic since the rule of nonsatiety does not apply.[11] Thus, "Only one unit of the product is ordinarily required (desired) per body, no more and no less" (Smith 1997:137).

When revenues are tethered to the supply of dead bodies, an essential resource, those revenues are limited, to an extent, by the number of available dead bodies at any given time. Production was, for most of the industry's history, centered on the dead body. The value added, and thus the profits reaped from practices such as embalming, restoration, cosmetizing, burial containers, burial real estate, floral arrangements, and the like, necessitated a limited resource—i.e., dead bodies. The dead body was an essential resource in the funeral industry. As with other industries where access to the essential resource is limited by natural barriers, diversification of output takes on added importance. However, when revenue is tied to the consumer's ability to assemble her own product, the capacity for value-added production is limitless since there can be any number of goods, services, or experiences that can be created to that end. In concrete terms, the funeral industry manufactures the raw material and tools for a product. More and more, though, it is the consumer who assumes the responsibility to assemble and package those components into the end product.

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[10] This is a simplification—the number of funeral firms varies of course over time.
[11] Nonsatiety assumes that the more a consumer gets of something, the better she is.

In the 90s, the funeral industry began to loosen its dependency on rival resources and turn to those that are non-rivalrous—cultural goods. These cultural products are not grounded in corporeality but rather a hyperreality in which "The sign aims to be the thing, to abolish the distinction of the reference, the mechanism of replacement" (Eco 1986:7). The dead body once served as the referent in the production of funeral goods and services. Increasingly, however, funeral goods and services are mediated through the symbolic representations of consumers. It is not the embalming and therapeutic expertise that the consumer is purchasing. Instead, consumers are purchasing the opportunity to symbolically represent, to themselves and others, the lives and social relations of the dead. In consuming funeral goods and services, one is participating in a discursive construction and, in the process, manufacturing the end product.

Many examples of this are forthcoming but one should suffice here to demonstrate my point. Software programs that allow funeral directors to create memorial DVDs are near ubiquitous in funeral firms around the country. Almost all of these software programs necessitate some input from the consumer. She must select a background visual theme, then choose pre-recorded musical selections or bring in her own. She must also provide photographs (usually depicting significant events in the life of the deceased) to be scanned into the program and burned onto the disc along with the other visual elements and soundtracks. The DVD is independent of the corporeal dead body (i.e., the issue between burial versus cremation is moot). Instead it relies on the ability of the consumer to co-produce a visual tribute to the deceased, a product that can be (and typically is) purchased in multiple copies and even formats.

This transition to a service industry that is highly responsive to the consumer represents a successful re-framing that extends beyond mere rhetoric. The fact that the funeral industry, with its past of strident conservatism, has been able to transform its slice of the marketplace and provide an array of goods and services that appease the vast majority of its consumers even as these consumers are facing the most challenging times of their lives, is remarkable.

One perspective on the significance of this re-framing may come from scholarship in social movements. A "frame," or the assignation of meaning designed "to mobilize potential adherents and constituents" (Snow and Benford 1988:198) must be broad enough in scope to allow for variability in the users' understandings or interpretations but at the same time narrow enough to be worthwhile and mobilizing. The funeral industry has had to frame its goods as necessary enough to mobilize consumers and realize revenue streams. Simultaneously, it has had to address the needs of a progressively more ethnically, religiously, and ideologically diverse marketplace. To overstate the case as a point of illustration, the funeral industry has had to present its goods as both universal in need but individual in application.

To accomplish the goals of re-framing, the funeral industry made customization of nearly all of its products and services available to its customers. By no means exclusive to the funeral industry, other successful examples of this trend include Build-a-Bear Workshop, in which the base product, the teddy bear, is readily identifiable to consumers, and yet, via various appliqués and accoutrements, the possible (trivial) permutations of the end product are nearly endless. So too with Toyota's "Build your Scion" program wherein the car buyer is encouraged to "after-market" her vehicle

through an expanded (in comparison with Toyota) variety of options. Dell provides a similar service for its computer customers and you can, of course, "Have it your way" at Burger King. In all of these instances, it is easy to conclude that consumer choice is equated with subjective agency, but of course the citizen-consumer's volition only extends as far as the checkout. This is because all of the end products of these companies are easily recognizable commodities, only slightly modified.

The funeral industry began promoting its own personalization stance in the 1990s, and this trend continues to the present. The degree to which the end product is recognizable as a funeral good can be, when compared to the above examples, quite broad, as I will later demonstrate. Nonetheless, even during this recent epistemic shift, the funeral industry remains beleaguered by the nature of its product—the unpleasant associations the public holds regarding care of the dead and the ongoing necessity for the expansion of capital.

One way to overcome the aforementioned obstacles and contradictions is to conceal the very fact that they exist. What I argue throughout this dissertation is that the utilization of amusement has become the primary means of concealing contradictions. Amusement succeeds insofar as it: distracts the consumer by shifting attention away from the profit motivation of the funeral firm, and diverts attention from the stultifying effects of death. Specifically, these things are accomplished by performing any or all of the following functions:

1. Engage the consumer in creating her own end product
2. Provide a spectacle that (over)stimulates the senses
3. Utilize humor, irony, and pastiche to bracket the trauma of death

The three elements of amusement I have identified are by no means exhaustive. In the funeral industry, they are the most prominent, however. Whether piecemeal or in their entirety, these three elements distract and divert in a kind of institutionalized prestidigitation.

However, in order to accomplish this, the funeral industry has had to re-figure itself, and not only transform the kinds of goods and services in its charge but make over its business models, the labor that is utilized, and the purposive nature of the industry as a whole. In short, the funeral industry has positioned itself as a culture industry (with similarities found in service industries). This is a shift from its retail, ritual, and public health foundations.

Culture Industry

Prior to Adorno and Horkheimer's seminal essay from 1944, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception," creative products such as music and film were chiefly thought to be the outcome of the valorized subject working to realize her vision. Adorno and Horkheimer turned this notion on its head by demythologizing artistic products and likening them to any other mass-produced commodity typical of the Fordist era. The term, "culture industry," then, came to refer to a commodity form with clear connotations of Taylorized "trained gorillas" responsible for the manufacture of dumbed-down products that were then "mindlessly" consumed (Steinert 2003). As Negus (1997) writes:

> [Adorno and Horkheimer] linked the idea of the 'culture industry' to a model of 'mass culture' in which cultural production had become a routine, standardized

repetitive operation that produced undemanding cultural commodities which in turn resulted in a type of consumption that was also standardized, distracted and passive. (p. 70)

Adorno's and Horkheimer's use of "culture industry" served to demonstrate the linkages between the arts and commerce—two social spheres many considered autonomous and independent from one another. They demonstrated that at least to some extent the dominant mode of production was an independent variable in our cultural consumption via rationalized "sausage factories" (Negus, Ibid.). Products that were thought to be unique or at least personal or personalized were, in fact, designed to be perceived in exactly that manner, while ironically being produced on mass scale. Stuart Ewen in a 1976 work referred to this phenomenon as "mass pseudo-demassification" (in Farrell 1980). On a mass scale, we are being sold individuality.

Perhaps equally important is a secondary consequence of demythologizing the creative process: by revealing the social facticity inherent in the production of cultural goods through processual and collective means, sociological research which highlights the structures responsible for making these goods is made possible. Ettema and Whitney (1982) write: "The symbols of contemporary culture are more than anything else the products of complex organizations. To understand these symbols, it is necessary to understand among other things the organizations producing them" (p. 7). Ettema and Whitney thus conclude that understanding the sources, the means, and the processes, engenders at least some understanding of the products themselves.

Furthermore, Crang (1997) notes, culture and social structures are intertwined: "[P]olitical and social/structural embeddedness are bound up with cultural practices of identity formation and meaningful signification" (p. 12). Cultural goods are manufactured

according to hegemonic economic paradigms that individuals generally perpetuate. The intersection between culture and commerce finds some element of expression through cultural products. Therefore, the question emerges: What is the relationship between social structures (e.g., the prevailing political economy, ideological themes, and trends from both production and consumption aspects) and the creation of cultural goods? More specifically, as Brain (1989) inquires: How do producers "transmit and translate the effects of more general social conditions into specialized productions, at the same time locating them within the social structure and its supporting culture" (p. 34)?

The implications for an understanding and study of a culture industry are manifold. The culture industry is porous, with openings at various points from a variety of sources along the development, creation and distribution of a cultural good. Quite broadly, the use of the term "culture industry" presupposes the "subsumption of diverse kinds of intellectual production under commodity principles" (Steinert 2003:10), for the throughput processes privilege revenue generation. Cultural industries produce socially constructed symbols that potentially reveal the social structures in which they are embedded.

Among those who have offered specific definitions of culture industries Gibson and Kong (2005) write: "All cultural industries are at some level about producing and selling meaning, but these meanings are not simply 'content' for the particular sectors concerned. They indelibly shape the very industries themselves, as well as reproduce social relations and norms" (p. 556). This definition supports my previous assertions while adding that culture industries are on some level recursive. That is, the culture

industries themselves shape and are shaped by the production processes in which they are involved.

Power and Scott (2004) weigh in with a definition of their own: "All [culture industries are] concerned with the creation of products whose value rests primarily on their symbolic content and the ways in which it stimulates the experiential reactions of consumers" (p. 3). Simply put, culture industries are aggregates of cultural firms, which Hirsch (1972) defines as "profit-seeking firms producing cultural products for national distribution" (p. 642). Likewise, these firms produce cultural products, or "'nonmaterial' goods directed at a public of consumers, for whom they generally serve an aesthetic or expressive, rather than a clearly utilitarian function" (Ibid.). Given this definition, we open "culture industry" beyond areas one might conventionally expect as culture industries (i.e., music, movies, and books). Thus, we find a wide variety of works that explore the ways other industries operate to produce culture and thereby serve as culture industries: restaurants (Fine 1996), science (Hagstrom 1976), marketing (Averill 1996; Ohmann 1996), jewelry (Pollard 2004), journalism (Shumway 1996; Gamson and Modigliani 1989), video games (Aoyama and Hiro 2004), and weddings (Adrian 2003; Boden 2003).

Hirsch (1972) proposes that cultural goods be designated as such because their primary function is "aesthetic" or "expressive" rather than "utilitarian." His dichotomy introduces an element of arbitration on the part of the researcher and he appears to realize this when he acknowledges that these tendencies are only "generally" served. Nonetheless the distinction is an important one, as it appears to inform much of the work on culture industries. As recent as 2004, Peterson and Anand highlight the "expressive

aspects of culture rather than values" (p. 312). Because theirs is more fluid, I personally favor Power and Scott's assertion who state: "It must be stressed at once that there can be no hard and fast line separating industries that specialize in purely cultural products from those whose outputs are purely utilitarian" (p. 4). Especially given the rise of the so-called "democratization of design" in recent years, combined with the accessibility of a wider variety of goods, consumers can purchase strictly "utilitarian" goods based on symbolic, aesthetic, or expressive content. Hebdige's (1988) study on the consumption and use of scooter design demonstrates the ease with which both marketing and production technologies can manufacture goods of utility that simultaneously allow buyers to articulate anything from personal identities to political leanings. As Mukerji (1994) says in her study of material culture, "Importantly and surprisingly, the distinction between the physical and symbolic in the socially constructed environment often breaks down" (p. 145).

Since all industries manufacture and sell goods, and all goods are to some extent cultural goods, a case could be made that "culture industry" is more an imprecise ideal type rather than a categorical designation. A given industry can be either more or less a culture industry depending on the degree to which the goods it produces highlight the expressive or symbolic aspects for the consumers. Conversely, the utility of the goods an industry produces can also vary in degree. One could ask whether it is the utility of a particular product that is the primary goal for consumers? Is it secondary? This suggests that the distinction between a culture industry and another sort of industry is *quantitative* rather than *qualitative*.

The caveat in much of the aforementioned literature on the culture industry is the use of the binary opposition that aims to distinguish form from function. Dichotomization, even if it purportedly applies only to production processes, potentially mis-represents the use, understanding, interpretation, and inclusion of goods into our everyday lives. As Giddens writes, "[C]ultural objects... incorporate 'extended' forms of signification," but, he goes on to write, "All artifacts, not just cultural objects, involve a process of interpretation" (pp. 215-6). Items purchased primarily for their utility communicate meanings both latent and intended. We have long accepted the association between status and price points but marketing technology has made possible an ever-increasing variety of ways to append signifiers to even the most banal items that are manufactured. Zukin (2004), for one, discusses the myriad values and lifestyles that can mark one's identity or desired reference group through our purchases[12]. Manufacturers are aware of these decisions and behaviors around consumption.

Rather than concoct my own definition of "culture industry," I will offer a modified characterization of others' work on the subject, in the process revealing my own affinity for ideal typical, albeit equivocal, definitions. To borrow from a semi-decontextualized Peterson (1976) I will limit my definition of "culture industry" to *an industry that focuses its efforts where "symbol-system production is most self-consciously the center of activity"* (p. 10, emphasis mine). This confers the label "culture industry" to an arguably broad array of forms of commerce while bracketing the issue of form and function, or utility versus expressiveness, as these are, in the end, arbitrary conventions. "Culture industry" thus becomes a manageable heuristic; one that describes industries

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[12] Neil Postman ([1985] 2005) offers a poignant example when he writes, "Indeed, we may go this far: The television commercial is not at all about the character of products to be consumed. It is about the characterof the consumers of the products" (p. 128).

whose primary focus is on symbol-production but simultaneously manufactures and provides goods and services that offer some degree of utilitarian benefit to the consumer. The emphasis, then, is not only on the kinds of goods an industry produces but also the ways those goods are used *and* valued, appreciated, or interpreted.

The Funeral Industry as Culture Industry

Thinking about the funeral industry as a culture industry provides a different perspective than one might otherwise consider. It allows one to focus on the production of meaning and symbols in addition to the values of those whose charge it is to produce those meanings and symbols. Thus, the following suppositions were crucial in my consideration of the funeral industry:

1. Global entities and forces that can include anything from technological developments to regulatory ideologies, credit and lending policies, and popular representations of death and dying, all shape the funeral industry and impact the ways it conducts business.
2. The funeral industry, in turn, makes available particular meanings that influence the ways we celebrate death, given the dominant role the industry plays with respect to the ritualized disposal of our dead.
3. The funeral industry serves as a mediating social field between cultural values, beliefs, and performances, and global and local economic and ideological structures.
4. The funeral industry creates, legitimates, and privileges particular meanings, beliefs, behaviors, and values over others through its internal operations and its externalized goods; and the ways it accomplishes these things can be traced to variables that influence and alter other culture industries.

In producing goods that contribute to the larger culture (not merely funerary rites but memorial codes, representations of death, and so on) it quotes, appropriates, hides, and exaggerates elements from other industries, social institutions, and subcultures. It is embedded in other spheres but is itself an entity—one that I have designated the "funeral

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industry": *an aggregate of for-profit firms involved in the ritual disposal of dead bodies*.

This aggregate, of course, is composed of individuals who are embedded in multiple social arenas, involved with overlapping institutions, and who often synthesize discourses and logics. Thinking about the aggregation in this manner is particularly valuable to culture industries literature for its ability to avoid what Mukerji and Schudson (1991) argue is the tendency to "…examine parole, not langue; performance, not competence; or speech, not language, to borrow distinctions from linguistics" (p. 33). In other words, symbolic goods are produced through collaborative, additive processes that often occur in unintended, accidental, and nonlinear ways—not the least important of which takes place at the point of purchase when industry participants are interfacing one-on-one with their customers.

The funeral industry is one in which cultural products, symbols, expressions, ideas, and values are generated, circulated, and transacted on the free market. While one could argue that any and all products that are involved in a fiduciary exchange system carry symbolic, aesthetic, non-rational, and/or significatory powers beyond their mere use value, I would argue that funeral services deal primarily in the realm of those former properties rather than on their pragmatic utility. Embalming, for instance, is required in few instances. In most states, one can legally bury one's dead oneself. And there is nothing intrinsically beneficial to cremation over burial or vice versa. Thus, while the disposal of dead bodies is necessary, the utilization of the products and services provided by the funeral industry is not. I will say more on this momentarily. For the present purposes, though, I want to highlight that the emphasis in the industry is on producing symbolic rather than practical goods.

Funeral goods make a significant contribution to the things, places, and spaces involved in shaping our relationship with the dead, the dying, our memories, and our mortality. Hallam and Hockey (2001) write: "Material culture mediates our relationships with death and the dead; objects, images and practices, as well as places and spaces, call to mind or are made to remind us of the deaths of others and of our own mortality" (p. 2). The funeral industry is a revenue-bearing entity, and therefore its primary function is to return a profit to its respective owners. However, I am arguing that, after profit, its most important purpose involves the "encoding or the making of meaning… [that has] an ideological role in naturalizing and normalizing the dominant meaning systems and institutions" (Seidman 1997:44). To be sure, the funeral industry disposes of dead bodies but it also entertains, comforts, enlightens, shames, inspires, frustrates, and moves us. In so doing, it regulates and inscribes us. It also contributes to how we think about death, memory, and life, and shapes how we care for, remember, and consider and re-consider loved ones who are both alive and deceased.

CHAPTER III

CONTRADICTIONS, CRISES, AND CONTRAINDICATIONS

Introduction

"Capitalism can reproduce itself only by an incessant accumulation which develops as a mass production and consumption of commodities, a phenomenon generalized to embrace the sum total of activities of social life" (Aglietta, [1976] 1979: 81).

One could be forgiven for believing that mortality and economic expansion abide in a kind of metaphysical paradox, for death and its properties appear on the surface, anyway, to be antithetical to the work of *doing* capitalism. Capitalism evokes associations with movement, accretion, and abundance, while images of death convey images of withering decay and gradual disappearance. The co-existence of the two is not impossible, but amicable relations from the perspective of human agents who need to attend to both would appear to be challenging. How does one honor the demands for expediency, ambition, and the unceasing intensification of revenues *and* simultaneously honor the demands of utterly defeated bereaved persons, with forbearance and understanding? In the popular book *Freakonomics*, the authors state that tensions arise when economic, social, and moral incentives (i.e., demands and norms) conflict (Levitt and Dubner [2005] 2006:17), a fairly common product of capitalism I would add. The funeral industry has incentives on all three fronts. It is forced to simultaneously care for:

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the dead (moral); the bereaved (social); and the bottom-line (economic). Integrating and managing all three are, at best, challenging.

The fact that an industry has apparently managed to satisfy all three incentives for a century-and-a-half should not undermine the import of what appears to be merely a philosophical quandary because *death and capitalism create their own sets of socially constructed norms and values with which individuals are expected to comply*. Society has established and defined what counts as appropriate responses to death and capitalism, both with regard to behaviors as well as emotions. Further, the logic of capitalism, even as it exists on a macro-scale level, affects how the work of capitalism (and the business of attending to the dead and bereaved) is conducted on a micro-level.

In this chapter, I explore what contradictions emerge out of the intersection between capital and funerary ritual. Because agentic humans are involved, any contradictions that arise must be somehow managed—be it through resolution, bracketing, or concealment. Contradictions can also be ignored but inaction carries its own penalties. People can always choose other options or, in the rare case where there are no other options, people may choose to avoid participation. Attending to contradictions contributes to the formation of ideologies that work to normalize participation in the market and legitimize the accumulation of capital.

I begin this chapter by discussing what I mean by "contradictions." In short, the funeral industry's participation in the commercial market necessitates that it continuously expand through growth, reinvestment, and the realization of profits. Contradictions emerge because there are built-in obstacles to this process. Giddens ([1981] 1995) writes, "Contradictions are structural fault-lines that tend to produce clusterings of conflicts" (p.

238). Later, I will elaborate on what these obstacles are, or in Giddens's terms, where these "fault-lines" reside and discuss the clusterings of conflicts that have been produced at these fault-lines. This is important because the kinds of conflicts that arise allow for particular sets of responses, or in other words, the ways contradictions are managed. In subsequent chapters I describe how actors, both individually and in aggregate, manage contradictions that are inextricably bound up in their activities through the work of negotiation.

Some of the obstacles to ceaseless expansion are material. These material obstacles are imposed by organic, or physical, barriers, for example the declining death rate that I described in Chapter 2. Other obstacles are cultural, that is, they are defined by value-systems within society. While both cultural and material obstacles exist as fault-lines, these two categories are neither self-contained nor easily demarcated. One type of obstacle affects the other and addressing one type of obstacle in turn affects how the other is perceived or is dealt with (e.g., efforts that attempt to compensate for the declining death rate can create problems with how the public views the industry). Regarding cultural limits to expansion I highlight two in this chapter. Both are interrelated and to some extent mutually constitutive. The first obstacle I address is death denial, or the cultural disinclination to openly talk (and presumably think) about death. There are a variety of ways of thinking about death denial so I provide an abbreviated review of how death denial is taken up in sociology. This leads to a discussion of the ways this cultural obstacle, present in the value systems of many Americans, becomes articulated in the cultural contradictions of the funerary apparatus.

Next, I turn to the second important limit to ongoing expansion: the association of death with pollution. If one adheres to the notion that death is somehow "unclean," then the denial of death (and, by extension, the dying and the dead) reasonably follows. Or, conversely, if one tends to live one's life in denial of one's mortality, ascribing symbolic pollution may be one way of rationalizing this denial. Pollution is an apt trope for describing the nature of death for human beings since pollution, unless it is properly contained, spreads. It is contagious in its contamination. Thus, persons who are involved with waiting on the needs of the dying as well as the bereaved, and persons whose "work objects" are the dead, are to some degree "dirty."

Because each of these obstacles manifest themselves in material consequences, the distinction between the two (or between material obstacles versus cultural ones) is less important than describing how they are dealt with and the consequences that follow. If the consuming public is avoidant both with regard to thinking about the deaths of themselves and others, and have an aversion toward (polluted) death workers, then it is reasonable to conclude that consumers will be less inclined to do any more than is necessary in their dealings with the funeral industry. The fact that more structural obstacles such as the declining death rate exacerbate this effect simply means that the funeral industry faces greater challenges to its expansion. The goal, obviously, is to attract consumers, and not repel them. But to do so, one must go against certain cultural values (avoiding death-related matters) as well as overcome the structural constraints imposed by a limited number of deaths.[13] The junction where fiscal strategy meets these obstacles create a clustering of conflicts.

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[13] One example of overcoming structural limits is reflected in the horrifying story (http://www.nytimes.com/2006/03/05/international/europe/05funerals.html) that describes funeral workers

In the second half of this chapter I argue that the obstacles I discussed in the first half of the chapter are manifested in two important and interrelated clusterings. The first has to do with the status of funeral workers and the industry overall. The denial and dirtiness of death affects the ways the public perceives those who are associated with death. The second clustering of conflicts has to do with the rationalization of the industry that is articulated through corporatization, or the adoption of a corporate model *even in firms that are not corporately owned*.

Corporatization is a form of rationalization and is a recurring theme throughout the dissertation. In this chapter I link corporatization to the more encompassing conceptual framework of McDonaldization, which is the focus of the final sections of the chapter. McDonaldization rationalizes workers, work processes, commodities, and consumers. As I demonstrate throughout this dissertation, rationalizing mechanisms are clusterings of conflicts that become embedded in the very identities of industry participants and are manifested in their negotiations. In short, this chapter outlines the different kinds of contradictions that are a part of performing funerary ritual as a commercial venture and it begins to address the clusterings of conflicts that emerge from these contradictions.

What Contradictions?

By "contradictions" I wish to evoke what Daniel Bell (1976) calls more distinctively "cultural contradictions" that have to do with oppositions between "norms

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(albeit not in the US) making payoffs to paramedics who delayed their response times to calls or otherwise deliberately produce deaths through the administration of drugs.

demanded in the economic realm, and the norms of self-realization that are now central in the culture" (p. 15). Cultural contradictions emerge out of the demands to, on the one hand, earn a profit, and on the other hand accomplish, at minimum, two things: a.) Not be seen as wanting to earn a profit, because in order to earn a profit, a person must have died and additional people are suffering as a result of that death; and b.) Not be viewed as instrumentalist because if a person can be calculative and rationalist in one part of the business transaction there is reason to believe she will be that way in all the other parts of the business transaction.

The business transaction between the funeral worker and the funeral consumer does not end and begin with a signature and money exchange. Instead the transaction includes everything from the initial inquiry to the delivery of services. Within the framework of that transaction, consolation is generally proffered. And as Goffman (1959) argued, actors generally agree to take one another on face value. That is, actors' performances are assumed to be authentic, and any suspicions otherwise are typically suspended until counterevidence is presented. Thus, the juxtaposition of instrumentality with consolation may be seen as contradictory.

In other words, there is a near-universal need to dispose of and honor the dead by attending to the ineffable pain of bereaved persons. Yet participants in the funeral industry are equally beholden to accountants and owners or stockholders to strengthen their firms' proceeds. Performing the business of *funerals*, which requires nothing other than managing an ongoing series of deaths, is reasonable (if only because it is inevitable). Performing the business of *capitalism*, which requires expansion into new markets, the occupation of new spaces, or the creation of new demands, is also reasonable. However,

many wince when the two are combined. Funeral care as a capitalist endeavor can feel ruthless, giving the appearance of the exploitation of someone's loss and subsequent grief. These dichotomous demands are not merely conflicts of interest but contradictory poles of social logic.

A number of sociologists have researched the role strain involved for funeral industry workers who must acknowledge the heartbreak of those who are bereaved while simultaneously meeting the demands of the bottom line (Howarth 1993, Hyland and Morse 1995, Pine 1975, Turner and Edgley 1976). To be desirous death especially in pursuit of profit is unconscionable. All the same, the business of caring for the dead, as with commerce in any sector, requires ever-new stimuli to fuel its own propagation or risk stagnation and decline. The funeral industry, with its propensity for cannibalizing its own constituents, places a kind of demand on society's ability to replenish its stores. Though existentially bound to venerate the gift of life, fiduciary burdens modify these contractual stipulations.

So, on one hand, economic productivity entails movement, abundance, and regeneration, while on the other hand death imposes stasis, paucity, and extinction. The business of doing business requires vigilance and foresight in addition to replenishment and regeneration. The business of deathcare, however, is final and typically entails little more than memorialization, or the production of memories. Non-being proves not merely an opportunity for, but a further condition of, the continued expansion of capital. This seems to support the claim of Gianni Vattimo (1998) who asserted that metaphysics has been reduced to an exchange value. Death is, under these circumstances, conducive to capitalism. Much as the technology of actuarial statistics monetarized life (and being),

features of the funeral industry suggest that non-existence, too, can be ascribed an exchange-value. In the funeral industry, this exchange-value often assumes the form of buying and selling memories of the dead. Internet memorials, scrapbooks, DVD tributes, bracelet charms, T-shirts, plaques, and eating and writing utensils are only a few of the available wares that metonymically represent the dead.

As economist Philip O'Hara (2004) writes, "Capitalism could not exist without the creative cultural process of continual innovation, competition, accumulation, and growth operating incessantly through time over many continents, nations, and regions" (p. 415). While death, or at least the kind of death that is personal, proximate, and oftentimes tragic and immensely painful, can result in, among other things, terror, bewilderment, and a state of paralysis. Where "advanced capitalism requires expansion, speculation, the creation of new needs" (Sontag, 2001:63), the experience of death threatens to incapacitate. So disorienting is it to lose someone close, that personal care can often go by the wayside; hence the tradition of neighbors and other loved ones bearing hearty foods, reminding the bereaved that they *need* to eat.

Alfred Killilea (1988), a political scientist, writes that capitalism's "contest to pursue unlimited wealth must deny death and any other notion of limits" (p. 76). Yet we know it is a social (if not wholly physical) fact that the two do indeed coexist and often look as if they do so quite amicably. There is no shortage of means for profiting from the death of human beings.[14] In the funeral industry the relationship between capital and

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[14] Some examples: the graphic depiction of grisly corpses in television and movies; true crime genre; news media outlets sensationalizing the deaths of celebrities or transforming ordinary citizens into celebrities because of their unusual death "trajectories"; "if it bleeds it leads" journalism. Outside mainstream media, there is a combination of industries that psychologize loss or offers counsel to the bereaved. Of course the military industrial complex has an ages-long history devising and disseminating tools for ending lives. The body and tissue market has also been the focus of recent media attention (albeit not without some altruistic,

death is, at the very least, contentious and contested. As I discussed in Chapter 2, the

funeral industry is responding to a crisis of capital, and this crisis has made conspicuous

certain contradictions having to do with flows of capital and the American funerary

tradition.

Death is, of course, uncomfortable, tragic, depressing, awkward, difficult,

unimaginable, not to mention generally undesirable, none of which would appear to make

the business of death favorable to expansion and growth. For the purpose of the present

discussion, I refer to the sort of death that is intimate in its immediacy, affecting, and

personal. My focus is on what might be considered the more quotidian death—the banal

but tragic deaths that all of us necessarily experience during our lives. They are small 'd'

deaths though they are quite likely the most painful kind. These are the deaths that

problematize profit. They shake one's foundations, overwhelm and confuse a person, and

can be depressive for very long periods of time.

These small 'd' deaths are relatively invisible as opposed to the deaths of notable

figures and celebrities that organizations like booksellers, television news outlets,

Hollywood screenwriters, advertisers, and so on, can exploit in their pursuit of profits.

The anomalies represented by these examples serve as catalysts for the generation of

considerable profits but they are, in the larger scheme of things, just that, anomalies. The

deaths of well-known figures (or the spectacular deaths of lesser known people) fall

under what Levi-Strauss (1985) classified as "mythic" or "heroic" figures. These

individuals transcend the general tendencies and rules that apply to most mortals and,

because of their transcendence, often pre-empt contradictions rather than create or

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non-profit-motivated exchanges exist). Additionally, some elements of the tourism industry highlight sights
of death or glorify historical deaths (e.g., Prohibition-era gangsters).

reproduce them (Miller 2001). And while the amount of money that is generated as a consequence of the famous deaths of a very few individuals (e.g., Princess Diana, Anna Nicole Smith, or even Terri Schiavo) is sizable, the number of unremarkable individuals dying every day in the US is even more so. Indeed, according to *Marketdata Enterprises*, the United States funeral industry generated $11.7 billion in 2003. According to the data from the US Census Bureau's 2006 "Service Annual Survey" that figure is now over $15 billion. Small 'd' deaths, in aggregate, make for very big business.

Like any other economic sector, the funeral industry is susceptible to macro-level ideological/monetary trends. The present moment of late capitalism, in which the funeral industry operates, may be defined by its infusion of a postmodern sensibility and synonymous with what Jameson refers to as "multinational or consumer capitalism" ([1991] 2005:35). Late capitalism creates contradictions particular to a historically specified point in the American mainstream (Mandel [1972] 1975), not to mention the effects on funerary rites and practices. This is not to suggest that these contradictions displace or supersede other contradictions unveiled throughout the long Marxian lineage regarding such matters (cf. Bell and Kristol 1971, Block 1999, O'Hara 2006, Smith 1981). You still need money to make money in the funeral business. Oppositional class interests continue to be important concerns. And over-accumulation looms as a possibility. However, I am especially interested in the cultural contradictions having to do with honoring the dead and their bereaved as pertaining to the demand for continued flow and expansion of capital.

According to Weber ([1904] 1958): "[C]apitalism is identical with the pursuit of profit, and forever renewed profit" (p. 17). And Schumpeter (1962), too, states:

"Capitalism is, then, by nature a form or method of economic change and not only never is but can never be stationary" (p. 82). In concrete terms, producers pay "out of pocket," if you will, for raw goods and labor in order to realize a profit. Producers are seeking profit for two purposes—to reinvest back into new raw goods and labor and to earn a little spending money. That is, according to Marx's articulation of M-C-M' (whereby money is transformed into a commodity that is transformed into even more money), producers require more capital at the end of this conversion process (from material and labor into the extracted surplus value from the commodity) than at the beginning. Profit must be higher than the initial investment. Expansion, then, refers to the various ways producers have of extracting greater and greater values of surplus from this process to the point that "expansion becomes in truth a coercive law" (Luxembourg [1913] 2003:12). Competition between firms for the coveted consumer dollar only accelerates the need for expansion. Paying less in wages for more work, moving into new markets, finding additional customers, charging customers more, finding cheaper raw materials, and so forth, are all means for expansion.

This ongoing process is unstable and, in Marx's original sense, "contradictory" since it leads to overproduction. Therefore different mechanisms have been constructed to ensure stability. For example, in the Fordist era, workers were paid wages that were high enough to allow them to purchase the products they were employed in creating (Aglietta [1976] 1979). Taken together, these mechanisms comprise what is called a "regime of accumulation," which David Harvey (1990) refers to as "the stabilization over a long period of the allocation of the net product between consumption and accumulation" (p. 121). According to regulation theory, this balance, with its intrinsic

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demands for expansion, allows the economic forces within our prevailing mode of production to perpetuate both their dominance and their invisibility. Laws of accumulation necessitate the ongoing expansion of capital but this means that over-production is an ever-present challenge (Aglietta Ibid.). The inability of the market to absorb surplus goods, capital, and labor results in too many surplus labor, or unemployed workers who can no longer afford to consume products and services (Giddens 1995).

Disposing of one's own producers and consumers could theoretically upset the balance implied by these regulatory mechanisms. Indeed there is some evidence that precisely this has happened within the funeral industry, albeit on a meso scale rather than a macro one. Confronted by secularization, growing numbers of individuals undertaking do-it-yourself (diy) funerals, and a significant decline in the death rate (combined with a fairly constant number of funeral homes), have contributed to an economic crisis within the industry. There are too many goods that consumers do not want and too many funeral workers to supply those goods. One nationally recognized marketer told me:

> There are way too many funeral homes in the country. Everybody involved the funeral industry would be a lot healthier if there were a lot fewer. It's very similar to what the automobile industry is going through. There's 500 Lexus dealers and 700 Mercedes dealers. But there's 3500 Chryslers [dealers] and 5500 Ford [dealers]. There's just so many dealerships that it weakens all of them. General Motors is trying to consolidate all their dealerships. The same thing has to happen in the funeral service.

And an economist writes: "For greatest efficiency in the death care economy, perhaps each metropolitan area should have only one or a few large funeral homes and one or a few large cemeteries" (Smith 1997: 270). There is simply not enough to demand to match the increasing numbers of products and services that the funeral industry is generating. So while Marxians suggest that this supply-demand problematic is the core contradiction in

capitalism, it is not my primary focus. However, this *structural* contradiction exacerbates the *cultural* contradiction that exists between sacred rites and the commodity form.

A number of scholars have made reasonable arguments suggesting that death and capitalism quite clearly co-exist but do so in an ongoing state of uneasy tension. This strained coexistence produces a variety of contradictions. One such argument is made by sociologist D. W. Moller (1990), who claims that we equate life with ownership: "In that life is defined as a possession, modern society has produced an explicit image of death robbing us of something we can own" (p. 57). Capitalism provides the discursive rationale for existence itself. Life is some-*thing* we own and some-*thing* that can be bought, traded, and sold. To the degree that we have properly nurtured this investment, foreclosure seems an awfully unjust end. Thus, if the equation holds that life equals possession, how are we to capitalize on death?

In our present mode of production, the fact that we exist becomes less an issue of metaphysics than a series of cost-benefits analyses. Zygmunt Bauman (1992) argues that life is perceived to be episodic. One episode has little if any consequences for the next. Thus, death is more easily compartmentalized and imagined as a "problem" we will eventually get to and deal with much as we would any of life's other problems. Death, when it is framed this way, becomes a problem to be solved or resolved. "Death is seen as a failure of medical science," writes John Stephenson (1985:210). McCue (1995) writes in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* that in the medical professions death is a consequence of disease rather than "a chronic and incurable condition" thus contributing to the perception that death itself has become a "starkly unnatural event"

(pp. 1040-1). There exists no diagnostic category for death as an inevitable characteristic of being human (and thus mortal).[15]

Indeed, this unsolvable "problem" presents an obstacle for rationalized systems unaccustomed to such anomalies. To reference Moller (1990) again, "Dying is intolerable to the technocratic consciousness since it blemishes the technical ideals of omnipotence and abundance, with scarcity and vulnerability" (p. 9). Alfred Killilea (1988) goes so far as to blame our death-avoidance as being congruent with our Lockean tradition in capitalism—which stresses insatiable desires at the expense of the recognition that life itself is finite. It is axiomatic to state that capitalism, in order to survive, requires constant expansion. How can capitalism continue to perpetuate itself within the funeral industry and necessarily grow in the face of terminal existents and mortality-avoidant consumers? The answer, in short, is that it must be situated, put in its place. Often, that place, though, is nowhere, or at least, nowhere in particular. (Just so long as one need not face it or think about it…)

Denial

As sociologist Michael Kearl (1989) writes, individuals in the funeral industry are "dedicated to the maintenance of [our] culture's death denials" (Kearl 1989:284). The industry, then, helps us preserve this fundamental, existential denial, something Ernest Becker ([1973] 1997) called both a "basic motivation" and "biological need" (p. xii) for

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[15] Even an embalming textbook echoes this perspective: "The dead represent defeat and despair" (Mayer 2000:4). And Baudrillard wrote, "It is not normal to be dead today … To be dead is an unthinkable anomaly… Death is a delinquency, a deviance" (in Ragon 1983: 106).

human beings.[16] Funeral work, the business of death, grapples with the very thing we, and they the workers, want most to deny, ignore, or overcome. The experience that the self will someday be completely emptied of content is overwhelming, terrifying even. Mortality can be debilitating if kept in awareness for long. Indeed social psychologists have conducted a number of studies referred to as "terror management." This research suggests that thoughts of mortality are both culturally constructed and so intimately threatening that when asked to consider their death, the degree of punishment meted out by judges increased significantly when compared to the control group (Rosenblatt et al. 1989). Similarly, Greenberg et al. (1990) found that subjects reported a significantly more intense affability for others perceived as to be like them than did those in control groups.

The (Durkheimian) point these studies make is that society provides buffers and brackets to thinking about death for individuals. Thus, when made to think about death, individuals are so threatened that they desire to re-connect with their in-groups and distance themselves from out-groups. The denial of death, then, must be managed interpersonally and if such a denial is not ongoing, there are evident consequences for individuals.

It should be acknowledged that there are a number of ways of thinking about "death denial" on a societal level. Some scholars, like the historian Philippe Aries (1981), have shown that the degree to which a society exists in a state of death denial is intertwined with many factors having to do with religious economies, death rates, and causes of death. Thus, denial is culturally and historically specific. Wilson (1995) offers a related study on the ways the prevalence of death in the early South led to an absence of

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[16] Julia Kristeva (1982) writes "[C]orpses show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live" (p. 3).

death denial in some forms of southern culture that maintain continuity of the past (e.g., country music lyrics). Moller (1990) writes that outright "denial" does not exist, instead: "Dying is not so much denied in the sense that society ignores and makes the process of dying invisible, but rather dying is feared because of what it means for defilement, stigmatization and casting of dying people into the role of second-class citizens" (p. 20). Seale (2001) has recognized that society goes through phases of death denial and that death denial in today's society is not as evident in large part due to the hospice and death with dignity movements. In an intellectually inventive move, Wernick (1995) stated that with all of the periphery institutions (AARP, financial trusts, grief therapy) that work with or around the funeral industry, the American way of death "equals the disguised negation of death denial," a sort of "stylized simulacra" (p. 284). Talcott Parsons (1963) argued that ours is not a death denying society but rather one that is "apathetic" to the matter (1973, with co-authors Fox and Lidz). Most sociologists, anyway, who have addressed the issue of death denial in society, suggest that it is in fact a prominent characteristic of contemporary American society (Garces-Foley and Holcomb 2006, Hyland and Morse 1995, Kammerman 1988, Littlewood 1993, Quigley 1996). Hayslip, Sewell, and Riddle (2003) write that today "the vast majority of Americans could now live much of their lives as if death did not exist" (p. 589). My views echo those of Bauman (1992) who claims that, not only do we occupy a death-denying society, but also we occupy a society that demands that we "live as if we were not going to die. By all standards… a remarkable achievement, a triumph of will over reason" (p. 17). In other words, we are socialized to sweep it under the carpet like so much dirt.

Death is dirty. And by that I mean that it is scary, tragic, immobilizing, and it is unfortunate and sad. Death disrupts one's life quite literally, but it also disrupts the lives of those still living. Funerals may never happen at a good time. Death has the tendency to scatter one's attention in different directions, and it forces the bereaved to shuffle their schedules, making everyone somehow fit it into their lives. It is never appropriately situated. Death is rightfully, "matter out of place." It is therefore, a source of symbolic pollution, according to the anthropologist Mary Douglas ([1966] 1996), and if it is not contained properly, this pollution may spread its disarray and disorder. Indeed it typically does and thus the bereaved may be thought of as dirty, so too with the dead body, and those whose task it is to process and dispose of it.

The dead body, Kristeva (1982) says, is a source of "fundamental pollution" (p. 109) and, in fact, it is the most abject entity in nature. Abject things exist outside the symbolic order of language and reason, and as such, are threats to one's discursively constructed reality (Chaplin 2005, Kristeva 1982). In order to contain the threat presented by abjection, the dead body must be processed, re-figured, and represented. For the funeral celebrant, order can be restored via the "dirty work" (Hughes [1971] 1984) accomplished by funeral directors. Disposal of dead bodies helps to bracket death and it ensures the ongoing protection of a highly vulnerable aspect of the human psyche (Becker [1973] 1997; Littlewood 1993). As Berger (1967) writes: "Death radically challenges all socially objectivated definitions of reality—of the world of others, and of self. Death radically puts in question the taken-for-granted, 'business-as-usual' attitude in

which one exists in everyday life" (p. 43). Berger is not merely making a philosophical claim since he of course believes that reality itself is a product of mutual interaction. It is therefore *socially* necessary to bracket death and to compartmentalize death-related matters.

Thus, the disposal of dead bodies combined with the continuous contact with bereaved persons can be classified as "dirty work" since we are all aware of this kind of labor but which we nonetheless *bracket* and even hide. As Hughes ([1971] 1984) writes: "[W]e have taken collective unwillingness to know unpleasant facts more or less for granted" (p. 91). With respect to deathcare, dirty work puts particular facts and tasks into abeyance for the purpose of preserving the overall ontological security of the collective conscious. We all recognize that the disposal of our dead occurs with seemingly astonishing ease and efficiency, but few of us voluntarily call into question the mechanisms that make this possible. It is, therefore, largely hidden from both the view of public as well as salient awareness.

The concealed nature of dirty work likely perpetuates its status as dirty and polluted. Americans attend increasingly fewer funerals which also exacerbates the tendency to view funeral work and funeral employees with some degree of circumspection. Individuals attend an average of less than one funeral every year, thus limiting exposure to the industry (Wolfelt 2001). Thus, though dated, Leroy Bowman's (1959) observation continues to resonate:

> Because of the avoidance of the sight or thought of death, and despite the knowledge that it occurs about us constantly, we as a people have not developed rational attitudes toward it nor logical means of dealing with it... Lack of attention breeds indifference, a very common attitude of men and women toward funerals. (p. 8)

In other words, out of sight, out of mind. Unfortunately, as Bowman points out, so long as death is treated as something "obscene" (Gorer 1976) and not openly discussed, the public's attitudes regarding matters related to death (such as funerals, the funeral industry, etc.) can be contentious when compared to those who are around such matters much of the time. One funeral director and funeral supply storeowner complained, "People don't even know their funeral director. It's just some stranger. They don't know who's doing the embalming and how long they've been doing it… Families just don't know what to expect… They don't know what they're supposed to do or what the funeral director or embalmer is capable of. Consumers don't want to educate themselves." Many funeral directors shared the perception that their social function is unseen and oftentimes, as a result, unappreciated.

John Stephenson (1985) adds to the discussion on the status of dirty work by identifying three related reasons for the public's wariness of funeral directors. The first reason has to do with the motivation for why someone would want to get into the business in to begin with. If it is not a familial profession, people tend to believe there is something peculiar about someone who would choose this career-path over others that require similar levels of training and provide similar levels of compensation. Secondly, Stephenson writes, the public resolves the first issue by concluding that funeral directors must be in his business, the business of death, to see profit, and profit and death seem incongruent. Finally, the third reason suggests that the public presumes that in order for funeral directors to reap the financial rewards they seek, they must somehow desire the deaths of others.

Each of Stephenson's three reasons for why a person may regard the average funeral worker with suspicion are related to a crucial cultural contradiction. Quite simply, the disposal of the dead is widely and readily acknowledged as necessary but also necessarily bracketed. There is therefore a social *need* for certain individuals to perform such work. On the other hand, this is work that is dirty, polluted, and because of its virtual invisibility, not considered a part of normative social processes. Given those things, who would want to take on such an occupation?

Professional status, specifically with regard to funeral workers, then, is a fault-line that gives way to more clusterings of conflicts. Those clusterings have to do with how funeral workers are perceived and the need to make sense of questions like: How does one resolve the fact that capital necessitates its expansion with the urgent need to mark the end of life in as genuine way as possible? How has capital come to constitute these transitions and thereby reshape how we think about rites of passage? In other words, I do not wish to presuppose an authentic pre-capitalist originary. As Bataille ([1967] 1998) pointed out long ago, rituals have always contained some form of exchange and expenditure. There are, however, contradictions that are historically specific and thus there are clusterings of conflicts that emerge. One such clustering is produced when the culturally sanctioned death denial meets the collective attribution of funeral workers as "polluted." This clustering has to do with the status of the funeral industry and its workers.

"Performing these tasks [of handling the dead] for monetary reward... amplifies popular belief in the immorality of the craft" (Howarth 1996:66).

The degree of death denial falls along a continuum, and I argue that the US is more death-denying than it is not. I also argue that this only adds to the "dirtiness" of dirty work and thus affects how the public views funeral workers as well as the funeral industry more broadly. Death work is considered too threatening to be entirely transparent to society and therefore remain within its awareness. Thus, it must be compartmentalized, or, in some case, extricated altogether from public consciousness and concealed. As Quigley (1996) writes: "The layperson knows the funeral director and pathologist has secret knowledge about the corpse and trusts him or her to keep that knowledge secret" (p. 305). The elements of postmortem deathcare that are by necessity revealed to the public are distilled and softened through peaceable rhetoric and cosmetized facades. However, this socially accepted bracketing may worsen the contaminated status of these deathcare workers since the majority of their labors are consigned to backstages rather than the scrutiny of the front.

This view of funeral workers is to some extent reflected in measurable findings. According to the Census Bureau, funeral directors received a **52** on the occupational prestige score in 1970. In 1989 the score went down to **49**, which is slightly higher than the score for accountant (**47**) but slightly lower than the score received by dental hygienists (**52**), neither of which one generally associates with community leaders,

hallowed caregivers, or moral entrepreneurs. Though these are not very low scores, my feeling is that most funeral directors would be disappointed.

Sociologist Baheej Khleif (1975, 1976) reported that customers of the funeral industry were by and large happy with the services they received and were pleased with the workers they encountered. And the Wirthlin Group (2005) found that "87% [of customers] wouldn't change anything about their personal [funeral home] experience" (p. 31).[17] Still, these studies done by Khleif and the Wirthlin Group measure concrete instances of interactions with funeral workers and experiences of recent funerals rather than general attitudes.

The cultural contradiction that emerges from the industry's need for capital expansion in light of the polluting but necessary nature of funeral care is clear. Spencer Cahill (1995), who recently passed away, was a sociologist who frequently engaged in ethnographic work in the industry. He gave voice to what he felt was the public's primary concern by summing it up in the simple query: "Are they [the funeral service workers] justifiably profiting from providing the public what it needs and demands, or are they creating that demand by fabricating a psychological need for the products and services from which they profit?" (p. 132). Thus one might conclude that negative depictions are related to what I have continuously argued is an inherent property of the funeral industry—the concern over the putative equivalence between funerary rituals and the commodity form. I say "putative" because the *equivalence* between money (paid) and commodity (delivery of good) may be semantic. Instead, as evidenced by the observation from one funeral home manager, one side of the equation has significant priority: "Our

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[17] I recognize that the objectivity purported by marketing studies may be contentious. Wirthlin describes their methods in their published reports and their approaches demonstrate empirical rigor.

lowest paid preneed salesman made almost twice as much as our highest paid funeral

director… That shows you just how important they [the decision-makers in the company]

think of funeral direction." According to this funeral director, his claim reflects an

emphasis on sales or a primary focus on the generation of profits over the human contact

and guidance provided by the funeral director.

Clusterings of conflicts reveal themselves as suspicions around the profit-

motivation of funeral industry workers. And these are not new. In fact they are nearly as

old as the profession itself in the US. In 1919, Prudential Insurance funded, published,

and distributed a book warning consumers of exploitative sales tactics and other

underhanded deeds in the funeral industry (Gebhart 1928). Metropolitan Life Insurance

followed in 1928 with a thematically identical book. In it the author stated: "[T]he

average undertaker is trying to make a living out of one funeral a week. If any incentive

is needed for gouging and overselling, we have it in the limited volume of business of the

average undertaker" (Ibid., p. 235). Wilson and Levy's (1938) *Burial Reform and*

Funeral Costs was also instrumental in perpetuating the stereotype of the underhanded

undertaker. Evelyn Waugh's (1948) fictional *The Loved One* is a well-regarded satire of a

mortuary business said to be based on the author's experiences at Los Angeles's very

unique Forest Lawn.[18] Ruth Harmer's 1963 book, *The High Cost of Dying*, was

overshadowed by Jessica Mitford's *The American Way of Death*, published the same

year, but both served to elevate suspicions of the funeral industry.[19] All of these popular

works reflect the general concern we have about the meeting point of capital and death

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[18] Waugh's work, of course, was the basis for the film of the same name released in 1965.
[19] It is difficult to keep track of the works (not only books but in newspapers and television programs) that add to the trade's bad rap. There are two notable additional entries. In 1977, the Consumers Union (publishers of *Consumer Reports*) published *Funerals: Consumers' Last Rights*. And more recently, Darryl Roberts (1997) wrote *Profits of Death: An Insider Exposes the Deathcare Business*.

and can only have produced deleterious effects on the industry. Participants in the funeral industry are very conscious of their potential status as suspect. A prominent funeral directing textbook says the industry has been in a decades-long state of "wringing of hands and gnashing of teeth" as a result of the public's collective "angst" regarding the funeral trade (Klicker 1999:221).

These aforementioned works are not merely consumer advocacy pills. They all attest to the opacity of the dirty work involved in the industry and articulate a generalized sense of uneasiness around treating funerary ritual as a commodity form. This is not to say there are not in fact greedy, duplicitous funeral workers. Consider the 2002 case involving Tri-State Mortuary. In this instance the public was made aware of the funeral firm in Noble, Georgia, that was paid to cremate bodies but instead took the money and disposed of 339 bodies in the woods. This case was quite scandalous. It also prompted the governor of Georgia to create legislation increasing the state regulatory powers of crematories (which then prompted similar legislation in other states). Furthermore, the fact that some of the urns of customers serviced by Tri-State were not human ashes but powdered cement supports the concealed nature of the dirty work involved in the funeral industry.

The widespread media coverage suggests more than a case of the consumer not getting what she paid for but that the treatment of dead bodies is sacred and that those who are involved in this kind of work must be held to a standard that befits the sacred status of such work. Reynolds and Kalish (1974) write, "[W]e joke about the high incomes of plumbers, politicians, and entertainers, but we become livid when discussing a mortician" (p. 224). It is not socially acceptable to pay high salaries to funeral workers.

Neither is it socially acceptable to pay high costs for funerals. Yet, and funeral workers

love to point this out, it is perfectly socially acceptable to spend a lot on weddings (at

least in some circles).

What I am suggesting here is that sacred rituals involving death act as a kind of

multiplier to allegations of misdeeds. Thus, if one were somehow able to extract the

funerary elements from the exchange relationships established by the commodity form

we would be left with matters of overcharging, failure to fulfill contractual obligations,

violation of public health codes, and the like—each of which represents an instance of

deviance. However, I suggest that the inclusion of the funerary component exacerbates

the degree of social reprehensibility. This is rooted in the very basic notion in political

economy that rationalization is a form of dehumanization. Thus, leveling funerary rites to

the commodity form is socially problematic because it rationalizes sacred rites, ones that

explicitly address human *being* (through pain and the recognition of mortality). Equating

the two is a cultural contradiction that must be managed accordingly and this is especially

true during an era dominated by the rationalizing mechanisms of corporatization.

Corporatization

Much of the negative attention the funeral industry has received has focused on

depicting the corporate chains as soulless golems. Since little in life is more personal than

death, some may view the standardization of funerary rites that accompanies

corporatization as effrontery. These corporations are represented as Wal-Marts without

the eponymous "Wal-Mart effect" (which occurs when economies of scale can pass on

the savings that result from the enormity of their ability to buy in bulk, thereby

eliminating what was previously the domain of "middlemen" and distributors). Indeed,

Lisa Carlson, formerly of the Funeral Consumers Alliance, states that chain funeral

business charge anywhere between 20% and 90% more than those that are independently

run. At least one of my informants disputes the feasibility of economies of scale in the

funeral industry:

> Let's be real. [The corporations] may be able to save 10 percentage points on
> caskets maybe a coupla' hundred dollars on a case maybe even more on the high
> end—whoop-dee-doo! They've got Sarbanes Oxley.[20] They've got huge
> responsibilities in terms of accounting for everything that goes on… Put it this
> way—by the way they price their services they must be at a great disadvantage
> because they're a third higher. That's a huge consumer price disparity that must
> mean they really aren't winning on the economies of scale.

I have been unable to systematically collect enough price lists to make a generalization

about the veracity of this claim but four independent funeral directors/firm owners I

interviewed told me they eventually benefited from big corporations taking over their

competition since customers eventually discover for themselves the higher prices.

The economic cost, which is one clustering of conflict, can better be understood

as a proxy for other collective concerns—namely the ceaseless drive for profit. In 1998

Henry J. Lyons, then leader of the National Baptist Convention (NBC), was arrested for

racketeering and extortion. Many of these charges were related to his ties to the Loewen

Group, which was the second largest funeral service provider in North America at that

point. Loewen had a contract with NBC to maintain a sales presence in every

congregation within the denomination. Sales generated from the church, employees were

told, would earn extra commission. In 1995, a jury in Mississippi found Loewen liable

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[20] The Sarbanes-Oxley Act mandated that public companies apply greater transparency to their accounting
procedures. The law took effect in 2002 and was legislated in response to the scandals at WorldCom, Tyco,
Enron, etc.

for $500 million for its mistakes. (Later, the company settled for $175 million.) At the time of the judgment, the award represented the highest a jury had ever handed down in the state's history.

HBO's *Six Feet Under* represents a fictional account of a family-owned funeral business. Its critical acclaim and popular attention played an important role in the popular imaginary with regard to collective sentiments and fears around the American funeral industry.[21] (Anecdotally, almost everyone who was not a part of my research but who learned of it asked me whether I was familiar with the series.) Even though the series began airing in 2001, after the bulk of corporate acquisitions had already taken place, the theme of the "mom and pop" business struggling to compete against the corporate Goliath resonated with viewers through its run of five seasons.

In the first episode of the series we learn that the protagonists consist of a family struggling to contend with the death of the father. The father operated and owned his own funeral home. He bequeathed the firm to his surviving family members who then had to face the overwhelming tasks of simultaneously operating a funeral home and conducting the funeral for their father. In one of the last scenes in the first episode a representative from their primary competitor, Kroehner Service Corporation—an enormous corporate entity—approaches the grieving son immediately after he has buried his father, with a buyout offer. The Fischer son, justifiably stunned at the abrasiveness of this approach, rebuffs him by angrily saying, "Look, I'd really like to hit someone right now and it might as well be you." "I'll call ya'" the Kroehner rep says casually, before adding, "…Once you've had some time to recover from your loss." The corporate representative

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[21] Evelyn Waugh's *The Loved One* served similar functions. Even the film version, a bust at the box office, might be considered a "cult classic" today.

is represented as being callous to the experience of death. Profit for profit's sake acts as blinders. Death and grieving are incidental.

Though I have never come across any statements from Alan Ball, the creator of the TV series, suggesting as much, the fictional Kroehner Service Corporation seems to evoke the very real Service Corporation International (SCI). This would not be surprising since no other funeral corporation has received the media attention SCI has received. Best-selling consumer advocate, Jessica Mitford, was, if not the harshest critic of SCI, then at least one of the most well known. Most of her complaints focused on issues of pricing, a particularly prickly issue for the fiery consumer advocate. "Our investigator has ascertained that in a Denver mortuary fronting for SCI, a gray-cloth-covered coffin, the likes of which would create consternation if found befouling the premises of one of their high-end establishments, was being retailed to its customers for $1,995," goes one such complaint, "The standard wholesale cost of this box is $140. SCI's cost is even lower because of its volume discounts" (Mitford [1963] 1998:174). The banality of pricing mark-ups Mitford so often focused on in her work belies the importance of death rituals and the levels of egregiousness attributed to those who mishandle these rituals. Even prior to writing *The American Way of Death*, Mitford herself marveled at the level of public and media interest in her work. As she asked: "Are we not robbed ten times more by the pharmaceutical industry, the car manufacturers, the landlord?" (Ibid., p. xiii). Mitford apparently could not see beyond her highly pragmatic consumer advocacy in order to comprehend the hallowed meanings her readers attached to funerary rituals.

SCI has received an abundance of bad publicity, which may be viewed as a clustering of conflict. In what is known either as "formaldegate" or "funeral-gate"

(depending on the magazine or newspaper that reported on the matter) the world's largest

funeral company intersected with the soon-to-be "leader of free world." This scandal,

which grabbed headlines beginning in 1999, had to do with SCI's chairman, Robert

Waltrip's ties to then-Governor George W. Bush. Allegedly, Bush used his powers as

governor to impede an investigation by the Texas Funeral Service Commission, which

was looking into reports of SCI's reliance on unlicensed, and/or third-party, "outsourced"

embalmers. Since SCI's chairman was a fervent supporter and a significant financial

donor to Bush's campaigns, concerns emerged over potential impropriety.

Because of the degree of bad press, I curiously asked one of my informants, a

middle manager with SCI, whether or not this kind of attention affected his interaction

with customers. He responded:

> A lot of times we get "Oh, you're a part of that big conglomerate?" And I say,
> "Yes we've been that way since 1980, when Horowitz-Cartman became the first
> home that SCI bought in [town]."[22] But even though we've worked for them for
> umpteen years we've still tried to keep the local flavor. [Yet the customer still
> says:] "Well if I had known that I wouldn't have come here." But he didn't know
> that from the way we treated him.

Everyone I spoke with who was employed by SCI was well aware of the controversial

status of their company as a result of the various forms of negative publicity. In fact,

ethnographic entrée into SCI proved exceptionally difficult for me in the early stages of

my research. In these initial periods I had feared the distinct possibility that I would be

granted little access to the occupational lifeworlds of funeral workers. As one British

sociologist who conducts ethnographies of funeral homes states: "A keen awareness of

the disdainful stereotype of the undertaker, coupled with an understanding of the taboo

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[22] In spite of the enormous size of SCI, I have nonetheless altered the specific year to further ensure the anonymity of this interviewee. This is in addition to changing the name of the firm mentioned in this passage.

nature of the trade, must force the researcher to recognize the industry as highly sensitive and requiring a correspondingly delicate approach" (Howarth 1993:223). Indeed, I regularly employed such "delicate" approaches by making myself highly flexible with regard to schedules and highly accessible with regard to my research interests. Furthermore, I almost always made the point that I had no interest in "indicting" the industry and that I maintained a great deal of respect for the people who chose or were called to this line of work.

As I discuss in Appendix 1: Methods, I occasionally drew on snowball sampling in which an interviewee would (voluntarily and usually without any soliciting on my part) provide me with names of others I could contact. Sometimes, after providing me with names of others, these original respondents would ask me to tell these additional people that they had, in fact, "sent" me. I did not reveal the names of referrers to future interviewees unless I had gained their approval on at least another occasion or they had mentioned to my future interviewee that they themselves had spoken with me. As a whole, my interviewees were gracious in their acceptance of my intrusions and generous with their time and other resources.

Even utilizing additional contacts, however, provided entrée into the world of SCI during the early stages of my fieldwork. I telephoned and left messages for the manager of one firm nine times and e-mailed him three times.[23] At another firm, a director would speak to me only "off the record." I had numerous exchanges with another director who finally agreed to talk to me on the condition that I submit to him an interview schedule in

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[23] On the surface, calling someone nine times without receiving a reply seems far from "delicate." It appears heavy-handed. To be fair, however, this took place over a year's time and on two occasions I was not given the opportunity to leave a message. Additionally, two other contacts suggested I contact that particular manager, adding words to the effect "Tell _____ I sent you," necessitating additional contact attempts.

advance so that he could fax my questions to his corporate counsel to obtain their approval. I complied, but the approval never came. Subsequent interviews with SCI employees confirmed my suspicions that my difficulties most likely had to do with employees' fears of garnering additional negative publicity for the company. Workers perceive that the public already views the company with some trepidation, especially with regard to its expansion goals and its "corporate" moniker.

McDeath

Given the above accounts of SCI, it should come as little surprise to discover comparisons of SCI to McDonald's. Both are leaders in their respective industries, maintain a heavy interest in corporate brands, have expanded on a global scale, and both have created fairly routinized work regimens in order to manufacture a relatively standardized product. In fact, a Texas journalist quotes Robert Waltrip, SCI's founder and long-time CEO, as having "compared his company to McDonald's. 'Things about each business are the same,' [Waltrip] told stock analysts. Like McDonalds, SCI's death-care stores have fixed costs, offer one-stop shopping, buy in quantity… and consolidate local operations to achieve economies of scale" (Hudson 2007). And a writer for *Fortune* introduces one article by staying, "Service Corp. is to burial what McDonald's is to hamburgers" (Kelly 1999:38). In fact, comparisons of SCI to McDonald's occur regularly.

There are indeed many similarities between SCI and McDonald's but there are even more similarities to the broader process of McDonaldization. The McDonaldization

of the funeral industry represents a final clustering of conflicts that I address in the present chapter. Ritzer's (1993) work on McDonaldization and the rationalization of consumer society provides a poignant lens for viewing the corporatization of the funeral industry. Ritzer's concern was that the homogenization imposed by companies in an ever-expanding search for efficiency, predictability, and calculability, standardize both the company's employees as well as its customers. In the process, rationalization leads to irrational, dehumanized subjects. The basis of McDonaldization, as Ritzer points out, is borrowed from Weber's conceptualization of rationalization, a deterministic march towards the "polar night of icy darkness" (Weber 1994:368).

The notion of McDonaldized funerals widens the contradictions that inhere in the funeral trade rather than resolves them. Waltrip is also credited for creating (or more likely borrowing from other industries) the concept of "clustering" in which the corporation bought out multiple businesses within a metropolitan area. The services provided can then be centralized such that multiple homes employ one or two hearses with fewer limousines and fewer embalming chambers. This adds to the bottom line by limiting the number of employees, reducing the amount of capital spent on upkeep, and other routine expenses while increasing the overall control of the various branches. Waltrip has said, "'There's nothing different... about running three or 10 or 100 [funeral homes]'" (in Bagnell 1988:132).

Throughout much of SCI's history, expansion of the company has been a primary goal. Even as early as 1992 (prior to the most significant consolidation era) Robert Waltrip is quoted as saying:

> What we do has to do with morbidity and mortality reports, with births and deaths and shifts of population. We have all of that in our big computer, and I guess we

know as much about that type of movement in America as anybody… We've been very efficient in positioning ourselves in these areas where the number of deaths is going to increase over the next decade (in Smith 1997:292).

Waltrip's highly rationalized desire to buy in to markets with high death rates (by buying out facilities) may be seen as ignoring the emotional costs of death. But it also ignores the social costs since markets with much higher death rates likely have structurally-related causes (e.g., poverty).

SCI's goal towards rapid expansion has sometimes landed the company in hot water with the federal government. SCI has frequently been the target of many actions by the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) and has seen several court orders to divest itself of properties in multiple metropolitan areas when they began to make up too large a share of those respective markets. Indeed, corporate expansion into new markets creates its own clustering of conflicts both with the body politic and with consumers. Like most corporations, funeral corporations are based on a core-periphery structure wherein the core (i.e., corporate headquarters) makes decisions that affect the periphery (i.e., individual firms). As a result, one would expect there to be a degree of homogeneity with regard to both the internal operating processes and the subsequent manufactured product (I discuss this in more detail in Chapter 4). Most funeral corporations, presumably like most corporations in general, have regional "headquarters." Nevertheless, the cultural dynamics and social structures that would ordinarily affect the way local firms operate within their locales are often leveled by non-local, corporate structures and their norms and expectations. Corporatization, an element of McDonaldization more broadly, then, is a disembedding mechanism through which the individual rooted in space is uprooted and abstracted.

Also a facet of McDonaldization is the standardization of products and services. The standardization of contemporary funerals would not be such a problem were it not for the fact that traditional funerals of the past are so ingrained in the cultural imaginary. However, this is not merely a case of sentimentalizing tradition. It represents a whole cloth transformation of civic engagement. Consider the following image painted by one informant. His depiction of mainline, middle-class, Christian funerals seems radically different than funerals that today's consumers are accustomed to:

> Because you lived with your grandparents, you lived with your parents, and you lived with your siblings. So you were constantly involved with the ceremonies of life. People were dying. People were getting married. People were having babies. And not only at your house but at houses all over town and since you knew them well, everybody turned out for every birthday party. Everybody turned out for every wedding, and everybody turned out for every funeral. So that these funerals… were extremely personal, they were exactly what [the consumer] wanted… The event was much more religious-based, much more involved in the local community because everyone knew everybody they were involved in the church so that when the pastor came to speak it wasn't a paid honorarium. This wasn't a guy that made his living speaking. He knew grandma as well as anybody because grandma baked cakes for the church and maybe sang with the choir or cleaned up after or whatever. So he was the perfect person to get up and talk about her.

Setting aside the hegemonic ideals of an Edenic past, one would be hard pressed to reproduce any part of this narrative in many parts of the country. For one thing, as Robert Putnam (2000) deftly points out, Americans simply lack the civic involvement and thus the social capital needed to have such extensive local networks. Disembedding mechanisms may in fact be a necessary means of adaptation in an era, when as one nationally active funeral director put it:

> People are transient, they've moved several times, they don't have a body of friendships, relationships that they can call upon to say, "Well, gee, we ought to get together to remember this person… Sign here and you can come back in three days and pick up your little box [of cremated ashes]…

There appears to be something special about this cultural imaginary of funerals long since irrecoverable that makes a McDonaldized atmosphere all the more troubling for funeral directors, a topic I discuss in the next chapter.

In the preceding sections I have provided numerous examples of both the structural and cultural obstacles to what might otherwise be limitless expansion of capital. Furthermore, I have described some of the clusterings of conflict that are created by the contradictions intrinsic to the funeral industry. While I am certainly not arguing that all participants of the funeral industry are mere automatons who are subject to the machinations of capital, I am suggesting that reputations (and identities) are complex and themselves contradictory.

In the next chapter I address how these contradictions have been negotiated historically and how these negotiations are beginning to shift from the canopy of morality to the trope of amusement. There, I will focus on the perspective of labor to illustrate this transition, where the groundwork of "putting death in its place" begins.

Death rites are made consumable and to make them such requires a variety of actions that eliminate the fear that surrounds mortality in funeral rites; in some cases attempting to elide the fact of human ephemerality altogether. One of the ways in which capitalism overcomes this challenge of mortality is by bracketing its tragic nature for funeral celebrants and ritualists alike. As Fulton (1965) writes, "Modern America with its emphasis upon youth, health... has come to view death as an infringement upon the right to life and upon the pursuit of happiness. And how do we cope with death? As never before we choose to disguise it and pretend the meanwhile that it is not the basic condition of all life" (p. 100). This accomplishment begins with the workers who are in

some instances rationalized to the point of abstraction and other times encouraged to transgress the conventional boundaries between the sacred and profane; to transcend moroseness, to embrace fun, play, and even entertainment. Funerals, in this way, can be made less menacing and more banal, and can be re-framed such that marking the deaths of others can be consumed like so many other areas of our lives. Thus, it is to work I next turn my attention.

CHAPTER IV

DE-MORALIZING WORK

Introduction

"I would never make it in a corporate funeral home." (Lloyd, funeral director)

I would never make it as a positivist, strictly speaking. The many interviews I

conducted with funeral workers throughout my research investigations have resulted in

my having a great deal of respect and fondness for each of them. Funeral work is

unquestionably a challenging job for a wide variety of reasons. As will become clear

from the narratives in this chapter—funeral work is incredibly difficult. First and

foremost is the emotional and existential capital needed to constantly be reminded that

life is fleeting and ephemeral, and that death is pervasive and often unpredictable (Cahill

1999). When asked what the hardest part of their work is, the universal response I

received is taking care of dead children, which happens more often than most people

realize, some added. Then there are the common views that funeral workers are morbid,

creepy, and strange, or even malicious and exploitative. Opening up bodies or putting

them back together is taxing and sometimes horrifying. Kristeva (1982) writes that the

corpse is the "the most sickening of wastes... the utmost of abjection… It is death

infecting life" (p. 4). It is reasonable to believe then that working amidst such abjection

would be angst-filled and a little depressing. And living customers are rarely happy to see

them.

According to the US Department of Labor, the median salary of funeral directors was a little more than $49,000 in 2006—certainly sufficient for many Americans but by no means the highest compensated for the educational (not to mention emotional and existential) investment.[24] As one funeral director who married into the business two decades ago put it, "It is not a real high-paying industry for people... You're doing it to put food on the table but you're also doing it for greater rewards; personal rewards. [You get to] be paid to be warm and kind." Indeed, many members of the public would blanch at the thought of a highly paid funeral director—as Reynolds and Kalish (1974) write: "[W]e joke about the high incomes of plumbers, politicians, and entertainers, but we become livid when discussing a mortician" (p. 224).

One could easily focus on the taxing emotional burden of working with the dead and grieving all of the time and forget that the job entails a set of physical demands, too. Being around embalming chemicals that are carcinogenic is widely recognized by funeral workers to be an intrinsic hazard. Formaldehyde comprises the bulk of the chemicals used to embalm bodies. Its fumes are especially dangerous since people generally acclimatize over time to the odor. I got to know a mortuary college student whose educational track was delayed by a year because of a pregnancy. While the young woman could attend classes, when it came time for her to participate in clinical internships, she was told that, unless she "wanted a two-headed baby," she should not return. Or, as another funeral director said: "I've come to one conclusion. You might as well get yourself a pre-need [funeral contract] 'cause that's what you're going to need if you're an embalmer. That's what you're going to die of." Furthermore, body pick-ups and removals

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[24] See URL: http://www.bls.gov/oco/ocos011.htm retrieved 12/22/2007.

can be punishing on workers' backs, especially when required to traverse stairways or narrow and angular corridors. Moving bodies is strenuous and exhausting.

In the previous chapter I elaborated on the cultural contradictions that are both intrinsic to the funeral industry and ones that have emerged as the industry has refigured itself over time. These contradictions, or "fault lines" engender "clusterings of conflicts" (Giddens [1981] 1995). One area in which this is concretely experienced is in the domain of labor. Workers are impacted in a variety of ways and, as I demonstrate, many of them struggle with the processes of negotiation and re-negotiation in their workaday worlds. As the industry moves away from a moral framework to one that is infused with the trope of amusement, some workers who have either been in the trade for some time or who have grown up in a "funeral" family (as many of them have) are particularly conflicted by the transformation. I spoke to others, however, who eagerly embrace the shifts that are taking place, and even among those who have a lengthy background in the trade, there are those who like the direction their industry is heading.

Irrespective of personal preferences, every worker I spoke with recognized the distinctiveness of this present moment in the industry's history and every worker is trying to make sense out of what might be illustrated as a fissure between their understanding of the past and their perception of the present. This present moment, or situation, is mediated by other situations, experiences, actors, and actants that may not even be present—but merely implicated (Clarke 2005). Thus, it is important to understand some of the more significant implicated situations for funeral workers, especially since they can, even if only on the face of things, appear to be in conflict with one another and necessitate active and ongoing negotiation. In this chapter, I highlight different spaces

and situations in which workers are confronted with different discourses: the classroom, the "corporatized" workspace, and the trade show.[25] Each of these sites or situations promote their own kind of logic, and sometimes these logics can be in conflict.

I begin by talking about the training and education that most funeral workers in the US currently receive.[26] Part and parcel of the training program is a *moral* understanding of their work as contributing to the greater good. Drawing on my experiences while enrolled in a mortuary services college I describe how students are socialized in the classroom according to paradigms that emphasize the necessity of their work for society as well as the necessity that workers understand the ethical dimensions of their work.

However, corporatization is changing the goals of traditional mortuary education, as some see them. With its stress on rationalized work models that call for functionally differentiated environments, specialized roles, bureaucratic administration, the need for a funeral directors who work autonomously and have broad skill-sets is less in demand. Some corporations even provide their own educational programs. SCI, for example, offers Dignity School for its funeral counselors. This reflects a sea change in the way funeral workers experience their work identities, a topic that I address in the second section of this chapter. Internally, the funeral industry has had to contend with an aging workforce and high rates of attrition among its ranks due to the unwillingness of children of owners to assume their parents' (typically their fathers') business. Thus, corporatization, which is increasingly apparent in society at large, has also enveloped the

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[25] As I earlier mentioned, the majority of funeral homes in the US are not corporately owned. By "coporatized" or "corporatization" I mean to refer to the model in which particular rationalized forms and processes are predominant. This model is explored both below in addition to Chapter 1.

[26] I say "most" because, as I show, this varies according to licensure requirements.

funeral trade and serves as its current dominant model. Many report that they have gone from highly respected leaders in their communities to (presumably) less esteemed, party planners or "used car salesmen." This has left many workers feeling disillusioned as they negotiate new roles and identities.

Perhaps in such a state, it is no surprise that the trade show becomes a cathartic means for temporarily undermining the status of "one-dimensional" men and women, to use Marcuse's term that describes the automaton-like absence of agentic reasoning and critique. The trade show represents a carnival, of sorts, in which funeral workers "let loose," and provides a space in which they often embrace festivity and even parody.

However, this delimited space and time is also where developers, hoping to get their goods into wider acceptance and distribution, find or gain traction amongst workers. One might characterize this class of developers as "capital" since they are essentially attempting to convince labor to purchase their wares. Furthermore, these "capitalists" are often backed by corporate and shareholder interests. Interestingly, many of the products and services that one finds at these trade shows contribute to the culture of amusement and use novel, entertaining, or otherwise amusing gimmicks to attract the attention of show attendees who are themselves often engaged in their own forms of amusement.

Things like humor and amusement have undoubtedly played a large role in funeral work throughout the history of this labor. For instance, Reynolds and Kalish (1974) found that humor was a necessary element of the workaday worlds of death care workers. Humor and fun have long been a part of the "dismal trade." But what is new is the market's commodification of such amusement and the degree to which this has come to colonize areas of work life.

Funeral work is of course multi-faceted, and negotiations among various actor and non-human actants reflect this fact. At any given time, a subject and her work are connected to past experiences and future expectations. Therefore, the themes of morality, rationalization, and amusement are apparent in the accounts workers provided for this chapter.

Getting Started

Funeral directors are embodied representatives of the funeral industry. And as such funeral directors are, to an extent, discursive products of the industry, inscribed subjects who are trained and regulated by dominant forces both in the industry and society at large. Here, I limit my discussion on "labor" to the individuals responsible for the actual delivery of funeral products to the consuming public (i.e., the point of purchase).

Funeral direction has historically been a familial profession but corporatization of the industry is changing that. Beginning in earnest in the late 1980s, a handful of large, publicly traded funeral providers began acquiring independent, typically family-owned, funeral firms. Generous stock options on the part of these corporations, combined with the dwindling interest of inheritors to take on the family business, led to enormous numbers of buy-outs. Compared to private firms, these companies had access to vast amounts of wealth and resources that allowed them to operate on economies of scale. In order to compete, independently-owned firms had to adopt many aspects of the corporate model. Thus began the hegemony of this operative mode that exists today.

Corporatization here refers to this qualitative mode rather than a quantitative number of firms belonging to corporate networks. This corporatized approach extends to the ways that labor, in particular, funeral directors, are recruited, trained, and mobilized.

According to the U.S. Department of Labor there are about 30,00 funeral directors working in the US.[27] Nearly all states require their funeral directors to be licensed. Approximately half of all states, however, have a dual licensure system. In those cases a legal distinction is made between a funeral director and an embalmer. A funeral director may sell goods to the public, oversee funerals, and generally operates in the front stage regions of the firm. The embalmer is responsible for the preservation and restoration of the body and works primarily in the back stage regions.

While state laws vary, most workers have traditionally seen some funeral-related, formal education. There are 56 American Board of Funeral Service Education-approved mortuary service programs in the US. Most are departments attached to community colleges or four-year universities. I applied and was accepted to a stand-alone mortuary services college beginning in the spring of 2007. "Woodward Mortuary College" offers an Associates of Arts degree with an emphasis on mortuary science. In order to earn an A.S., students are required to take courses in psychology, accounting, microbiology, restorative arts, funeral service, and embalming, among other things. There are about 200 students enrolled at any one time.

Woodward Mortuary College occupies a rather non-descript building on a busy thoroughfare.[28] The academic campus is confined to a single structure save for the building behind it, which houses dormitories (approximately ten fully furnished

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[27] See URL: http://www.bls.gov/oco/ocos011.htm retrieved 1/20/2008.
[28] When I tell colleagues where it is, nearly all of them are surprised since many pass by it so frequently on their way to nearby restaurants or nightclubs.

apartments). Inside the college there is a small library, a laboratory classroom, several administrative offices, a lecture classroom, and a "prep" (embalming) room. Inside, it resembles many other college campus buildings except it is a little smaller. With respect to audio-visual equipment and online connectivity, the college is as up-to-date as most campuses I have visited.

Accessibility to the building is impeded. The front entrance does not lead directly to the college but is staffed by a security guard primarily there as a service to the other funeral-related businesses that also occupy the building. To get to the college from the front entrance one must first pass by the security guard and then navigate a hallway past the other business and locate a stairwell that lacks any signage indicating the presence of the college. In the rear of the building one finds direct access to the college. In fact, there are two doors to the college. However, one is a solenoid buzzer activated by an access code and the other which is only unlocked for part of the day, is heavy with OSHA warning signs and other environmental hazard decals. All of which is to say that the limited accessibility can be intimidating to someone who is unfamiliar with the school.

I registered for Embalming 101. The class roll numbered 40 individuals and was comprised of students from a variety of ethnic/racial backgrounds. About half appeared to be in their late teens or early twenties while the remainder of the class was fairly evenly divided across their 30s, 40s, 50s, and even 60s. Slightly more than half were women.

Like any college course, the first day was devoted to covering the syllabus as well as the teacher's formal requirements and normative expectations. In going over these structural obligations, the teacher alluded to funeral culture both wittingly as when she

told us her views on academic honesty: "Anyone who would cheat on a test would cheat a little old lady out of her preneed"; and her attendance policy: absences would be excused only for death in one's immediate family.[29] Indeed, the instructor introduced the substantive material on Embalming (ostensibly a procedural class) with a lengthy discussion on the ethics of the practice. As it turned out, the majority of embalming lectures included some prescriptive component outlining appropriate ethical behaviors. The very first of these came when the students were read a quotation that is well known by many in the industry: "Show me the manner in which a nation cares for its dead, and I will measure with mathematical exactness the tender mercies of its people, their loyalty to high ideals, and their regard for the laws of the land." (British Prime Minister, William Gladstone (1809-1898)). After she read the quote aloud she used emphatic gesticulation, a sober tone, and a careful and deliberate enunciation to convey its importance: "You. Need. To know. This. Quote." With that, the instructor paused, scanned the entire classroom and then added, "You need to know who he is."

The second lecture in embalming class conveyed the message that the downfall of Rome, Greece, and Nazi Germany had primarily to do with their disrespect for the dead. While historians may argue otherwise (students and staff implied that they were aware of the contentious nature of this claim), the sincerity invoked in the statement was indisputable. In later interviews with the instructor I would learn that her foremost scholarly specialty had to do with business and marketing aspects of the funeral industry and that she was not the regularly assigned embalming instructor. She had assumed the duties as such only for the semester because of administrative staffing issues. Even

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[29] The term preneed is trade parlance for a funeral (usually purchased through insurance or placed in a trust) that is bought in advance (i.e., while the customer is still living).

though she was a skilled embalmer, and her primary interests lay elsewhere, this in no way limited her enthusiasm in the classroom or her admonishments to the effect that, "Embalming is one of the most important subjects you will take here."

As I discussed in Chapter 2, with regard to the formation, legitimation, and professionalization of the funeral industry and its workers, embalming is central. In spite of the fact that about one-third of all bodies in the U.S. are now cremated, many consumers still opt to have a body embalmed typically either because of an extended time span between death and cremation or because the families opted to have a viewing prior to the cremation (Cremation Association of North America 2007). Most funeral directors I interviewed that still performed embalming took great pride in the appearance of the body. Statements like the following from one long-time funeral director were common: "With us [embalming] is still important because if a family comes in and compliments us that [the deceased] looks great, you know you've done a great job..." Another funeral director likened embalming to a ministry and added, "We feel like we're giving [the deceased] back to their family." Many funeral directors impart qualities from living persons onto those who are dead. Care, then, is a reasonable outcome of framing the dead as living persons.

Thus, it ought to have been little surprise to learn of the frequent appeals to ethics in an embalming classroom. Embalming, then, was presented as a form of "care" work, which involves "attentiveness, responsibility, nurturance, compassion, [and] meeting others' needs" (Tronto 1993:3). Lloyd, who is a funeral director, articulated his own feelings well when he told me "How can you take someone who was a living breathing soul, a living breathing person that's been in the community and people cared about that

person, and then, all of a sudden, just because they ceased breathing, turn them into a piece of meat? I could never get to the point where I think that person doesn't matter anymore."

Embalming though is not merely considered as care work for the dead but care work for the living as well. As Komaromy (2000) writes: "[T]he body after death is much more than the representation of the living person. Occupying the space between life and death it is a powerful symbol of the particular beliefs which surround death" (p. 300). The work-object, in this case the dead body, becomes a proxy through which care gets expressed to others by fostering an attitude of moral accountability. Thus, the failure to practice attentiveness, responsibility, nurturance, compassion, and so forth, can be a source of cognitive and emotional dissonance.

This idea of the dead body as a proxy is evident in the following story a funeral director related to me:

> My cousin was hit by a train. The handrail of the train caught him right here [angles his hand across his forehead] and from here back was gone. His wife kept screaming, "I want to see him! I want to see him!" And I kept saying, "No you don't." She said, "Well he's not really dead, is he?" I said, "Yes, he's dead." "I have to see him." "Okay." So we went back there. This is my dad's nephew. My father said he wanted to go too. I said, "Sorry I'm not going to let you back there. I'm letting her back there because this is what she's demanding." Walk back and he's laying on the prep table in a body bag. I open the bag and pulled it back and there he was or what was left of him. And she screamed she cried she tried to faint and everything else. I sat her down. "Why did you let me do that?" I said, "It was because you were going to do what you were going to do. I didn't have a lot of choice." She has never ever overcome that experience.

This story illustrates how funeral directors view their role as caretakers of the dead and, by extension, caretakers for the bereaved.

On one occasion we had a guest lecturer in the embalming class who was a representative of a well-known chemical company in the field. Rather than the sales ploy

I had expected, he delivered an engaging talk on the ways embalming has had to evolve, especially recently.[30] During his presentation, he discussed one embalmer's shoddy work adding, "That embalmer should've been ashamed for not treating those remains properly." Divergence from the prescription for care becomes justification for the ascription of "deviance" and all the penalties therein. Instead, the guest lecturer counseled us to, "Be proud of what you do. Money can't make you as happy as when a family member hugs your neck and thanks you. You've done something for people. I don't care what anybody says. Yes, it is a business of course, but you've got to be willing to help people." Embalming is often perceived in this way—less a mechanical procedure than an expression of human care.

Many of the embalming lectures were moralistic and emphasized the relationship between the worker and her work-object. The concept of the work-object as an extension of the lifeless body became a symbol that cast a wide net so as to encompass a variety of potential interpretations and meanings. One very important interpretation of the body that was often conveyed in class was that it metonymically represented the living. "You handle the remains as if they were still alive," we students were told. On other occasions we were instructed to "Treat the body as if it's your own family member," and "Keep the body covered [in order to] maintain modesty."

I also found this "extended" view of the work-object beyond the classroom. Practitioners in the field sometimes manifested the idea that the dead body represented more than just a "mere" corpse. Lloyd, a funeral director I quoted above, became a regular interlocutor during my tenure as an embalming student. I had found the

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[30] For example, chemotherapies dehydrate some tissues in the body and thus require different chemical compounds than a non-chemo treated body.

embalming instructor's use of the term "modesty" to be unusual, since "modesty"

conventionally refers to an active subject who can "perform" modesty (or immodesty).

So I asked Lloyd if he had ever thought about modesty when he had embalmed bodies.

He nodded and said:

> First thing, of course, [that] we have to do is set their [the body's] features. You know cross their arms, close their eyes, and undress them. Well, I believe in modesty. So, when I undress someone and they're on the prep table, I treat that body like they were my mother, my daddy, my daughter, or whatever. And during the embalming process you can still take a towel and cover up the top part of the body and that is just decent…You can put their undergarments on underneath that sheet so they're never exposed to my view or anyone else's. If my best friend passed away and I was taking care of him I'd do the same thing because I don't want to see that part of my friend. That would embarrass me. That would harm my relationship with him.

Lloyd's reference to a "relationship," especially one that is vulnerable to diminution

implies that the relationship between the worker and her work-object is one that is in

some respect "alive," or, at the very least, open to new meanings. The dead body is quite

literally inscribed with the values of the embalmer.

In spite of the care some embalmers exhibit towards their work-object and, by

extension, express to the bereaved and their communities, the majority of funeral

directors I interviewed also perceived a decline in the significance of the appearance of

the dead body at funerals today. One funeral director claimed that corporatization, among

other trends, "has taken the focus off the remains." And another funeral director stated:

"Our customers are our clients and they are not concerned so much with the way the body

looks. That's just not a big focus."[31] Since so many funeral workers now feel this way,

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[31] One indicator of whether or not Americans do not care as much about the body may be the number of "direct cremations," in which a dead body is cremated without a visitation or service. Approximately one-third of the bodies in the US are currently cremated, a figure that continues to rise. According to the Cremation Association of North America (2007), of those cremations a little more than 60% were "direct."

and since the dead body is viewed as a work-object through which they are able to express care, the implication is that this is an attenuation of care work.

Corporatization Revisited

"Every man who enters funeral service as a career has an ambition to become his own boss" (Krieger 1951:3).

Rationalization is not an either/or process in which some thing (or good, or (work) process, or subject) is either rationalized or not rationalized. Instead, rationalization is a pre-given quality or characteristic (at least in present American society) and it is ever-present. Therefore, the degree to which something is rationalized can be analytically weighed and examined. Just as Taylorism, with its de-skilling, piece-rate production processes, further alienated workers from the products they were creating as well as their own labor, new commodity forms can potentially alienate workers from increasingly intimate aspects of the self.

Rationalization processes can colonize the moral dimension of work and preclude the ability of many in the funeral industry to provide the care they are asked to provide and oftentimes desire to provide. This is similar to, but not identical with, the kind of alienation Hochschild (1983) identified with respect to capitalism's colonization of the feeling or, affective self. Hochschild defined emotional labor as the kind of work that "requires one to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others" (p. 7). Funeral workers undoubtedly perform emotional labor as expressed in their care work but their work goes beyond that

characterization. As I stated in this chapter and in Chapter 2, many in the funeral industry understand their work to contribute to a moral economy, a term that is intended to "denote those bonds and obligations that are above and beyond—indeed, are prior and presumed by—the work contract itself" (Hopper 2001:476). Whether or not morality is a facet of, or distinct from, emotion is beside the point in the long run. The effects of rationalization bring about yet another area of alienation for the individual laborer. In this section I want to focus on a particular form of rationalization—that of corporatization.

My use of the term "corporatization" is meant to serve a heuristic function. In fact, the majority of funeral homes in the US have been, and continues to be, under independent, local ownership. Even so, many non-corporate funeral homes have had to adopt such rationalizing mechanisms. Corporatization is "characterized by processes, decisional criteria, expectations, organizational culture, and operating practices that are taken from, and have their origins in, the modern business corporation" where "corporate-style priorities, decisions, activities, and structures are very much in evidence" (Steck 2003:74). Steck's characterization of coporatization bears repeating here. It is the "belief that market mechanisms are appropriate," and the subsequent adoption of "culture and practices of corporate practices: missions statements and hierarchical patterns, benchmarking, productivity measures and emphasis on institutional goals to be achieved, mission statements and strategic planning, best practices and the like" as well as "a customer service orientation" (Ibid., p. 75).

While corporatization is the dominant model in the funeral industry and nearly all firms, in my experience, reflect some degree of corporatization, the degree to which a firm has integrated corporatization is clearly evident when comparing corporately owned

homes versus those that are independently owned. Firms that have been in business for many years, maintained familial ownership, and serve a rural market, a market that is more fixed than transient, and a market that is more conservative with respect to religious and cultural traditions, will tend to be the least corporatized. My point here is not to examine the multiple variables that contribute to the corporatization of a firm but to investigate the effects of corporatization itself on the workers, their craft, and their interactions with consumers. Thus, to explore the effects of corporatization and not its causes, it makes sense to highlight at this point the corporate model and the experiences of funeral workers employed by corporately owned firms.

In order to highlight the effects of corporatization, the process, I will discuss some of the comments from people who describe working at a corporately-owned firm since these represent the apex of coporatization processes. That is, some degree of corporatization is pervasive in the industry, but many respondents continue to make a distinction between a corporate firm and a family firm. My understanding of this distinction is that it is a nominal way of talking about types of firms: those that are highly corporatized and those that are not.

In fact, the majority of the funeral directors that I interviewed had at one time or another worked with a corporate firm. One of the primary disadvantages many funeral directors expressed in working in a corporate funeral home has to do with the diminished degrees of autonomy they experienced. Supervisors in a corporate hierarchy are often located in a completely different market and so many funeral directors complained that their superiors fail to understand the cultural dynamics that are unique to a given place. Decreased autonomy is also related to other factors. Most corporate funeral directors I

interviewed, and many who were not working for a corporation at the time of the interview but had in the past, complained that they were beholden to anonymous stockholders and felt pressured to find ways to bolster their revenues. Robert, a funeral supply storeowner and former funeral director, told me:

> [There is a] vast difference [between corporate and non-corporate firms]. At the corporate firm all they want is numbers. You gotta' keep your numbers up with quotas. They give you certain budgets to stay under. You had to maintain averages selling packages, selling merchandise. [They want] the most they can get out of the consumer. They don't care about return business. They just want the most they can get at the time. So that's not what I'd gotten into the funeral industry for.

Several funeral directors provided similar expressions of disillusionment. One told me: "I was tired of being the one forcing families to sign these contracts for eight-, nine-, ten-, eleven-thousand dollar funerals. The majority of it was profit to these funeral homes."

Thus, there would appear to be a lack of autonomy with respect to the ways workers chose to focus their efforts. This lack of autonomy carries over to other areas too. Most funeral directors I spoke to expressed a desire to assist customers who may not be able to afford the products and services at a firm. Sometimes this means offering at-cost products and no-cost services. (Many firms also provide heavily discounted funerals regardless of financial need to families who are burying a child.)

I spoke with one funeral director, Margaret, and asked her whether there were any disadvantages to working in a corporately owned funeral home. She replied:

> Well, there's a lot of things we would like to do. We'd like to help all the low-income people that come through the door. But we're blessed. We don't have that that often here. Now there are things we can't always do in the corporate structure. If it were the "Terry and Margaret Boyd Funeral Home" we might not do things the same way.

She went on to describe the story of a homeless man in the area who had passed away a year prior. After she described the funeral they had held for the man, I asked her whether she suffered any backlash from her company as a result. Margaret shook her head and said:

> I'm sure that on the corporate level they probably wouldn't like that but if I had a contract with you and I was discounting things because you had no money I would still go ahead and put the usual and customary charges on there. And on the discount line I would just put "charitable discount." That goes to whoever sees it. So we're not trying to cover it up. I've always tried to figure out a way but I'll suffer the consequences if I were to get in trouble.

Under the corporatization model, credit is playing a more prominent role. More and more firms run credit checks and operate with a financial institution so that customers can purchase (or rather pay back) their funeral services and products in installments.

Another way to attend to customers who may not be able to afford a firm's goods is to send them to a different funeral home. Corporately-owned firms can maintain different brands and each brand can serve a different niche or segment in the market, While I discuss the role of brands in greater depth in Chapter 5, one can see an important function of brands in the present discussion—the segmentation of the consumer market. SCI, for example, maintains several brands. Most SCI funeral homes carry the Dignity brand. In many markets SCI maintains at least one Advantage firm, which serves as their lower-cost alternative.

This strategy is not only valuable to companies who want to segment their consumer market, but it serves another purpose. Robert Waltrip of SCI is widely credited with developing the practice of "clustering." This is a practice in which several funeral homes in the same market can share resources and reduce certain fixed capital expenditures. One funeral home acts as a hub and can serve as a warehouse for goods like

caskets, automobiles (hearses, limousines, and removal vehicles), and other necessary equipment. It can also house staff that need not maintain a full-time presence at satellite funeral homes such as embalmers, cosmeticians, pre-need sales staff, and middle management. Torres (1988) stated: "Chain organizations became efficient and profitable by first purchasing a 'cluster' of funeral homes in close proximity and then adding an administrative central office…The clustering strategy enabled the firm to centralize staff and coordinate equipment usage… [which] significantly reduced costs and increased profit margins" (p. 387). The rationalization processes represented by clustering affects the ways workers understand and perform their work. It organizes funeral work according to a new division of labor that is not present when all of the tasks are completed in one facility. It distances workers from the final product and it distances them from other workers. It also may serve to de-skill workers who in the past were accustomed to a wide skill set.

Where companies have several firms in the same market, embalming duties get centralized at one location, saving money not just on staffing requirements but on space and supplies for meeting OSHA rules. One respondent who had worked in the embalming room of one such centralized facility said that there were often so many bodies there that he was literally bumping and backing into them. Not surprisingly then, Dean was not the only one to tell me that this creates an "assembly line" whereby a corporate embalmer will process 10-15 bodies a day and what is probably worse in Dean's mind, causes the "dumbing down of embalming." [32]

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[32] Dean teaches that it should take two hours to complete just one embalming. This time frame is for a body that is in relatively good shape. Bodies with edema, or bodies that have undergone chemotherapies, autopsied bodies, bodies that have had tissues extracted for donations, and so on, take significantly longer.

Dean is not alone in his belief that the deathcare industry ought to be about care and that this care starts with the preparation and presentation of the body. Many practicing funeral directors I interviewed told me they continue to take great pride in their work when it comes to embalming and restoration. For the embalmer, the dead body is a "work-object," "around which actors construct meanings and organize their work practices" (Casper 1998:31). The dead body is a medium through which embalmers articulate meanings intrinsic to their craft via techniques, professional norms, and histories. As a result, the dead body assumes different meanings and relations for the funeral director-embalmer than the consumer that are a consequence of their practices with the work-object. For embalmers this work-object is a proxy through which they are able to express their care.

Many embalmers, however, feel that they are being stripped of their ability to express care. Some share Robert's feelings, the storeowner and former funeral director, who stated:

> With embalmers today, they get them through school and if they go to a corporate funeral home they don't teach them anything because they just get their license, shoot fluids, and go… Funeral homes in general just don't put a lot of emphasis on the way the body looks anymore.

Clearly, according to Dean, Robert, and others, many in the deathcare industry are placing less importance on the practice of embalming. As a consequence, the centrality of care of the dead body is displaced.[33]

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[33] One might reasonably counter that this de-emphasis on the product of the processed dead body is a consequence of the rise in cremations, which currently stands around one-third of all dispositions. However, few bodies go the straight-to-cremation route. Most bodies are still embalmed for a funeral visitation and service. Approximately one-third of the dead bodies in the US are cremated and of those about two-thirds were "direct cremations" (i.e., had no service) (Cremation Association of North America 2007).

Lloyd, who is one of the only funeral directors in my study that never worked in a corporately-owned funeral home, said:

> In the corporate model you have embalmers who stay in the back. They don't work with families. It's different when it's a family funeral home. I'm the one who's in the back but I'm also up front. You've got to be. I guess when you meld the two—when you're taking care of that body and taking care of the family— you're thinking, "That's somebody's loved one." I have friends who work in corporate funeral homes. Would I want them to embalm me? No. I want someone to care about me.

When funeral directors spoke of their concerns about the elision of care work, most placed the blame on corporately-owned homes. As one funeral director told me: "When you come to a corporate funeral home, what you get is a lousy preparation job. And you get the removal that's farmed out to a third company. They're contracting that out with someone else." (The "removal" has to do with the pick up of the dead body from the location where the individual expired.)

My own experience has been that it is not merely *corporately*-owned firms that excise care work from embalming. Rather, many *independently*-owned firms have adopted similar corporatization measures, especially those that can cluster. Historically, for instance, many funeral homes were in fact *homes* in which funeral directors resided. Thus, these firms were staffed around the clock. It is becoming more and more difficult to find even independent firms where that is still the case. Ideally embalming, in order to see the best results, must be done as quickly as possible after someone has expired. Robert, a funeral director in his late 30's, stated: "Most embalmers these days are 'fluid pushers.' They're not quality, specialized people. The corporations don't do any embalming at night. After hours, if you die, you lay there until the next day until someone can get to you." Again, it is my experience that Robert is actually

underestimating the effects of corporatization since call centers are increasingly

contracting with independent firms for cases that arise after-hours. As Martin, an

executive, once told me when comparing the former model to one that is increasingly

corporatized: "A family doesn't say, 'Oh it's 6 o'clock its time to go.' Hours don't matter

when you're self-employed. I've heard crazy stories where a funeral director kicked a

family out at 9 o'clock. They told them to go home."

Robert continued with his indictment of this new corporate mode of operation and

its effects on embalming:

> [To do] the best embalming… you use the correct fluids for each individual
> person, their weight, their heights, the fat content, their matter of death, how long
> they're going to be out for public viewing. That calculation isn't done by
> corporations anymore. They just shoot fluids, throw on some make-up, throw 'em
> in a casket, cut their clothes down the backs, get their clothes on 'em and send
> 'em on their way.

One funeral director who had been practicing for 40 years says that the amount of

embalming fluids in a given body has become very standardized by what he termed

"numbers crunchers." This is contrary to the credo that embalming ought to be done on a

case-by-case basis.

Dean has been teaching for over 30 years. In my numerous conversations with

him not one has passed when he has failed to lament his perception that no one seems to

care as much as they once did about the appearance of the body. The embalming textbook

he teaches from states that, "[T]he most significant benefit of… embalming is achieved at

that moment when the finality of death of the death is fully comprehended by the

bereaved person" (Mayer [1990] 2006:7). Sometimes Dean's speech moves from

innocuous commentary to lambaste. Once he told me:

> I spent 22 hours on a little girl's head that had been run over. Nowadays when [funeral directors] receive a body and look inside the body bag and think, "Ooh that's a mess, I'm not going to tell them we can have a funeral if that body's in bad shape…" We no longer try and convince the family that we can fix that so they can see it even though it's my duty as a caretaker in society to do that for them.

Dean talks a great deal about care for the family and tries to impress upon his students this ethic. He often uses phrases like "reverence for the dead" and introduces his restoration course through a lengthy discussion on the question: "How can I serve others?" But Dean also says it is increasingly difficult to convey this care in an age of corporatization which "has taken the focus off the remains."

Harold, another practitioner of some 40-odd years, made his thoughts very clear early on in our interview: "The whole credo of funeral service is *service* and we feel this business is a ministry. If it isn't then it's just a department store selling stuff." Harold's use of the term "ministry" is not uncommon. The word makes an unambiguous connection to a certain religiosity that once pervaded the industry. Increasingly though, rationalizing mechanisms such as corporatization have all but eliminated religious overtones that once held sway over the industry.

Almost every funeral director I interviewed displayed the same earnest zeal for the work as Lloyd does: "In my position as a funeral director and embalmer I get to help people during the worst times of their lives. I wanted to be someone that people respected and had to earn people's trust. You can still help people. You can still give people comfort during difficult times." On the other hand, corporatization, whether found in a corporately-owned funeral home or in a "mom and pop" firm, can rationalize the work, de-skill the workers, and either limit the agency of workers to deliver care in a genuine rather than an artificial manner or preclude care work altogether. As one dispirited

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funeral director told me: "I don't know what to say about it. It's not what I envisioned when I got in the business 25 years ago. When I walk in the room I don't think people see you as the respectable guy who knows everything about the funeral."

When I asked David, a mortuary college administrator (not employed at Woodward) how the corporatization of the industry affected the placement of graduates of his college, one of his roles at his program, he answered that it did not bode well. He went on to describe how SCI and a few other corporations "send recruiters to S & K [Men's Wear] and other [retailers] in search of closers." These companies are no longer interested in funeral directors who are involved with every aspect of the business. Instead, according to David, they want salespeople. As one corporate funeral director told me, "We're here as used car salesmen." Routine searches in company classifieds or national trade sites hosted by the International Cemetery, Cremation and Funeral Association bear out this claim. Titles like "family service counselor" seem to belie the fact that the focus is on sales rather than what most people probably think of as "counseling."

The effects of corporatization on this culture industry are widespread. Not least of all, the type of worker that is being produced through training and regulation that ultimately shapes the delivery of service to the consumer. By contributing to the broader culture of flexible labor (Smith 1997), the funeral industry is radically re-shaping the junction of the funeral industry and its public. Indeed one might very easily conceptualize the shifts in the funeral industry as a kind of McDonaldization. In fact, the corporatization of the funeral industry has earned the moniker "McDeath" by some.

In many states, all that is required to become a licensed funeral director is apprenticeship, not formal education, companies may take advantage of this regulation in creating a division of labor in which the front-staff are mostly comprised of salespeople, bereavement counselors, and funeral directors. In the past the occupational category comprised by funeral direction encompassed embalming, selling goods, scripting ad copy, providing grief counseling, managing the firm, writing obituaries, and leading funeral services.

Not unlike Disney University or McDonalds' Hamburger University, SCI, the world's largest funeral company, has established its own in-house training program. "Dignity University" even provides certificates that correspond to varying levels of training: "Associate," "Bachelor," and "Masters." Staff members at corporate firms are compartmentalized by highly differentiated functions. I was informed by a funeral director with close ties to one prominent corporation that whenever a family member comes into one of its firms, three employees work with the bereaved: a licensed funeral director, "To keep it legal" as he put it; a "family service counselor"; and an "aftercare specialist". All three are primarily salespersons. The funeral director assigned to a family member at any given time changes depending on who is on the clock and who is not occupied with other clients. One funeral director who had become disillusioned with his corporate funeral job and left to start his own business told me:

> In a corporate funeral home, you may see funeral director **A** to make your arrangements. And you will probably see funeral director **B** who will work the visitation or you may not even see a funeral director! You may see a flunky or a retired person or a part time student doing all of that. And then you may have funeral director **C** to work the funeral for you.

Now, funeral firms have become functionally differentiated. Many of the aforementioned tasks are outsourced and when they are not, individuals within firms are assigned one task. Corporatization not only changes the way funeral workers perform their craft, it impacts the nature of their occupation and their relationship with consumers. Just as Ritzer (1993) pointed out that McDonaldization rationalizes the kinds of goods that are produced, it also rationalizes work and it standardizes consumption.

Kim Hopper (2001), an anthropologist who examined the rationalization of contemporary psychiatry, noted that the "the effects of this reconfiguration of the moral economy of care… are registered chiefly on two fronts: that of professional autonomy and that of the fiduciary relationship to clients" (p. 477). Hopper was of course interested in an occupation that produced no material merchandise, save for pharmaceutical scrip. I, on the other hand, am interested in the rationalization of an industry that produces many goods and services. Thus, any reconfiguration gets expressed on not just two fronts. Instead there is a third—that of the nature of the products, a topic I discuss in later chapters. Nevertheless, one can see Hopper's observations that the rationalization of care leads to a loss of autonomy on the part of many workers and also alters the relationship between worker and client.

The McDonaldization of funeral workers is novel to the funeral trade for a variety of reasons—not the least of which is the standardization of labor. In the past, funeral workers were deeply rooted within a given community. But in a system in which work has become routinized and easily regulated, every worker is replaceable and thus expendable. Additionally, many companies have locations dispersed across a wide

geographical terrain making it easy to move workers between firms.[34] This transferability

of workers has the double-sided benefit of making the worker easier to regulate while

attenuating the role of the state's ability to regulate the corporation. As one sociologist

noted:

> Corporations, unlike traditional funeral establishments, which were owned by
> licensed funeral directors, could not be controlled as easily through a professional
> code of ethics. As a state board chairman testifying before a public hearing
> explained, if the state board attempted to discipline a corporation for violating
> professional rules by revoking the license of the funeral director committing the
> act, the corporation could simply go out and hire another funeral director and
> continue the same practice. (Torres 1988:387)

What Torres fails to note here is what a mortuary services college administrator claimed

happen to occur with more frequency in these situations. When a funeral director's

license is revoked by the state, the funeral director can be relocated to another branch

within the corporation either taking advantage of non-reciprocating license requirements

or applying for a different kind of license.

One corporation in particular has also been likened to McDonalds. Not

surprisingly, that company is SCI (see Chapter 3 for a more in-depth discussion on this).

Thomas Lynch (1999), a family funeral director in Michigan wrote in *Salon* magazine

that "[CEO] Waltrip of Service Corporation International in Houston, is no stranger to

[funeral industry participants]. He and SCI are to funeral service what McDonald's is to

the local diner: a multinational mergers-and-acquisitions firm that has bought up funeral

homes and cemeteries on five continents, including something like one in five here in the

good old USA."

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[34] Doug Hernan a trade writer, states: "[I]n their attempt to extract ever-greater economies of scale from a
regional cluster, some of the public chains would shift even the most beloved, community-connected
funeral directors from location to location" (Funeralwire website:
http//www.funeralwire.com/features/feature.phd?id=5 retrieved 1/22/08).

Corporatization is also characterized by an ongoing drive for capital expansion. In the funeral industry this led to widespread consolidation especially in the 1990s. SCI had really begun buying out independent homes for at least two decades before that. Consolidation trends in the 1990s had both "push" and "pull" factors. From the corporate side, conditions were ripe for acquisitions because of overall market increases in venture capital and perceived reductions in risk. At the same time, many owner-operated firms had no willing successors and attrition was on the rise. Additionally, in many urban and suburban markets, real estate had appreciated to the point that when a funeral director wanted to sell a firm, only those with very deep pockets could afford to purchase the firm.

Consolidation leveled out in the 2000s. Loewen, the second-largest company in North America declared bankruptcy and other corporations had over-extended themselves and were deeply in debt. SCI had also begun to divest many of its interests in the UK and France. Loewen re-emerged as Alderwoods in 2002. Headquartered in Canada, it was the second largest funeral service company in North America with operations throughout the US. Alderwoods led the way in the corporate funeral world because of its heavy investments in "combo" firms, or funeral homes that are located on cemeteries.

I developed a relationship with a funeral director who managed an Alderwoods combo firm that was relatively new. I had had numerous conversations with Grant when it was reported that SCI was buying out Alderwoods in 2006. Grant took great pride in developing his new firm and did a brisk business. During a visit I asked him how the news had been received. He said:

We found out on Monday right after April Fool's Day. It was April 3rd. And we got to work just about 7:30 and we have a Monday morning staff meeting and one of the staff had pulled it off an e-mail and I though it was an April Fool's joke! It really took about an hour for it to sink in and say, "This is real." We were angry we had to find out about it that way. The person right above me, and his boss, the geographic vice-president said that they only knew midnight the night before. So just about everybody was taken by surprise.

Since the takeover had to be approved by multiple parties including the FTC there was a waiting process for workers at both SCI and Alderwoods and a great deal of uncertainty. I later asked Grant about any developments and he told me:

We [middle management from various branches] get together hoping to find out what their plan is. And our leaders are saying, "We don't know anything." I believe that to be the case. I don't believe they're lying to us. I believe it extends all the way up to our geographic vice-president. He's expressed some frustration with us and he doesn't even now if he's going to have a job. I've seen a quite a bit of frustration among some employees.

In subsequent updates Grant informed me, "Corporate tells us it's going to be business as usual," and that he and most others do not need to worry about anything because they will simply be employed by SCI once the transaction takes place.

The sale of Alderwoods to SCI was finalized in November 2006 for a purchase price of $1.2 billion for $20 per share. Grant, unfortunately, did not get to keep his job. Lay-offs are an regrettable externality of expansion for expansion's sake and represent a concern for Grant and many others who face the risk of job loss because of buy-outs.

Carnival

"'[Participants] bring guitars and violins and sing songs. There are stands for selling food for the visitors. It goes on all night. It's a happy occasion'" (Description of Los Dias de los Muertos in DeSpelder and Strickland 1992:68).

Morality was the principal construct through which cultural contradictions could be managed in the funeral business. Now, the logic of late capitalism with its hyper-rationalized latticework of specialization, customer segmentation, disciplining measures, and overall McDonaldization of the industry encourages a different means of dealing with these contradictions. That is, by leveling funerary ritual to a commodity form, especially one that can be accommodated within a pre-given exchange system, selling a funeral can be treated much as one were selling a hamburger or a widget.

But given the market logic imposed on funeral workers and other industry participants, capital, or the owners of the means of production, must make its goods consumable. In order to maintain unceasing expansion, capital must have an ongoing source of buyers for its commodities. Ultimately, these buyers are members of the public, but in order to reach these members of the public, capital must establish a system of intermediaries. Funeral directors are the primary intermediaries in this case. They are the ones "on the ground," interacting with consumers, promoting and selling some goods and not others. These workers, then, must be the initial targets of capitalists in the funeral industry who are often backed by corporations. Bringing goods to the market and vying for the attention and the commitment of funeral workers to promote and sell these goods is primarily accomplished at trade shows. To get these goods accepted, the goods and services must be sold or made appealing and this is accomplished by amusing the workers who may choose to use, carry, sell, or otherwise promote a particular product or service. The goods and services themselves can be objects of amusement, as can the manner in which these goods and services are presented on the convention floor.

After receiving an invitation to attend my first funeral trade show, I perused a few trade magazines to get an idea of what to expect. Several titles devoted extensive copy to photo-essays of these conferences. Many of the pictures depicted funeral directors in variegated states of seemingly intoxicated revelry, caught wild-eyed and dancing. Not a few photos portrayed individuals thrusting forth clenched beer bottles or other drinks. One could be forgiven for mistaking some of the pictures as being a bash on Bourbon Street sans beads, and, of course, bare breasts. There were also B- and C-list celebrity speakers, a contingent of Harley-riding funeral directors, an array of Rube Goldberg-seeming contraptions for sale on the convention floor, and the seemingly requisite golf tournament. In short, the event appeared to be a spectacle falling somewhere between a corporate booster club meeting and a second-city Mardi Gras celebration. Still, I felt confident that the depictions seemed to exaggerate the setting, a belief I tenaciously held until I arrived at my first trade show.

The gathering held the charged atmosphere of a pep rally. Crowds of both people and caskets were thick. At one booth, beer was being given away to people willing to listen to a sales pitch on funeral software. Among the assorted goodie bags, there was one table handing out cloth sacs promoting their cremation services. On the side of the bags were the words "Don't let this happen to you" next to a picture of a man with a giant screw piercing his belly, alluding to an obvious "getting screwed" with an inside (trade specific) joke equating embalmers with "belly punchers." Punctuating Aftermath, Inc.'s booth was a life-size mannequin adorned for what appeared to be a nuclear fallout (Aftermath cleans up sites of gruesome homicides, suicides, etc.). Some items of note included an answering service company passing out pill bottles containing chocolate

candies advertising a "prescription for telephonitis"; portable "morgues" giving embalmers the opportunity to bring their services to you if need be; a Harley-Davidson pulling a window-pane-walled trailer containing a casket; a booth displaying multi-hued lampshades that were made from wax mixed with dried funeral bouquets; several clothing suppliers showing off their wares (for staff members and decedents alike—clothes fitting the latter are tailored for horizontal adornment and have numerous snaps and Velcro tabs for quick, in-casket adjustment); and an abundance of music and video/DVD tribute service companies. One outfit contracted with the Thomas Kinkade company (as in Thomas Kinkade—"Painter of Light"), enabling them to offer stationery, guest-books, urns, plaques, and calendars ornamented with appropriately sanguine and immediately recognizable images. Batesville, the world's largest casket maker, was showing off its new line of wider caskets to meet the ever-growing need of ever-growing American bodies.

My experience there supported my earlier impressions from the trade literature—the whole event was a little carnivalesque and even a bit surreal. According to Bakhtin ([1968] 1984), the carnivalesque is derisive and irreverent, it simultaneously breaks with the order of hierarchies and etiquette. Insofar as it welcomes the spectacular and the hyperbolic, it is stimulating and colorful. But one could easily account for the surprising degree of jest and raucousness. This was, after all, a trade fair, albeit one involving the historically conservative funeral industry. In fact, embracing such "backstage" antics is a very recent phenomenon for these dismal traders, in spite of the fact that participants are involved in one of the most emotionally and existentially taxing jobs there is. Compartmentalizing the event of death is necessary dirty work (cf. Hughes [1971] 1984),

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but it can also foster jaded cynicism. Participants in the trade perform tasks few of the rest of us would want to do. And much of it is for relatively low pay.

Funeral trade shows minimize death with their play and amusement. To be sure, trade shows also represent a capitalist brainstorm, but by juxtaposing myriad facets of the funerary apparatus, attendees, normally staid, buttoned-up, somber funeral workers, are encouraged to assume the role of the *flaneur*, engaging in free-association and play as they absorb the images, samples, services, tastes, and sounds around them. As a matter of course, networks are established and products are bought and sold, but the sheer volume of services and merchandise vying for one's attention and consumption make contemplative focus on any one stimulus a real challenge. The moral entrepreneurs of the death care industry are able to redefine both their occupations and the rites they have been charged with preserving, if only for a couple days. They are persuaded to forget the traditional ways of performing their duties, shedding their old skins and temporarily assuming new ones, all with an underlying celebratory tenor. Funeral workers are free to imbibe, to dance and sing to karaoke machines, to laugh heartily at their own crude jokes, or even to engage in unsavory pranks. Perhaps just as poignantly, they are free to avoid the self-censorship that prevents many participants from openly taking pride in their profession.

At trade shows, funeral workers are encouraged to blow off steam and let loose a bit. This period may be thought of as one way to manage contradictions. As anyone who has attended similar functions, the sanctioned nature of these events seems to suggest that they serve as a kind of catharsis wherein oft-rationalized and occasionally disillusioned workers are able to temporarily bracket unpleasant qualities of work and replace them

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with forms of amusement. On the other hand, the trade show's manifest function is to expose workers to novel goods.

If investment capital is any indication of the direction of the future, and the trade show represents one leading edge of this, then one might reasonably conclude that amusement is becoming the dominant trope through which to understand the role and meaning of the funeral industry. And while the trade show might be viewed as existing on the periphery of the industry's happenings (given its carnivalesque atmosphere), it is also central to the industry's production of meaning. The trade show is a sanctioned event by almost every actor and organization in the trade and, furthermore, it embodies an important intersection between investment capital and the first step towards the realization of the profits from that investment capital. Thus, amusement can be a unifying theme between capital, marketing, workers, products, and, as I discuss in the next chapter the kinds of messages the industry sends to the consuming public.

The industry also manufactures amusement through the way it packages its products and services—an imperative link to a broader culture of amusement. Funeral goods make a significant contribution to the things, places, and spaces involved in shaping our relationship with the dead, the dying, our memories, and our mortality. Hallam and Hockey (2001) write: "Material culture mediates our relationships with death and the dead; objects, images and practices, as well as places and spaces, call to mind or are made to remind us of the deaths of others and of our own mortality" (p. 2). The funeral industry is a revenue-bearing entity, and therefore its primary function is to return a profit to its respective owners. However, after profit, its most important purpose involves the "encoding or the making of meaning… [that has] an ideological role in

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naturalizing and normalizing the dominant meaning systems and institutions" (Seidman 1997:44). To be sure, the funeral industry disposes of dead bodies but it also has the ability to entertain, comfort, enlighten, shame, inspire, or aggravate. In so doing, it regulates and inscribes, a process that is increasingly accomplished through brand management. The production of brands can also contribute to the ways consumers think about companies, but because those companies are inextricably associated with the themes of death, memory, and life, a company's symbols and images may impact how one thinks about the care and remembrance of the dead. Arguably, they also shape how these things get articulated (and performed) in sacred funerary rites.

CHAPTER V

BRANDING MESSAGES, MASSAGING BUYERS

Introduction

"Think of it this way: people don't buy soda – they buy Coke™ or Pepsi™. They don't

buy cars: they buy GM™ or Toyota™ or BMW™. They wear branded clothes, eat

branded food, carry branded phones (you likely don't have a PDA – you have a

Blackberry™ or Treo™) and make 'Xeroxes' (our apologies to Xerox™) instead of

photocopies." (From Eternal Image website: http://www.eternalimage.net/investors.asp

retrieved 12/10/2008)

Unless an economic entity has become so entrenched in the lifeworlds of the

public as to become taken-for-granted, its utility and necessity must be actively asserted

and re-asserted. The funeral industry, as I earlier discussed, has a troubled history in this

regard. Critics of the funeral industry often receive a great deal of attention and

troublemakers are excoriated if not outright demonized. As of late, there are a wide

variety of options for the ritual disposal of the dead that exist outside the funeral industry.

Do-it-yourself (DIY) funerals, death midwives, backyard burials, are all possible in most

states across the US. Wiskind and Spiegel (1998) have published a manual on these

options, as has the former president of the Funeral Consumers Alliance (the premier

consumer advocacy group in the US), Lisa Carlson (1997). Not surprisingly, there are a

number of organizations with an Internet presence (e.g., Natural Transitions, The Natural

Death Centre US, and Final Passages) that promote services that are outside the mainstream funeral industry.

The funeral industry, then, is a non-vital component with regard to societal use-value. When it comes to social exchange-values, however, the funeral industry is crucial since it demonstrates the power of consumer capital to pervade all stages of the life course. This value, though, must be communicated to the consuming public in order to be made effective. In this chapter I will discuss the ways in which funeral companies communicate their value to the public. The funeral industry's participation in this symbolic exchange is partially accomplished through the deployment of signifiers to the larger marketplace: that is, the creation and dissemination of brands. Brands are conducive to creating narratives around the industry and communicating its value(s) since a brand is essentially a signal that is intended to impel consumers to impute traits to an organization or a set of goods. Not surprisingly then, in an era that privileges the role of brands in the lifeworlds of all consumers, branding has assumed an elevated role in the funeral industry.

In branding, one also sees evidence for the ongoing negotiations by the funeral industry (in aggregate) within the confines of late capitalism to manufacture new American deathways. Where funerary rites once served to galvanize a community around the time of death, the funeral industry is instead mobilizing brands to do similar work. On the one hand, many of the messages that get conveyed through brands continue to be framed according to the industry's claimed contribution to a moral economy. On the other hand, many brands rely on the trope of amusement both as a conveyor of the message in addition to the messages themselves (i.e., the medium and the message can

both be forms of amusement). To examine the manner in which these negotiations become manifest, I highlight three topics.

First, in employing a case study of SCI's most prominent brand, I will demonstrate how branding can co-opt a moral trope and suspend some of the contradictions intrinsic to the funeral industry, especially those related to the corporatization of the industry.[35] In this case, morality, at least as a signifier, figures into the iconography of the brand and, one might presume, into the brand's meaning as well. Branding in this case may be understood as anthropomorphizing a company, or at least a particular product line, with a moral trait, thereby "sell[ing] identity by attaching to objects personal qualities and implied social relationships, loading commodities with qualities that surpass their actual use value" (Peck 1993:11). In branding then, corporate giants like SCI are able to suggest a narrative in which the abstract multinational is sublimated and reduced to a more human-scale.

Second, I will turn to the use of iconic, or widely recognized brands that exist largely outside the funeral industry, but are increasingly licensed and brought to bear on funeral goods. This is an area of commercialization still in its nascent stages but one that is rapidly ascending in importance and frequency of use. In those instances, brands provide a unifying trope for a geographically dispersed and religiously heterogeneous American populace. There, one can see evidence for the ways brands assert their utility through providing associations with immediately recognizable lifestyle regimens. According to Beardsworth and Bryman (1999) "The brand ceases being simply an advertising sign which highlights the availability of a certain commodity, but becomes a

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[35] As a corporation, SCI maintains a number of brands. Among the ones I do not discuss in this chapter are: Advantage®, National Cremation®, Signature Memories™, and Funeraria del Angel™.

symbol of a more complex set of leisure relations" (p. 243). This serves to appeal to an amusement culture through its signifiers of (mostly) leisure or lifestyle pursuits.

Building on the discussion of iconic brands I will then turn to the role of theming, or the use of an overarching topic that unifies different element of a funeral service together under a single motif. I suggest that themes and brands do similar discursive work. While brands are intrinsically commodified signifiers, themed funerals can often evade commercialization. On the other hand, the funeral industry's adoption of theming borrows heavily from branding strategies, thereby transforming personal rituals into promotional tools. As Firat and Venkatesh (1995) write: "The key to the dominance of the marketing culture… is the transformation of the commodity from a natural thing into a linguistic sign" (p. 253). Like brands, themes can be mechanisms to divert attention away from the more unpleasant aspects of the funeral—from the pollution associated with the dead body and the dirty work needed to contain that pollution, to the economic motivation of the funeral provider or even the deep sadness contained in loss.

Inasmuch as brands serve ideological functions in society, they can be understood as cultural products (Holt 1997). Indeed, some argue that, in the new economy, signs that are used to market the products they sell have become at least as important as the products themselves (Morris 2005). It is clear, at any rate, that branding, insofar as it participates in communicative exchanges, has taken on heightened importance. Among the many varieties of market-produced distraction, branding has become predominant in the lifeworlds of consumers. Here, I am interested in the ideological contribution brands make to a culture of amusement. Their utility in this area demonstrates an understudied

proclivity for branding to situate customers in narrative matrices (e.g., lifestyles, taste preference, etc.).

One might assume that it would be a challenge to establish brand loyalty in the funeral industry given that funeral products are purchased so infrequently (Wolfelt 2001). Brand loyalty, however, is only one of the many functions brands serve with respect to their symbolic roles in the marketplace. Customers can, however, be loyal to specific firms, and historically, funeral consumers have made purchasing decisions based on proximity and/or family loyalty to firms and their familial ownership (Research Publications Group 1997). As one economist stated: "Once a death has occurred, survivors do not usually have the time or inclination to enter into a discriminating decision-making process. That funeral home that comes to mind because of its location or general reputation or because of past experience is likely to be chosen by survivors at the time of need" (Smith 1997:139). Many producers in the industry frequently use terms like "brand," "branding," or "branded." Indeed, one of my respondents, Martin, who is a marketing executive, had this to say on the matter:

> Well, the oldest brands in the country are funeral homes but they're local. The longest continuously operated business are funeral homes. There are funeral homes in the country where the name goes back prior to the revolution. These are brands. If you live in that town you know these brands. What images would you want a funeral home to provide? A funeral business is nothing but image. I mean you could say that every business is nothing but image… What's the difference between one brand of flour and another brand of flour? It could just be the image, the brand name. Well that's what funeral homes have.

So while conventional notions of "lifestyle" branding are not as prevalent among corporations in the funeral industry as they are in many other industries, brands and branding nonetheless exist, and they are deployed in some very interesting ways that I discuss here.

As I examined in Chapter 3, the expanding commodification of funerary rites generates contradictions that must be managed (i.e., resolved, concealed, or bracketed). Throughout much of the history of the American funeral industry, contradictions have been addressed via appeals to a moral economy in which funeral work gets framed as care and the industry legitimates itself as preserving a social good. Workers and other participants in the industry saw themselves as paid care providers, upholders of sacred traditions, and healers. For this reason one might characterize the members of this occupational class as moral entrepreneurs who are charged with (or otherwise assume the duties of) preserving, highlighting, and promoting what they view to be sanctified values. As rationalizing mechanisms like corporatization and secularization attenuate their status as moral entrepreneurs, the kinds of messages that communicate to the consuming public have also changed. These messages not only help to convey the kinds of goods the industry provides. They also signal suggested ways of consuming these goods and ways of interacting with funeral producers. This is accomplished through intertextual linkages in which images, symbols, or themes are used by the funeral industry to create associations or connections to other spheres of consumption (such as shopping at a big box retailer or watching television).

A Case Study

In all the moral locutions that permeate the discourses of death care, there is one term in particular whose frequency seems to signal extraordinary value—*dignity*. Over and over again this term emerges. Because the term refers to a largely affective state, like

love, some may perceive a degree of imprecision to the meaning of the word in spite of its common usage. One may have a sufficient understanding of how to use the word without specific knowledge of its definition. In fact, it is just that combination of partial comprehension and indeterminacy that lends itself to frequent use and mobilization in the market. Social movements scholars suggest a parallel phenomenon. According to this line of thought, in order to mobilize a segment of population, an idea must be "framed" and that frame must be wide enough to encapsulate multiple interpretations so that its "range" can resonate across broad swathes of populations (Snow and Benford 1988).

The fuzziness of the term *dignity* is sufficiently evocative and agile to be used in a variety of contexts without being so precise as to warrant a tightly, limited scope. Indeed, the word is found throughout the discourse in the funeral industry from logos and ad copy, to magazine articles and instructional texts. From one of the earliest embalming manuals… "[Funeral workers] should live in their business and move out and in a subdued, dignified, and by no means Pharasaical manner" (Dodge 1908:232), to a mid-century one… "The care and disposition of the dead is, in all of its aspects, a religious rite which requires all of the dignity and solemnity accorded the other sacred customs and procedures of any church or religious group" (Strub and Fredrick [1958] 1967:50), and a contemporary textbook… "The preparation, care and final disposition of a deceased human being should be attended with appropriate observance and understanding, having due regard and respect for the reverent care of the human body and for those bereaved and the overall spiritual dignity of humankind" (Mayer [1990] 2006:3).

Individual funeral firms regularly incorporate the term *dignity* into their business slogans. Merely a cursory look at firms in my home community reveals the use of the

word in company mottos: "Service with Dignity"; "Serving the Community with Christian Dignity"; "Dignity Measured in the Simplest of Terms"; "Care and Dignity," and so on.

In spite of the word's questionable empirical traction, *dignity* is so common in the trade that is has frequently been integrated into sociological discussions. In their Goffmanian analysis of funerals Turner and Edgley (1976) write: "Funeral directors and allied members of their team may be seen as actors whose job it is to stage a performance in such a way so that the audience to it (the bereaved family and friends) will impute competence, sincerity, dignity, respect, and concern to their actions" (p. 378). And the legal scholar Rachel Ariss (2004) states that *dignity* is even a common term in juridical discourse with regard to the dying and the dead. "Dignity is conferred on human remains as memory of a specific person is respected... The self of memory can be understood as having a role in the larger narratives of the community… Dignity was conferred on human remains in this case through collective memorial narrative" (p. 51).

The "death with dignity" movement that became so popular in the early 1990s further attests to the import of this term. *Dignity*, in short, may be understood as part and parcel of the ways one thinks about and constructs values involving care and disposal of the dead. One may understand this as a need to confer decency and meaning on what can otherwise be indecent and meaningless. The dying loose control over their bodies. One's eyes sink in and one's skin turns black. Gravity settles the blood, involuntary defecation is frequent, and gases bloat the torso. And yet we are all powerless against these forces of nature that impose what are commonly believed to be *in*dignities, in spite of the biological necessities.

It may come as no surprise, therefore, that the term was appropriated for

mobilization in the marketplace. SCI, the much-maligned behemoth in the industry,

created a new brand in 1999:

> The Dignity Memorial network has started a quiet revolution in funeral, cremation
> and cemetery services. With more than 1,000 North American locations, Dignity
> Memorial providers are committed to delivering standards, options and values not
> found elsewhere. (From SCI's website:
> http://www.dignitymemorial.com/DignityMemorial/AboutDignityMemorial.aspx
> ?id=ADM retrieved 12/2/2007)

Dignity (the brand) emerged during the acquisition bubble. SCI was seen to be

gobbling up "mom-and-pop" firms not only across the country but also in Canada, the

UK, and France, among other countries. So while the plotline of *Six Feet Under* (in

which a family-owned funeral home faced constant threat of being bought out by a large

corporation) was yet to be revealed to a widespread populace (the show began airing in

2001), critics of the takeover trend were mounting.

The American funeral industry has long been the recipient of negative publicity.

However, it was the target of amplified scrutiny beginning in the mid-1990s (a subject

which I discussed in greater length in Chapter 3). Consumer advocacy groups, television

news programs, magazine articles, not to mention the funeral conglomerates themselves,

all contributed to a multifaceted conversation centered around the funeral trade. The

creation of Dignity, then, backed by the resources of an enormous corporate entity,

provided both members of the industry as well as the wider public with a preferred

interpretation within this conversation. After all, as Mommaas (2002) writes:

> Brands derive their attraction largely from the fact that they introduce a certain
> order or coherence to the multiform reality around us. Brands enable us more
> easily to "read" each other and our environment of brands and places and
> products… Seen in this way brands are not purely a source of differentiation but
> also of identification, recognition, continuity, and collectivity. (p. 34)

Dignity has fairly obvious, preferred semiotic implications. That is, consumers and other participants in the American way of death (such as competing funeral companies, potential vendors, consumer advocates, etc.) are encouraged to "read" in particular ways. Because of the conventional linguistic associations to a *moral* discourse, *dignity* suggests tradition, longevity, and steadfastness.[36] Its first-order meanings, of course, refer to respect, honor, or esteem, and the cultural currency provided by the then-burgeoning debate around the "death with dignity" movement only adds to this cachet.

Not surprisingly, funeral consumer groups and other assorted critics of the conglomerates have had a field day with the irony they perceived in this branding effort; positioning it somewhere in between oil companies' green-washing, marketing strategies and ABC Television's self-conscious, "TV is bad for you" ad campaign (e.g., "Hobbies, Schmobbies"). Oliver McRae (2004b) for instance, a well-regarded contributor to the premier trade magazine, *The Director*, expressed his disapprobation when he writes: "Sticking a label that says 'Dignity' on it does not make it so; it is just one more example of the emptiness and deception consumers get from everybody else in society" (p.40).

Under the Dignity moniker, SCI accomplished things they may not have otherwise been able to. Among other things, they manufactured new funeral service packages (of which I say more in Chapter 6), and they established ties with other corporations to produce synergies (FedEx, Florida Hospice). However, they also fulfilled another important function that has historically been a part of the funeral business. In the past, funeral homes played a visible role in civic life—from sponsoring softball teams to participation in chambers of commerce. Dignity enacted this civic engagement by

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[36] Again, Dignity was founded in 1999. Its parent company, SCI, dates back to 1962.

creating community outreach programs such as the Dignity Escape School which, according to their web page, www.escapeschool.com, "[I]s a nationally recognized program that teaches children and parents how to recognize deceptive practices of a would-be-kidnapper while demonstrating escape tactics children can use in case of abduction." They have a traveling, ¾-scale replica of the Vietnam Memorial. Among other programs, Dignity also features a program called "Defeat Diabetes" in which: "Members of the **D**ignity Memorial® network **E**ncourage client families and employees to fight diabetes by **F**unding, **E**ducating, **A**cting and **T**reasuring loved ones."

As Goldman and Papson (2006) write:

> On the one hand, branding… has become a means of supplementing the extraction of surplus value. On the other hand, branding has emerged as a hedge against risk, and as a means of ideologically concealing the operations of political economy. To buffer its voracious appetite, capital must also present itself as a good citizen, capable of acting in an ethical manner. (p. 340)

As a good corporate citizen, Dignity is the alter ego to SCI's image on Wall Street, which can sometimes be perceived as ruthless and greedy. Its founder and former CEO, Robert Waltrip, for instance, is quoted as saying, "People who don't buy our stock just don't like money" (in Bryce 1997). SCI has been an emerging giant since the 1960s, but the 1990s saw nearly exponential expansion for the company. SCI went from 1400 firms in 1992 to 4500 by the end of the decade. The buy-outs of what were mostly firms under independent and family ownership earned frequent comparisons to the menacing Kroehner Corporation that was depicted in *Six Feet Under*. Kroehner, with its mantra "Consolidate or die," was presented as a dehumanized golem set to feed off more earnest and naïve firms like Fisher and Sons, the protagonists of the series.

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The Dignity brand also allowed SCI to create new signage for their facilities and obscure the heavy acquisitive period in the 1990s. In fact, SCI's ownership of individual firms is most often obscured by Dignity's logo. Even then, Dignity is, quite literally, peripheral within the framework of the overall façade of the funeral home. The focus within the visual *mise en scène* remains on the signage that preexisted SCI's purchase of the home. Which is to say that a Dignity funeral home very rarely looks different from any other home. This works in SCI's favor since one marketing executive I spoke with found that 55% of his sample preferred locally owned funeral firms versus 5% who preferred corporately owned ones (Gould 2005). He writes: "Since the corporate operators are unlikely to make ownership an issue, the onus falls on the locally owned funeral firms. If the locally owned funeral homes don't advertise their independence, the consumer is left to draw their own conclusions; and they typically conclude all of the local firms are family operated" (Ibid., p. 16).

When SCI assumes ownership of a firm that was previously under independent (or familial) ownership, the actual name of the firm remains fixed both in space and on paper. Furthermore, this name is most often the surname of the founder or founders. Names, as I have shown, are of some consequence in the industry. The funeral director Thomas Lynch (1999) writes:

> The name is mine, my family's, my father's and mother's, my brother's and sister's, our son's and daughter's... The name is worth more than the brick and mortar, the rolling stock or any money in the bank. It is the only one we have. We cannot get another. It determines whom we hire, what we sell, for how much, what we say, who we are and what we do.

Even in accounting terms the firm's name has its own "goodwill value" that accrues from having been in a locality over years or even decades. Goodwill value is vital to a funeral

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home. As Smith (2006) writes: "'[H]eritage' implies a high degree of customer loyalty which virtually guarantees repeat business through generations of families. In spite of various barriers to entry into local death care markets, well-established local ('heritage') funeral homes have been able to expand by adding branches" (p. 285). Yet the name is subsumed into the overall value of the brand once a firm is purchased and becomes part of the "story" of the firm. The Dignity brand then, allows SCI to co-opt the goodwill value of an already established family name into the overall value accrued through its corporate brand which benefits from the cultural narrative it is intended to evoke. As one funeral director told me: "I'm friends with some of the former owners of what are now SCI firms and they told me if they could go back in time they would never have sold out because they sell their names. And now they are stuck with that."

The success of such branding can be found in various sources. One such area is the reactions of competitors who attempt to co-opt the Dignity brand and re-frame or, re-brand it, if you will. A major online funeral products retailer, for instance, The Funeral Depot (http://www.funeraldepot.com/), has as its motto "Where Overpaying is Not Dignified." But one really need look no further than SCI's financials for evidence of the success of the Dignity brand. From SCI's 2003 Annual Report one finds the following statement, "On a burial funeral, Dignity packaged sales generate on average approximately $2,800 more than non-Dignity sales."

According to Sharon Zukin (2004) branding accomplishes several things: it gets us to try new products because we are used to that brand; it tells a product's story; it protects against competition; it provides a product with a humanistic element such as a personality; and it suggests democratic participation in the market (everyone can

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participate in a brand). But I would add to Zukin's list that branding also "emplots" the consumer in a cultural narrative, oftentimes one that is intended to contravene cultural contradictions. Dignity (and here, it is problematic to distinguish between the term and the brand) is meant to invoke a more edenic alternative to corporate rationalization. Simply consider the following remarks, also from SCI's 2003 Annual Report: "We want every customer interaction to be the standard 'Dignity' interaction, which is based upon values of integrity, respect, enduring relationships and service excellence." The effectiveness of branding is foremost based on its ability to become a salient fixture in the consumer's perception of the market. Linked to this is the goal of establishing an association between that brand and certain psychological connotations like "integrity" and "respect." How did SCI accomplish this? Ironically, the answer is revealed in the highly rationalized mechanisms that made the brand possible that get revealed in the very same financial statement: "Our centralized marketing effort will utilize information from our broad customer databases to determine geographic, demographic and lifestyle information about our consumers in order to promote awareness of the Dignity Memorial brand name, our local names, and our provider network in the most efficient and effective manner" (Ibid.). The brand, therefore, represents a contradiction. It is intended to humanize a company yet relies on mechanisms which depersonalize its consumer market. In other words, the brand humanizes the corporation even as it rationalizes humans.

Icons

According to Zukin (2004), telling a story is just one of the many functions of brands.

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She adds that brands also serve to humanize their products. That is, brands ascribe personality or lifestyle characteristics to the products to which they are attached. Consuming the product, then, means consuming the various traits provided by the brand and taking on those traits oneself (as a consumer). The dichotomy between the consumer-subject and the commodity-object breaks down. Brands, then, supplement one's identity and become an extension of self. Rather than social identity merely being a product of one's location and past within a "peopled" network, identity is also a product of one's location within a material culture, which includes one's past shopping experiences. Since consumables so often come ready made with brands it is not merely the product that constitutes the commodity but the brand too. Thus, brands serve an important purpose in producing the consumer-subject.

The point here is that since brands have come to function as an extension of identity, it should be easy to understand their inclusion in contemporary funeral services which ostensibly signify a life once lived. Enter Clint Mytich and his publicly traded company, Eternal Image. The company, whose motto is "Products that Reflect a Life well Lived," does not, ironically enough, manufacture any products. Instead it partners with other vendors who make caskets, urns, and the like, and then affix a brand to that product—a brand for which Eternal Image has purchased the reproduction rights. Eternal Image deals with customers only through funeral firms. Eternal Image has licensing agreements with Major League Baseball™, Precious Moments®, the Vatican Library Collection™, American Kennel Club™ and the Cat Fancier's Association™ and they continue to "relentlessly pursue" additional brands.

The message Eternal Image provides to the public, equating life to consumables, is relatively artless. On its home page the company notes: "People have passion. It runs through all we do… So, why, when our lives are so full of passion, do funerals – events

designed to celebrate a life - have to be so plain and boring?" "Passion" here is equated to

a commodity form, albeit one that represents an interest, pastime, or hobby that was a

part of the deceased's life. Representing neither work nor pleasure, nor the deceased's

relationship to others except as mediated by the brand, the introduction of this commodity

form into funerary ritual serves as a contribution to a wider culture of amusement. The

novelty of this paradigm is not lost on the founders of Eternal Image or its associated

clients as evidenced by the following statement by a spokesperson for the company:

> At first companies were incredulous… You could see it on the faces of the
> licensing executives. The idea of putting their brand image on a casket or urn was
> in turns *astounding, amusing and amazing*. But once prospects recovered from the
> shock of the idea, many saw the benefits of allowing their most devoted fans to
> extend their relationship with a team or a company through the funeral process.
> [italics added for emphasis](Raffish 2007:25)

Since brands subjectify, that is, help enable the production of subjectivities, they promote

the expansion of late, consumer capitalism. And because, by and large, these brands are

representative of a leisure pursuit, a form of entertainment, or a recreational interest, they

are forms of amusement. Thus, the symbolic exchange implicit in the consumption of

these brands likewise contributes to the culture of amusement. Late capital's predilection

for consumerism is then aided by funeral customers' willingness to incorporate iconic

brands in their funeral visitations and services. This is not a case of free advertising—

indeed it represents value-added advertising since the companies who own the brands

profit from their relationships with funeral firms who want to purchase a license to use

them. Such a move promises to be profitable. As reported in a funeral trade magazine:

"At press time the company had sold out more than half of its first Vatican Library

Collection urn order and two-thirds of its initial AKC [American Kennel Club] pet urns

order" (Raffish 2007:24). The article goes on to report that the company completely sold out its Major League Baseball order.

The success of branding efforts in the funeral industry may be attributable to its ability to make sense out of a life in terms or signifiers that are widely recognized and easily understood. I would argue that brands exist as an increasingly important component of material culture in an era characterized by the disembedded individual, an era about which Ulrich Beck ([1986] 1992) remarks:

> The individual is indeed removed from traditional commitments and support relationships, but exchanges them for the constraints of existence in the labor market and as a consumer, with the standardizations and controls they contain. The place of traditional ties and social forms (social class, nuclear family) is taken by secondary agencies and institutions, which stamp the biography of the individual and make that person dependent upon fashions, social policy, economic cycles and markets, contrary to the image of individual control which establishes itself in consciousness. (p. 131)

The subject, Beck argues, has been disembedded, and one strategy that subjects utilize in order to re-embed themselves is via institutions such like the market. Branding provides a narrative—a sort of resolution to the issue of disembedding. However, brands contain their own contradictions—that is, they succeed in part because they are both a product of other disembedding mechanisms and are themselves a disembedding mechanism. Brands both abstract or excise individuals from their immediate context and restructure individuals' relationships across spatial and even temporal boundaries (Giddens 1990). Thus, where participation in funeral rites once helped secure meaning for people after the death of someone in her community, now one's identification with a particular brand links an individual to others who may share nothing else in common with the exception of the identification with the brand. Thus, brands uproot individuals from forming

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identities based on non-virtual ties or connections with others who might otherwise be physically present.

Brands primarily refer to a discursive reality. That is they attempt to construct a narrative structure (Codeluppi 2007), one that I would argue is often sufficiently indeterminate to allow for a broad hermeneutic (Arvidsson 2005). Consumers are, in fact, invited to actively mold their own interpretations. This is not to suggest that brand interpretation is a solipsistic affair but rather brands are templates that guide interpretation. Not all meanings are viable nor are all meanings credible. Many interpretations are suggested and others are suppressed. NASCAR's brand, for example, has traditionally evoked associations with "patriotism, Christianity, and fatherhood, deployed in a politically conservative fashion" (Vavrus 2007:245). On the other hand, NASCAR's efforts to open racetracks in "blue" states, recruit non-white drivers, and include more rock performances at their events, would all seem to suggest new readings that diverge from the older interpretations.

More specifically, the consumption of brands eases the process by establishing affective, rhetorical, or linguistic associations between the producer and product in which the consumer is encouraged to participate. Branding is appealing in part because the associations and meanings that get attached through images and words are designed to themselves evoke other associations for the consumer, casting a far-flung net of multiple signifiers. This makes re-embedding a relatively efficient process since there are almost always some meanings that an individual can find compelling. "The result," Codeluppi (2007) writes, "is that the firm is transformed into a powerful social actor that tends to invade the private space of individuals and penetrate ever more deeply into their lives"

(p. 157). Or, as Peck (1993) points out, that when "human relationships are… founded on shared consumption habits, community becomes another word for market" (p. 18).

A brand is a cultural good with both a use- and exchange-value. This might be uncomfortable for many people who are not accustomed to "brandscapes," or branded environments (Ponsonby-McCabe 2006), assuming more salience in the world of funeral products and services. Like the classical critique against fetishization of goods, it would seem that if things can be social and therefore approach personhood, then conversely persons can be viewed as nothing more than things. Kaj Ilmonen (2004) addresses this by stating: "[G]oods contribute to the patterning of our social world… To say that humans and our products go together does not mean, in the context of the work of 'hybridization,' that we have to treat people as goods or instruments" (p. 33). One's participation in brandscapes need not take on the same significance as one's interactions with other humans. Although participation in brandscapes is in fact social—since even the interpretation of a brand signals one's familiarity with a socially constructed framework of meaning (Arvidsson 2005; Goldman and Papson 2006). The consumption of brands, therefore, is a social act, drawing one into a network of cultural connections, images, and ideas. Dichotomizing the processes of production versus consumption potentially mis-represents the use, understanding, interpretation, and inclusion of brands into our everyday lives. As Giddens writes, "[C]ultural objects... incorporate 'extended' forms of signification," but, he goes on to write, "All artifacts, not just cultural objects, involve a process of interpretation" (pp. 215-6). Items purchased primarily for their utility also communicate meanings (to oneself and to others) both latent and intended.

This sociality of brands would appear to represent a contradiction. On the one hand the consumption of brands (by which I mean the purchase of a branded good or simply the reading and interpretation of a brand), links one to a network of others. This therefore embeds individuals along a continuum of individuals who share similar tastes and preferences, or who simply share similar interpretive schema by virtue of their membership in a particular community (albeit one that is mediated by the market). On the other hand, in the strict sense of Polanyi ([1944] 2001), branding is a disembedding mechanism that substitutes a non-contractual relationship (familial, neighborhood, etc.) with one dependent on a commodity form. This contradiction complicates embeddedness. Disembedding mechanisms have already created the condition in which individuals are atomized and less likely to participate in civic life (Putnam 2000). Yet branding appears to be a means for managing this by providing a common reference point with which other people, both near and far, can identify. Thus, one shares commonalities with other fans or members of a consumerist "tribe" (Bauman 1992) through the recognition of this brand-totem.

Whatever the root causes of the disembedding processes, social relations are rationalized and mediated by forms such as technocratic expert systems, economic structures, or quotidian bureaucracies. Heightened mobility and migration contributes to the needs of a transient populace to connect to other individuals in novel ways. Funerals, which have historically been functions at which individuals are brought together in a physical space for a unifying purpose, can be viewed as doing the work of embedding. The funeral industry, though, has itself had to adapt to a variety of disembedding mechanisms.

Martin is the head of one of the nation's largest funeral marketing agencies in the country. After I asked him about the increasing visibility of iconic brands in funerary rites, he reminded me that it was typical for previous generations to bury their dead in a family plot. Nowadays, though, since Americans are so much more migratory there has been a decline in the use of family plots. He told me:

> A lot of casket companies now are buying the rights to school logos and some ball parks around the country are actually selling cremation niches. [Through] the San Diego Padres, you can get a cremation niche with their stadium. Doakes Field up there at FSU, Florida State, is selling niches at the field. The idea, simply, is that many of us, because we are so mobile—something like 85% of families in America own cemetery property but it may be property you don't want to use. For instance, my family has it in two states that I never have any intention of going to again. Now a lot of families have that because it was an American tradition to buy an estate or a lot of gravesites or even build a family mausoleum.

Where physical sites once served to situate individuals in a community network, disembedding mechanisms have uprooted individuals, in this case, quite literally. Via the market, the funeral industry has established mechanisms through which a kind of re-embedding can take place. To use Martin's illustration, the individual is re-embedded within a kinship network that shares loyalty to a sports team (or a stadium).

Athletic franchises make for excellent brands since they are fairly enduring and provide a wealth of narrative. Team personalities, trades, particular playbooks, conflicts and scandals, and so forth, all provide additional dimensions of discursive realities through which individuals can come together. Though it tends to be a gendered phenomenon, some individuals mark particular memories by reference to sports or even particular games or competitions.[37] Thus a team's brand may be metonymically related to an actual tangible experience of the past. Of course, sports are, for many people, fun. Spectator sports is indeed very big business and thus juxtaposing sports

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[37] Apropos of gendered stereotypes of father-son relationships is the line from *City Slickers* in which one character states: "I mean, I guess it is childish, but when I was about 18 and my dad and I couldn't communicate about anything at all, we could still talk about baseball. Now that - that was real."

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brands onto somber funeral rituals may serve to displace some of the anxiety around sadness that historically surrounds American funerary ritual.

Iconic brands, though, not simply athletic brands, can situate individuals amongst others who share similar traits. This can also include the branding of cities, as scholars like Kevin Gotham (2005) and Michael Silk (2007) have demonstrated. Many people have witnessed the branding efforts of Las Vegas, for example, changed over time (from a brief family-oriented brand to the decidedly "adult playground" brand now employed). My informant, Martin, describes one attempt to piggyback on the success of promoting Las Vegas as a tourist destination when he remarks:

> Families … don't want to be buried some place that nobody will ever visit. That's why for instance there was a plan at one time about 209 miles from downtown Las Vegas there was going to be a huge pyramid with a beacon so bright that this light from this pyramid would be visible on the Vegas strip. And it was going to be columbarium niches and the idea is that [since] everybody goes to Las Vegas from time to time you could go and visit Mom. And the same concept applies to putting them in at a football field. Whenever you come to a football field you'd see Dad's niche and you'll think about him and then you'd go in and cheer for the home team. It's all reflective of the changes of society.

Regardless of which brand is being employed or which is being perceived at any given time (e.g., Las Vegas as tourist destination or Las Vegas as mortuary), Martin's observation is astute. The market, and in this case, more specifically, a brand, provides what families, churches, and neighborhoods once did—a point of common reference. Brands, therefore, function "as 'linking devices' that enable the crystallization of however transitory… forms of community" (Arvidsson 2005:242). They can connect people both virtually (e.g., in taste communities) and physically (e.g., sports stadiums) and construct new kinds rituals—ones that are mediated through the commodity form.

Themes

Like brands, themes are also instances of pure signification. Theming, or the use
of "overarching symbolic motifs within consumer milieus" (Gottdiener 2001:7), is a
socially manufactured relationship between either discursive or non-discursive entities
within a particular context. Theming, in this context, juxtaposes retail consumption with
representative symbols from mass (non-retail) culture. Commercialized themes make
discursive connections between disparate entities via shared properties. Consumptive
spaces may incorporate ideas, topical threads, or especially metonymical elements of
some area of culture that is conventionally not intrinsically a part of the retail space in
which it is inserted. This marketing strategy is widely popular in other areas of consumer
life (e.g., restaurants like Hard Rock Café or Planet Hollywood, Disney cruises, Las
Vegas hotels, Niketown, etc.), and is easily (and is increasingly being) incorporated into
the contemporary funeral. The incorporation of themes in the funeral industry suggests an
effort to construct a connection between the funeral industry and other areas of retail and
consumer life such as entertainment or shopping centers, and amusement culture more
broadly.

Brands and themes are often intertwined in unusual ways, sometimes to the point
of being inextricably linked. (Asking where the brand ends and theme begins, in an Apple
store, for example, is moot. On the other hand, Ford dealerships are environments that are
largely absent of motifs that set them apart from other car dealerships save for the fact
that one finds Ford-branded vehicles.) Brands can serve as the foundation for a theme.
Though I am personally unaware of someone having done so, it is entirely conceivable,

and even probable, that there has been a funeral service created around the Nascar brand (or a specific driver or team, e.g., a casket with the Nascar logo, a video of the deceased attending racing events with friends and family, autographed memorabilia on display, and the body of the deceased in Nascar regalia).

In the funeral industry, brands can be elaborated on in order to create themes. As a spokesperson from Eternal Image told a Fox Business news reporter, "The new trend is for themed funerals to celebrate the life of the person, what they're all about and our products are usually the centerpiece in that kind of thing" (from Eternal Image website: http://www.eternalimage.net/ retrieved 7/2/2007). Theming invites consumers to create meaning, construct narratives, and emplace and emplot themselves within that larger theme. This is accomplished in part through hypersignification whereby the consumer is deluged with representations that seem only to refer to one another. In other words, the themed funeral represents an almost closed system in which the deceased is represented by discursive constructions that merely refer to another symbol within that system. A poker-themed funeral then might represent the deceased as a "poker player" with her favorite card deck, a "lucky" card in her breast pocket, her sunglasses (to prevent "tells"), and so on—all of which represent poker playing as much as they represent the deceased. I would argue that the theming of funerals succeeds because of the possibility of this process of hypersignification (i.e., in which symbols utilized in the funeral ritual represent the process of signification itself).

Conversely, a brand can be built around themes. SCI represents one company that has done just that with their "Signature Memories." They describe this brand in their 2004 Annual Report:

> Signature Memories™, custom-planned additions to the memorial ceremony that further personalize and enhance the funeral or graveside service. While embellishments such as butterfly, balloon, or dove releases are often chosen under this program, more elaborate events might include the presence of live musicians, 'rolling thunder' motorcycle processions, military vehicles, or other significant and memorable elements. (p. 9)

Leveraging their significant resources, SCI has created a brand, Signature Memories™, that draws directly on the contemporary consumer's desire for themed environments, albeit consumers with abundant resources themselves. These "embellishments" are designed to contribute to a themed funeral. Thus, a motorcyclist could purchase the Rolling Thunder option that revolve around a include biker theme—perhaps with the Harley Davidson "hearse." Funeral directors I have interviewed tell me that the "embellishments" referred to in this passage are not rare. While customers need not go through SCI's bank of funeral counselors to organize a dove release or a motorcycle procession, SCI and others' efforts to vertically integrate all of a customer's funeral needs and provide one-stop shopping can be compelling.

In fact, as I discussed in Chapter 4,many funeral directors might more accurately be referred to as party planners since many funerals resemble theme parties. Mainstream press coverage, which only further legitimates their utility in the minds of many. The *New York Times* describes the popularity of themed funerals in an article titled "It's my Funeral and I'll Serve Ice Cream if I Want To" (Leland 2006). Another story in *USA Today* (Pancrazio 2007), described how a "funeral director simulated a campsite because the deceased loved to camp. The director pitched a tent and brought in a faux fire." From *Exit Strategy*, a book that describes a number of alternative funerary options, the reader is told "In Hickory, North Carolina, at Catawba Memorial Park, Chuck Gallagher has built a putting green that houses cremains" (Cromer 2006: 117). The book also describes how one customer employed a company to shoot her deceased loved one's ashes in a fireworks display featuring the colors of the deceased's *alma mater*. Eternal Reefs has

garnered a lot of press coverage for its product—a roughly 3 foot wide artificial reef made using

the ashes of the deceased. The bereaved are encouraged to create a ceremony that involves the

dispensation of the "reef" onto the ocean floor and subsequently re-visit it periodically via

snorkeling gear. The journalist Lisa Cullen (2006) points out that, in the deathcare industry, not

only services but physical spaces are also themed. She describes a visit to Rose Hill Cemetery:

"Here… was the fake-rock waterfall for the Mexicans; over here was Korealand; here was the $1

million family estates for the super rich..." (p. 52). In fact, many not-for-profit cemeteries in the

US have re-branded themselves as historical, tourist destinations and hold themed parties and

other events (which I will discuss in more detail in Chapter 7). However, since physical spaces

are generally pre-given, the consumer is not likely to be a co-creator of a particular theme. On

the other hand, the theming of funeral services is readily accessible to the consumer.

Lloyd, a funeral director from a small, southern town, told me even he has seen a

rise in themed funerals which, given the conservative nature of the region where his

business is located, surprises most people with whom he talks. Lloyd, who is also an

ordained minister, told me about one of his parishioner's funerals that he directed:

> We had a lady pass away and she collected cookie jars. She just loved them! And she
> gave everyone and their dogs cookies. So when her funeral took place, all around the
> room they had cookie jars and they were open and they had cookies in them. Different
> flavors and types. We had red punch over here. Now was that a three-ring circus? It felt
> like it at times but it was bringing to memory the things that were important to Claire.
> She had an antique electric stove. Just a little short one and it was what she had baked her
> cookies in. It was in the funeral parlor. It was sitting there. We had different potholders
> and stuff.

When I asked him whether he was influenced by the numbers of customer who wanted a

themed funeral, Lloyd, who is usually quite animated, turned solemn when he replied,

"My funeral is already taken care of. It's written down step by step. I'm going to lay in

state in my church. My songs are going to be 'Somewhere Over the Rainbow,' and

Tammy Wynette's, 'I'm One of a Kind.' I'm going to have my signature and a grand

piano on the casket lid. That's me. I love my piano I love playing the piano." Lloyd finds

great pleasure and fulfillment in music and he has designated particular symbols and

goods to articulate the deep meanings music has had in shaping his identity. Lloyd told

me that he even purchased small tokens to further express this—little key chains with

musical notes on them, which will be handed out to his funeral attendees.

Themes can be quite attractive for consumers since they have the potential to

liven up what has historically been a dour event. One can only imagine the fun that can

be had at a funeral this customer's funeral: "'We want a nice party. It'll be so pretty. It'll

be held in a public park with fountains with a tent, and very good catering'… And the

music must have a water theme, [the customer] said, such as the Beatles' hit 'Yellow

Submarine.'" (Montet 2007). Theming holds particular appeal to an industry beset by

cultural contradictions since themes divert attention away from the fault lines these

contradictions create (Gottdiener 2001). This is no less true for any businesses interested

in manufacturing a distraction. As Mark Gottdiener (Ibid.) states:

> [B]usinesses must disguise the instrumental exchange relation of money for a
> commodity as another relation between commercial place and the consumer… By
> orchestrating selling as theming and by the strategic design of consumer
> environments saturated with symbols, the connotative dimension of marketing
> overwhelms other aspects… Theming reduces the product to its image and the
> consumer experience to its symbolic content. (p. 73)

But I would argue that theming (like branding) is also appealing for its ability to embed

the consumer in a narrative that is easily recognizable and widely available. This is

especially relevant for individuals who have become disembedded by culture and market

mechanisms. This is counter to "When roles and statuses were ascribed by tradition, we

all knew who the deceased was and where he or she fitted in our lives" (Walter 1996: 16).

In the absence of such traditions and the mapping schema they provide, themes (and the incorporation of brands) provide a convenient way to celebrate the passing of a life. Themes and brands both situate individuals within a broader amusement culture.

Theming, a product of "the transformation of leisure into a massive industry" (Beardsworth and Bryman 1999:229), is thus one facet of the much larger trope of amusement. While theming, which "is constituted out of one of a wide range of readily recognisable narratives drawn from popular culture" (Beardsworth and Bryman 1999:228), utilizes conventional tropes in which to insert the consumer. Branding and theming are related by virtue of their abilities to emplot a consumer in a grand(er) narrative or canopy of meaning. Both create a sociality for consumers who might feel alienated either as a consequence of disembeddedness or because former rituals no longer hold any kind of currency of meaning for them (i.e., one is merely "going through the motions"). Thus, while the funeral industry is in many ways distinctive among commercial entities, commodified sociality is not confined to death care.

Firms create a line of communication through their brands and in doing so negotiate meanings both for actors employed within the funeral industry in addition to the purchasing (and even non-purchasing) public. The use of brands within the funeral industry and, more specifically, within funerary rites, demonstrates the value of amusement in contributing to the ongoing expansion of capital. While brands such as Dignity sublimate some contradictions that emerge with the rationalization and corresponding de-moralization of the funeral industry, others remain. For instance, loss incurred by death is an intensely personal experience yet brands may impose a sort of commodified universality on the rites.

The use of branding and theming are becoming more widely available in the funeral industry all the time and both are facets of other retail industries' efforts to commodify and sell *experiences* (rather than simply material goods). Alan Wolfelt (2001) authored *Funeral Home Customer Service A-Z,* a title that is considered requisite by the traditionally conservative National Funeral Directors Association. In it, Wolfelt points out American consumers are as often as not paying for experiences and memories (instead of material products), which accounts for much of the success of Niketown, Hardrock Cafe, Mall of America, and the like. To this discussion, Wolfelt appends a consideration of the theming of funeral homes or even individual funerals themselves. The funeral director must engage all five of the customer's senses and make use of what he typologizes as the four forms of experience: entertainment, education, escapism, and aesthetics (Ibid.). He writes: "What if you created a pricing structure that built little if any profits into the casket and other products you sell and instead firmly planted your profits where they belong—in the valuable, value-added experiences you help families create?" (p. 39). Experiential consumption is becoming a more and more important element in retail environments a topic I discuss in Chapter 6.

CHAPTER VI

PRODUCING MASS PSEUDO-DEMASSIFICATION

Introduction

"Distinction has been replaced by distraction" (Prior 2005:133).

Forms of amusement can be found along multiple levels—from the kinds of products and services that are made available to the ways workers are developers attract distributors; from marketing campaigns for the public to the ways spaces are designed within the broader funerary landscape. Amusement affects the ways the industry legitimates its own purpose as well as its growth in society. For workers, amusement alters the relationships that they have with their customers since it often de-moralizes what was long considered to be "moral" work. Funeral workers feel that where they were once "care" providers they are now "service workers."

Amusement also contributes to the stabilization of capitalizing forces and their requisite expansion by creating the possibility of new products, new markets, and new consumers. For these consumers, the goods and services that are now being created can appeal to the desire for leisure or entertainment, thus distracting consumers from the fiduciary demands of the funeral industry. The industry may accomplish this by bracketing the pain and confusion imposed by loss and replacing it with recognizable features from everyday life (i.e., elements derived from an amusement culture).

In this chapter, I continue my discussion of the funeral industry's attempts to alter the "means of consumption," or the ways and the kinds of goods that can be consumed. The funeral industry has traditionally focused on retail and embalming for its revenues (and still does, of course). However, new means of extracting revenue are being increasingly used in the industry. Many economic actors are focusing on providing their customers with an experience, one that can entail everything from a pleasant shopping atmosphere, to an engaging period of planning, or even a highly stimulating funeral event. This change in the means of consumption is intended to realign how consumers relate to the funeral industry. It also happens to be a familiar approach since so many producers today are trending toward "experiential consumption" (Caru and Cova 2007).

After discussing the role of experiential consumption in society, I turn to the ways actors in the funeral industry understand, explain, and generally make sense of these changes. Part of changing the means of consumption means changing the means of production. That is, in order to re-frame the ways goods can be interpreted and used by customers, there have also been corresponding changes to the ways these goods are created. These changes necessitate a shift with respect to the role of funeral workers, and part of this shift is a loosening of control over the final product.

In light of experiential consumption, funeral workers are more likely to provide the consumer with opportunities to plan and "personalize" the final product. Indeed, one might describe many of the events that are a co-production on the part of funeral worker and funeral customer as *spectacular*. My use of the term "spectacular" is meant to invoke the work of Guy Debord (1967) whose very prescient work foretold a culture of amusement. Debord contended that the spectacle represents a commodified form of

distraction and is a product of Western culture's economic moment. It is not merely the rise in the role of consumers in planning their funerals that accounts for the production of spectacular events. In fact, the funeral industry has begun to realize a proclivity for manufacturing a whole host of spectacular products and services. These goods contribute to a wider culture of amusement through their normalization of novel stimuli, and they further the expansion of capital (as evidenced by new companies, product differentiation, sustained growth, etc.). Debord's critical theory is a valuable tool for examining this new commodity form (amusement) and the social relations it creates.

I suggest that the alienation engendered by the new commodity form of the spectacle distances the worker from her product, from her self, of course, but it also creates a gap between the producer and the consumer as it presupposes a *kind* of consumer, one who is willing (and desirous) to purchase novel goods and services. Thus, I conclude the chapter by exploring a final condition in the industry's efforts to change the means of consumption, and this has to do with the reification of the consumer. Extensive marketing studies and customer segmentation practices attempt to pigeon-hole consumers into accessible lifestyle demographics. Currently, discussion on baby boomers pervades discourses within the industry. This generation of persons born between 1946 and 1964 are highly coveted in an otherwise declining market. Boomers are viewed as heterodox and highly individualistic. This is a mutually constitutive social construction. Marketing efforts, which are a result of data imputing characteristics on a class of persons, contribute to identity-building of the same people the marketers are presuming to study. The reification of the consumer, then, both contributes to and is made possible by a culture of amusement.

Thing(s) to No-Thing(s)

Retail environments are increasingly being transformed to create experiential events for consumers. This experiential consumption is intended either to accompany the shopping event or to serve as that which the consumer is purchasing (i.e., the product itself). In those instances, shopping is intended to be an amusing activity. Rather than relying on the mere use-value of a good as a selling-point, consumers can also be lured by making the acts of browsing, testing, playing, sampling, and so forth, value-added attractions. "The life of a consumer, the consuming life, is not about acquiring and possessing... It is instead, first and foremost, about *being on the move*" (Bauman 2007:98). Because "firms are increasingly trying to make consumers feel physical and emotional sensations during their experiences with products and brands" (Codeluppi 2007:155), the integration of everything from coffee shops, climbing walls, and video games, to mood lighting, ambient music, and pleasant aromas, are commonplace in various retail outlets. Experiential consumption can be an end in itself, as when the consumer is paying for (or paying more for) an experience rather than a product. But it can just as easily exist as a means to an end: a selling point; a way to get a customer into a store; or to get her to linger longer or encourage her to make return visits.

While the funeral industry can be characterized as selling both a product (casket, headstone, etc.) and an experience (i.e., the funeral service), historically it has been the product side that has provided firms with their primary revenues. However, firms are increasingly looking at other means of revenue extraction since material goods are declining in demand. More specifically, it has been the sale of caskets which has

generated the most significant proportion of profits for funeral firms according to Smith (1997), an economist who has studied the death care industry. Because the cremation rate has been rapidly increasing to its current levels at more than a third of all dispositions, burial caskets are no longer in as high demand as they once were.[38] Therefore, other sources of revenue have had to be developed.

The attitudes of many funeral directors reflect this shift towards a non-material product environment, even by those whose main responsibility it is to sell material products. Robert is one such person. He is a former funeral director who now runs his own store, Caskets and More. Traditionally, caskets and urns have had an auratic quality that reflected the sacralized rites and the hallowed dead body. Amusement in the funeral industry undermines this auratic quality since it privileges momentary delight over enduring dispositions and lasting significance. Caskets, for instance, were (and still are but to a lesser degree) marketed on their ability to transcend time. But Robert takes pride in the fact that his merchandise, comprised mainly of caskets, urns, flowers, and stationery, fill a pragmatic and yet fleeting need for corpse disposal. He said: "What does the merchandise really do? Is your body going to rot, either way? How much money do you want to put in the ground? Your body is going to do the same thing no matter what you put it in. So why spend the money?" Robert is an animated figure and this becomes most apparent when I ask him whether or not selling funeral products as though they were office supplies or hardware or canned vegetables got in the way of a healthy bottom line: "I tell people, 'How much money do you want to bury? How much more do you

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[38] In as recently as 1981, the well-regarded historian Philippe Aries wrote, regarding the US funeral industry: "Funeral directors are probably afraid that cremation will become as popular in America as it is in England. Cremation is much less lucrative, but fortunately for them, the American public finds it distasteful" (p. 600).

want to spend for the ten minutes you're going to look at some of these things? Ten thousand dollars? And then you're just going to put it into the ground?'" I discuss Robert's store in more detail in Chapter 7, but it is here worthwhile to note that it occupies a rather non-descript strip mall and, if one could somehow overlook the looming presence of the dozen or so caskets inside the store, which of course take up a lot of space, it would appear much like a cross between a mailing supplies shop and one that sells greeting cards. Indeed, the aura of mortality is almost completely absent, to some extent transforming the experience of purchasing funerary goods much like purchasing postage stamps.

Caskets and other goods have traditionally held an important symbolic position within funerary rituals. Not long after caskets were brought to bear on the funeral market, metal was introduced to the casket-buying public. More durable, weighty, and longer lasting than wooden caskets, death was not only abstracted but with respect to the symptoms of death (putrescence, adipocere, worms, and the like) it seemed to be, in fact, deferred indefinitely. Industry participants have, until only very recently, clung fastidiously to the significance of such *permanence* in order to brand and sell their wares.[39]

Batesville, today the world's largest casket maker, waged what was perhaps the most popular campaign embracing this theme. Writer and funeral director, Thomas Lynch (1997) notes, "Permanence and protection, were concepts that Batesville marketed successfully during and after a pair of World Wars in which men were being sent home in

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[39] This is in spite of the fact that anaerobic organisms continue to survive through the embalming process and continue to decompose the body. As Lisa Cullen, author of *Remember Me: A Lively Tour of the New American Way of Death,* forebodingly writes: "[S]ealing a casket can interfere with the natural decomposing process, causing bodies to fill with gases and eventually blow up" (p. 186).

government boxes" (p. 184). Much as Frank Capra, Coca-Cola, suburban tract housing, and Jackie Robinson provided common cultural reference points of identity, security, and pleasure for the American citizen-consumer, the funeral industry manufactured a six-sided fortification against decay, rot, and ephemerality. It should be no surprise, then, that during an epoch of grotesque, mass death, gaskets and seals further guaranteeing the safety and longevity of the buried body became *de rigueur* in the trade.

Funeral products do not appear to matter as much anymore for either producers or consumers. On the same day that SCI finalized its acquisition of North America's second largest funeral company, a spokesperson stated in a webcast: "40% of our customers didn't want a casket so what're we doing talking about it? … So the first thing we did is shifting from a product environment to an experience value and putting the price in the value proposition as well."[40] Grant is a funeral director in his late thirties who told me, "The casket isn't as important anymore..." He said that his customers wanted to spend their money on the event of the funeral rather than some thing with questionable utility.

Third party vendors, and stores like Robert's, combined with the rising cremation rates and the increasing consumer demand for experiential forms of consumption have all contributed a refocusing by funeral homes on the production of events. Alan Wolfet (2001), an industry consultant, justifies this trend in his comments, "Experiences engage, preferably on emotional, physical, intellectual and even spiritual levels… And buying those experiences is akin to buying a series of memories. If that doesn't describe funeral service at its best, I don't know what does" (p. 30). Wolfelt seems to imply that the funeral has always sold experiences and thus little there is new. What may be new,

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[40] Author transcribed from webcast from URL:
http://www.veracast.com/webcasts/ml/healthservices06/62111144.cfm retrieved 1/15/2007.

however, is the degree to which the experiential consumption has become the marketed commodity in itself. That is, funerals are increasingly being sold on the basis of their experiential qualities and on a firm's ability to offer consumers the opportunity to get involved in creating those experiences.

As I have already argued, in accordance with what some sociologists see as a rising demand for meaningful experiences via consumptive behavior (Caru and Cova 2007), funeral firms are turning more and more to manufacturing events. And while funeral services and visitations can be quite eventful, another area firms have begun to leverage experiential consumption is in the planning process. In the past, this process was fairly straightforward and simple for three reasons. First there were limited options of goods and services from which the consumer could select. Second, the funeral service and visitation were both routinized and predictable. Finally, funeral directors provided a great deal more *direction* (to the consumer) than they now do. I will address the element of product differentiation later in this chapter after first addressing the matters of decreased direction on the part of funeral directors and the absence of a standard, predictable funeral, both of which are intertwined.

When I write that there is an absence of funeral direction I mean to suggest that the funeral director has less control over funerals while the consumer has more control. Customer input has led to a greater variety of types of funerals one can expect to see. Helping accomplish this, there are an increasing number of firms that handle nothing but arrangements planning and the production of events. These firms often do not host events in their facilities, nor do they sell caskets, nor do they perform embalming. Functionally similar to wedding planners, these firms work with customers to design a funeral *event*.

These firms also work with other groups and organizations when necessary to provide peripheral services such as transportation, professional speakers, cremation services, reception halls, catering, and the like. Most of the arrangements-only firms, that I am aware of, employ funeral directors (or former funeral directors).

I interviewed Michael, a funeral director with one such firm and asked him to describe how he typically works with someone to create a funeral. Michael said that he begins by soliciting ideas from his customers to plan the service as a whole and depending on various matters such as their degree of religiosity, the number of attendees, the type of speakers, and the time of the year, he proceeds to organize the event. He told me that he had recently held a funeral in a botanical garden where a local singer-songwriter performed and several loved ones were invited to share memories of the deceased.

He said that most of his cases are cremations and that even though he sells urns he typically tells his cremation customers to provide their own—something that may have had special meaning to them or to the deceased and that can serve as a container for the ashes. Various things are used as urns, he said, like vases, ornamental boxes, and other containers that were heirlooms. He went on to describe how some families went home and deliberated over what to use and though he did not say as much one can easily imagine that in doing so, stories would be told, memories shared, and perhaps even old battles were reenacted. Going through the belongings of someone who has died can be difficult, emotionally exhausting, or even overwhelming. Without Michael's intervention, the consumer and her family would likely not have gone through the process of deliberating over what to use as an urn. This activity then has become part of the

commodity (Michael's expertise) for which the consumer is paying. In fact, much

consumer planning of funeral services works in similar ways and thus commodity-

creation, as a process, takes on new meanings.

Arrangements-only firms and funeral planners are not the only industry actors

involved in expanding the role of the consumer in the creation of her product. Traditional

funeral homes are doing this as well. Customers are routinely encouraged to create

scrapbooks to display near guest registries. "Memory boards" that contain pictures, notes

and other memorabilia are common. Tribute DVDs incorporating images from the

deceased's past and family photos are also widespread. Additionally, firms turn over the

actual running of the funeral visitation and service to the customers. Customers can bring

in their own music, their own videos, and include more speakers. All of these elements

necessitate the inclusion of the consumer in the creation of the final product.

Perhaps as a result of the history of negative publicity the industry has so often

been the object of, actors in the funeral industry have become increasingly aware of their

presentation and attempt to control the impressions members of the public have of them.

This has led to an emphasis on how the consumer helps produce and, presumably, how

she experiences her transactions and goods (e.g., such as making the purchasing of

funerary goods more pleasant). The trend is reflected in the increasing reliance on

specialized marketing tools and consultant agencies in addition to measurement

instruments. It is in fact part of the corporatization of the industry and its consumer-

centric focus. Adkins (2005) writes:

> Here it has been generally noted that employee effectivity is measured not, for
> example, in terms of units of production or quality of products, but in terms which
> relate to customers... [C]ustomer satisfaction, appeased customers and customer
> loyalty are all key indicators of employee performance and a range of socio-

technical devices such as the customer audit, customer benchmarking, customer surveys, customer focus groups and job descriptions and job training schemes which foreground customer care, comfort, pleasure and contentment are in place both to make visible and to measure such audience effects. (p. 122)

Funeral firms' too have an increased capacity to monitor their products via feedback from the consumer before, during, and after throughput processes.

What is of particular relevance here is the opportunity funeral firms establish for consumers to participate in the creation of their own products along stages in the process. In these instances, this imparts upon the consumer the ability to ultimately define the final nature of her product. This problematizes the strict division between producer and consumer since conventionally one thinks of the manufacturer as the arbiter of the final product. Now the product is as much a result of customer input as it is a consequence of any manufacturer's design template. As Zukin and Maguire (2004) write, "[P]roduction and consumption are not two poles of a commodity chain, but continually interacting processes in a 'cultural circuit,' where products both reflect and transform consumers' behavior" (p. 178). This imprecise demarcation is an outcome of the kinds of feedback loops in which the producer consults with the consumer herself who in *unison* shape the commodity. By turning the consumer into a co-producer of her commodity, the funeral industry has made possible a value-added experience. That is, at least part of what is being consumed is the experience of creating the product. This experience is better characterized as an event rather than a tangible durable (or perishable).

The move towards event-production refigures the consumer not merely into a co-producer of her purchases. It also bestows upon her privileges that allow for greater levels of personal expression for the deceased. That is, it provides the consumer with the opportunity to create and oversee the rite of passage governing her loved one's death.

Additionally, it allows her a voice in that rite of passage, itself an account of the dead. As one funeral director told me, "Families… tell us what they want and they expect us to make it happen."

These privileges likely appeal to a consumer ethic of care rather than a consumer ethic of desire. The consumption of material goods is generally thought to be a product of libidinal desires. That is, we purchase goods that can make up for what we, as subjects, lack (Peck 1993). Indeed it is widely presumed that the marketing industry works on this principle—consumers can be sold more goods when they see themselves as somehow deficient. This is in contrast to the perspective of scholars, such as cultural anthropologist Daniel Miller (1998, 2001), who have argued that shopping can be considered an ethical activity since one's purchases are often for another or are intended to in some way connect to or respond to an other. I am not here dismissing the compelling logic linking consumerism with desire. However, I wish to open the possibility for an interpretation of consumption as a consequential, moral-making exercise in human meaning-construction. This overturns oft-repeated assertions that consumption is void of deliberative purposivity (Marcuse [1964] 1991), or is self-gratifying and "hedonistic" (Bell 1976), mere status-expression (Veblen [1899] 1963), or simply a distraction from more serious, transformative work (Debord 1967).

Ironically, by relinquishing at least some of the activities that get characterized as care by funeral industry participants and instead, emphasizing their roles in the creation of events, the industry makes possible the social imaginary of a new ethic of consumption—that of care. This supplants the conventional view of consumption as an ethic of desire. In other words, rather than consigning the act of buying goods and

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services to a Baudrillardean simulacrum in which consumption refers only to itself or other immaterial signs, consumption in an ethic of care refers to the affective wish of the buyer to express her remorse and love for the deceased and/or others around her. Gottdiener (2001) writes: "As images, the original meanings of signs no longer matter. Stripped of their deeper significance, symbols become objects or 'sign-vehicles' for individual and group self-expression" (p. 170). It is likely that funerals have always been to some extent an expression of care but what I am here claiming is that changes in the funeral industry have the effect of making it more apparent that consumptive behaviors (involving funerary merchandise and, by extension, all goods and services) can serve as articulations of care since the customer is buying for an other (as opposed to purchasing these items for self-indulgence, any utilitarian need, or even for the collective good—as one might do for public health reasons). However, it undermines the popular representation in which producers are signified as a *shill* while the buyer earns the designation of the manipulated *dupe*.

Thanks in large part to an attenuation of control over funerary rituals by industry actors and the simultaneous rise in customer participation in the process of shaping these rituals, as my data shows, funerals are beginning to look different. Garces-Foley and Holcomb (2006) write: "[T]he contemporary funeral is a constructive reaction against the impersonal, cookie-cutter, ostentatious, theologically focused, tradition-determined, somber funeral practices of the twentieth century" (p. 208). Re-shaping the consumer into co-producer of an individualized funeral gives her more control than she once had. Funeral participants and attendees tend more often now to avail themselves of the opportunities to re-present the lives that have been lived, an important component of

funerary rituals and one that previously fell under the jurisdiction of clergy and funeral directors (Irion 1991, Emke 1999). In fact, evidence suggests that funeral customers do in fact feel they are given a great deal of latitude in how they wish to mark the passage of a loved one and are thus increasingly responsible for the creation of these rites (Wirthlin 2005). As a consequence, consumers are provided new opportunities for consumption as expression of familial and other emotional ties demonstrating that consumption "is not a personal, private act of destruction by the consumer, but a very social act wherein symbolic meanings, social codes, political ideologies, and relationships are produced and reproduced" (Firat and Venkatesh 1995:251). While I do not presume here to know or understand consumers' experiences, I do assert that changing the means of consumption somehow alters material culture, the funeral rituals that get produced and, by extension, the broader culture.

Spectacles

The kind of organizational reflexivity in which the consumer also serves as co-producer has also allowed for increasingly elaborate events, some of which can be quite spectacular. The term "spectacle" in this sociological discourse originated with the social theorist Guy Debord, who was interested in the ways mass media, especially in their visual forms, contributed to the capitalist mode of production and the consequential alienation not merely of a class of laborers but to the broader citizenry. In order to think through these ideas he conceptualized the spectacle as a way to re-consider the dominant role of capital and its effects in everyday life especially in its ability to distance people

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from one another and supplant real emotional and cognitive needs with a new kind of

"false consciousness."[41] Guy Debord claimed that our relationships with other human

beings have been replaced by technologies of representation. And examples of this are all

around: Myspace and Youtube, and even one's favorite television shows serve a social

function by creating a cultural imaginary through which the individual can relate. And,

like Marx, Debord was simply saying that as a consequence of these mediating

technologies, we have become alienated from one another and even from ourselves.

However, according to Debord, the spectacle is more than just the sum of its

technologies and images. So even though Debord never offers an explicit definition of the

spectacle, he claims that it is historically, culturally, and economically specific. Debord

(1967) wrote: "[T]he spectacle is both the meaning and the agenda of our particular

socio-economic formation… [It] is the present model of socially dominant life." In other

words, our social interactions are mediated in different ways now than they were in the

past. It is the confluence not merely of technologies but of technologies, economic

ideologies, cultural trends, and the like that give rise to the spectacle.

What sociologists since Debord have primarily focused on with regard to this

notion of the spectacle are the emphasized portions of following description: "[T]he

spectacle is both *the meaning and the agenda* of our particular socio-economic

formation" (p. 9). The meaning is the need for the ongoing expansion of capital and

revenue growth, and the agenda is the intention to distract consumers away from, or the

concealment of, less than desirable elements of a product's mode of production. There

are a whole host of things in the funeral industry that may be perceived as undesirable

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[41] "False consciousness" implies a totalizing, non-dialectical "structure," and is a concept I only employ to
discuss Debord's texts. This becomes clear as the chapter progresses.

and unpleasant. McDonaldized workers, products, and services (see Chapter 4) comprise just one category. Of course, the spectacle might be understood as removing us from direct experience with mortuary ritual, death, and the commodified nature of each of these, or even conceal that there is a relationship in the first place.

Oliver McRae (2004b) who often writes for the premier publication of the National Funeral Director's Association, *The Director,* on issues of economics and the funeral writes, "The living have no interest in buying a burial, but they are very interested in a glorious celebration of the beauty, magic, wonder and spectacle of life, with friends and family and love all around, i.e., a powerful and poetic funeral" (35). McRae's use of the word "spectacle" is not at all hyperbolic. To wit, funeral firms increasingly embrace high-end (and expensive) technologies for the purpose of impressing customers with novel choices, especially given the present media-saturated populace.

One funeral director I interviewed, Edward, works in a family-owned chain of funeral homes with four properties at present. Like most I have spoken with who have been in the business more than ten years, he has "put [his] time in with the 'conglomerates.'" Now he works out of a suburban firm that caters to an upper middle class clientele. There is a dining area with kitchenette for family members. There are also two visitation rooms and each has a big-screen television. The chapel, where the actual services are held, holds an even larger projection-screen television occupying front and center.

Both music and video figure heavily into the funerals that are conducted under Edward's care. He was one of the first in his region to begin including memorial DVDs in his funeral service packages (now almost requisite at funerals across the US). Families

are instructed to bring in photographs that are then scanned into a software program. A family next selects a nature theme (i.e., mountains, streams, or beaches), which serves as the backdrop for a six-minute montage with an appropriately somber soundtrack. The DVD is designed to play on repeat throughout the visitation or is sometimes integrated in the funeral service.

Kevin's funeral home is one of the newest in the area. It is part of a large corporate network of firms. It lacks the formaldehyde-reek of many homes and is well-appointed with furnishings that do not look as though they were built in the first half of the twentieth century. The walls and carpet are colorful and the doleful funeral bouquets are noticeably absent. As Kevin takes me on a tour of his home he said, "We're getting ready to spend $10,000 on a projector system inside the chapel. They're doing the wiring in there now. There's a cost associated with it of course. We expect to recover the cost and even profit from it from the consumer." Kevin's intent is to immerse the consumer in a different kind of experience by providing what Codeluppi (2007) says is an

> aesthetic of sensation which seeks to stimulate the body using the immediateness of its primary processes (aroused by desire), the communicative capabilities of sounds and images (all that is not conversational), and the possibilities provided by immersion of a previously detached subject into an experience must be considered to be particularly important. (p. 155)

Thus, attending a funeral service at Kevin's firm may be a lot like a cinematic experience, with high-definition television, surround-sound. The aural and visual components combined with the music, the nature of the gathering (someone's death), and the presence of others in the audience may in fact create quite an emotionally moving experience similar perhaps to a collective effervescence.

Marilyn, a middle-aged funeral director, was recently promoted to one of her

company's highest ranks in her market. She too uses videos as a regular part of the

visitations and services, incorporating the customer input. She tells me, "I think the DVD

is probably one of the best things the funeral industry has come up with." Like the vast

majority of funeral directors I have interviewed, when asked what the biggest changes to

the structures in funerals themselves have been, she provides a concise laundry list: they

are much more secular in tone; the use of technology is much more prevalent; and they

are much more participatory. She quickly and confidently adds, "And I think if the

funeral industry is going to be sustainable then we need to embrace those things."

Nigel Thrift (2006) writes that an experiential system of commodities for

consumption can be accomplished by including the consumer as part of the production:

"This stream of thought and practice has now blossomed into a set of fully fledged

models of 'co-creation' which are changing corporate perceptions of what constitutes

'production,' 'consumption,' 'commodity,' 'the market' and indeed 'innovation'" (p.

282). Because the consumer is responsible for providing the images and selecting or

bringing her own songs and soundtracks, the consumer is as much a part of the creation

as the producer (i.e., the funeral director). Part of the commodity that the funeral industry

is producing is in fact a co-production. The industry's product, in this case, is the

consumer's experience of making the final product.

In the past, visitors queued in front of the casket to wait their turn to gaze upon

the visage of the dead. But now video screens can be understood to obviate facing the

abject body of death and all that it symbolizes, such as our reflexive notions of mortality.

Video screens entertain and amuse. They also create a different kind of environment

where space is experienced in different ways and they differentially condition the performance of ritual behaviors. Screens can abstract death and "virtualize," if you will, the immediacy and visceral nature of what death represents. Kozinets et al. (2004) write: "Video screens have become indispensable parts of the spectacular experience, providing a new form of stage that enables consumers to breach fantasy and reality, to transcend physical limitations, and to conjure the iconic spirits of the celebrity pantheon... Screen play is powered by scopophilia: the nigh-irresistible impulse to gaze" (p. 668). Screens are almost ubiquitous in funeral homes today. And their location is significant because they are typically located where once the lectern for a speaker (e.g., clergy member, eulogist) stood or where the casket for the body was located. The spectacle then for the funeral event can distract the consumer from dwelling on death and her own mortality. Instead, screens are just one additional form of amusement that banalizes funerary ritual and transforms it into entertainment.

Americans have not traditionally thought of funerals as a form of entertainment. That is, the ideal typical funeral has rarely been linked to ideal typical entertainment. While most funeral directors avoided using the term "entertainment" to describe their funerals, many often describe funerals that contain descriptors often reserved for forms of entertainment. For example, Grant, a funeral director in his 30s, said:

> Before, even when people did not go to church, they wanted a religious funeral…[Now] they don't have a minister but an emcee, if you will, and that's fine. I like funerals like that. *Maybe* there's a song and *maybe* there's a poem. But we're past saying, "Well, George is in a better place today." That's definitely not the standard anymore.

I found Grant's use of the term "emcee" to be particularly compelling and so I asked him to elaborate on that. He replied, "We are fast becoming event planners…It's about an event and creating that event."

There is a shift from solemnity to spectacle and most of my interviews with funeral directors bear this out. Nearly all of them report a shift away from traditional funeral ceremonies towards something more celebratory and festive. One funeral director I spoke with who has been in the business for nearly thirty years told me, "It used to be solemn and now sometimes you can't even hear yourself think. It's a celebration." Services and visitations focus on those who are living as well as expressions of hope, rather than the loss and the memory of the recently deceased. "Celebrations of life," a now cliché phrase, have supplanted our mourning of the dead. The event of death is contravened, made pleasant or even invisible. The funeral, once believed to be an event of sadness, currently holds the potential as a time of joy.

Ryan is a funeral director in his mid-forties and bills himself as an "alternative" funeral service provider. The "alternative" provider has generated a lot of buzz in the industry, perhaps as much as "personalization" did in the 90s within the trade. Occasionally, "alternative" simply serves as a synonym for "inexpensive," but more often than not an alternative provider is a firm or funeral director who is open to the novel services or products that are increasingly becoming the norm. Ryan talked about how he started his own firm three years ago and about his decade-plus experience working with both corporate and independent funeral businesses. He explained that he is more and more in demand and that the number of funerals he has overseen has surprised even him. He said he is "just giving the consumer what the consumer now wants." And what they

want is an experience that is creative, memorable, but still in some way reflective of the significance of a life now past. He forthrightly stated,

> I'm the kind of person who wants something out of the ordinary. The traditional way is just so boring. You sit there with the body. The preacher comes in and for 15 or 20 minutes they talk about themselves and then they sing three songs. There's just so many better ways to celebrate the life of a loved one.

Ryan's desire for "something out of the ordinary" has been advanced because of the inclusion of consumers into the planning and production process. But it has also received a boost from product developers as well as technologies that allow for novel means of processing and disposing of dead bodies.

Spectacular Goods

The creation of events and experiential consumption more broadly are increasingly important for the funeral industry. However, products continue to serve as the foundation for many firms' revenues. Spectacular products are even being accepted into mainstream firms. However, some of these products might be seen as increasingly conforming to what Worrell (2008) conceptualizes as a "uselessness" value rather than a use-value. That is, through the reclamation of waste, in this case, the lifeless body, products can be created simply for the sake of making and owning them (Ibid.). One might consider the pet rock fad of the 1970s or the way packaging, normally a throwaway, is kept intact for collectors of goods like toys.

Cremains, or cremated remains, are processed human ashes. Often, before a body is placed into a crematorium and set afire, an embalming has taken place. This occurs if

there is a visitation with viewing, there is trauma to the body, and/or a delay of more than two days after a death that a funeral can be scheduled. Thus, cremains are typically already quite "processed" and can be further "refined" to create an altogether novel product. Cremains can be turned into jewelry, headstones, or paints. These products then serve as, respectively, adornments, signifiers, and an intentionally obsolescent good that is transformed into yet another product (a painting).

The spectacle, according to Debord, is totalizing. His conceptualization left no room for human experience to occur outside the spectacle or for resistance to the spectacle. In the "society of the spectacle" there is no escape from vacuous exchange relations and their tendencies toward the subordination of human beings. But an interpretation of the spectacle that precludes critique also seems to disavow consumer imagination. Waste, of course, can be commodified but it can also be recycled and reassigned new meaning. It might be argued that given our post-scarcity, use-value is highly contingent and self-referential. As Sherry, Kozinets, and Borghini (2007) write: "Consumers tend to be tricky wild things who find their own uses [of things] … Seeking authenticity and truth as well as fun and amusement, consumers bring their own conceptual and creative apparatus to the party" (p. 18). Thus, re-processing a lifeless body is not a "reclamation of waste" so much as it is a mechanism of recycling and re-use. Cromer (2006), for example, describes one funeral consumer who had her husband's ashes turned into a jewel which she put at the center of a cross: "She wears it on a necklace. Every Friday night she still meets their friends at the hangout, and they always ask her if she brought her husband. They buy him a beer, and she takes off her cross and dips it in the beer" (p. 87). Savvy consumers demonstrate that there can be quite a broad

gap between the use-value as it was intended versus the actual enactment of a commodity.

The French historian Philippe Aries (1974) noted, "The American way of death is the synthesis of two tendencies: one traditional, the other euphoric" (p. 101). Indeed, one need merely examine the options available to the contemporary funeral consumer to discover just how euphoric Americans can get with their funerals. Enabling this current state of affairs is the rapid pace of product differentiation, which is remarkably high given the relative stasis of the previous 100 years. As one becomes aware of the new products and services that appear on the market every day, one might conclude that novelty is appearing for novelty's sake. But this is a function of the demand for the continuous expansion of capital. Connerton (1989) writes:

> For the essence of modernity is economic development... And capital accumulation, the ceaseless expansion of the commodity form though the market, requires the constant revolutionizing of production, the ceaseless transformation of the innovative into the obsolescent... Integral too is the transformation of all signs of cohesion into rapidly changing fashions of costume, language and practice. (p. 64)

There is seemingly no end to the variety of merchandise that is both novel and spectacular (or euphoric). Honor Industries has a representative take a tablespoon of cremated ashes and makes a pencil out of them. Then an artist is commissioned to sketch a portrait of the deceased with that pencil. Similarly, Ashes to Portraits mixes cremains with oil paint before painting a portrait of the deceased. Most of these novelty goods presuppose cremation as a disposition.

Relict Memorials blends cremains with other minerals to form a granite memorial that can be used as a grave marker so that you can finally be what you may have suspected you always were—a mere placeholder; a cipher in life. One can prove one's

dedication to a particular athletic franchise by purchasing an urn in the shape of a football helmet with your team's logo emblazoned on the side, or a replica of hockey's Stanley Cup. Busts depicting the decedent are increasingly popular.

Of course, the more traditional burial container can be made quite spectacular, too. There are art caskets, futuristic, ovoid caskets for the design-minded set of the hipoisie; Last Supper caskets; patriotic, God-Bless-America caskets for the Republican red-staters; and bio-degradable, enviro-friendly ones for the blue-staters.

If one can dispense with thriftiness, there are a wide variety of crematory services that do not involve urns. Ashes can be launched into space to circle the globe or even the moon by Celestial Services. A colleague of mine is fond of Eternal Reefs which immortalizes your loved one by combining cremated ashes with other materials and then shaping the material into a sphere approximately two or three feet in diameter. The bereaved then accompany the processed cremains a few hundred yards off the coast where they are set about twenty feet under the ocean's surface (usually, I hear, accompanied by a rather moving ceremony).

Now a relatively well-known company, Life Gem, transforms the carbon-artifacts of human remains into precious jewels. Another company, Celebrate Life, packs the cremains in with pockets of gunpowder. Their sendoff involves fireworks, the literal kind. The consumer picks the colors. And still another company puts the ashes in a high-altitude balloon for launching where the balloon ruptures at a certain height and sends the cremains to the four winds.

Contributing to the culture of amusement are the media responses many of these items receive when they garner the attention of a journalist:

> [B]ack in August 2002 when [LifeGem] unveiled its product, all the world thought the whole thing was mental. WEIRD BUT TRUE! shrieked the *New York Post.* The *Maryland Gazette* included LifeGem diamonds in its list of "Wild and Wacky" holiday gifts. HERE'S A WAY TO MAKE A LASTING IMPRESSION, sniggered the *Philadelphia Inquirer.* The *Orange County Register* called anyone who'd consider the process "looney-tooney survivors." (Cullen 2006:70)

As I discussed in Chapter 3, cultural contradictions create "clusterings of conflict" and I would argue that the ridicule implicit in some media accounts demonstrates one such clustering.[42] This conflict emerges from the need for capital expansion and the need to honor the dead in a culturally appropriate manner. Novelty goods and services are more accepted now than they were in 2002 when the aforementioned passage notes the caustic tone of the mainstream press's lampoons but for many they are still considered tasteless.

Simply from the description of the response to LifeGem, one can see how this particular clustering involved popular media, LifeGem, as well as LifeGem's consumers (characterized as "looney-tooney"). What the passage neglects to reveal is that the clustering also includes funeral workers who are usually responsible for marketing novelty goods via word of mouth and providing access to those goods. Not every funeral worker I interviewed, of course, was thrilled with this shift toward spectacular products or euphoric parties that are playing a more prominent role in the industry. In fact, most expressed some ambivalence and a minority was unequivocal in their desire to preserve the traditional funerary elements. Harold is one such person. He is in his 70s and his view reflects this more conservative position:

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[42] Instances of such media accounts are not hard to find regarding novelty items and services as evidenced by the following headlines: From December 2006, *Entrepreneur*: "Death Becomes You"; November 7, 2005, *Barron's*: "Breathing New Life into a Dying Business"; April 9, 2007, *The Sun*: "Burial is so Last Century"; October 28, 2006, Financial Post, "Meeting the Reaper with Style." Of course, combining sports and death brought on a whole new list of clichés as was the case when MLB allowed for its own images: October 6, 2007, The Galesburg, Illinois, *Register-Mail* "You Could be Buried Along with the Cubs"; October 16, 2006, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, "When the Ballgame is Over…"; May 6, 2007, New York *Daily News*, "Yer Outta Here!"

Some funeral homes put out tables and chairs and have a social thing. I'm a funeral director and not a party planner. Some places have a bar or a separate building with a kitchen. Some have their own caterer and they make a little money off that too… I've been doing this for so long and I'm just interested in providing the funeral service for the families and avoiding the party atmosphere. I mean death is a pretty crummy thing.

I asked Graham, a well-known industry consultant, trade magazine writer, and blogger for his opinions on these novelty goods. Graham sounded incensed as he spoke to me on the subject:

My thoughts on it is that it's mostly foolishness. It gives the media something to talk about and everybody [in the industry] pats themselves on the back because well, at least the funeral [industry] is in the media but most of this, Grandma's Kitchen [a themed funeral home that had been profiled on a CBS morning news program] and whatever all else, I don't think it helps us. For the most part, people see that as irreverent and are not comforted. I've talked to others who even see it as very dangerous. But it just feels like nonsense to me.

Thomas Lynch is a funeral director who has written books of poetry, a sort of memoir of his life as a funeral director that was a bestseller and then made into a PBS special on television, and many articles for many mainstream publications like the New York *Times*. Lynch works out of a family-owned chain of homes he and his brothers inherited from their father. He has often criticized the direction of new American deathways in both trade publications and mainstream outlets alike. In an address to the ICCFA 2007 Annual Convention he characterized the transformation of the American funeral industry as a "shift from the real to the virtual, from the prayerful to the playful, from gravitas to the trivial" (in Hernan 2007). And another popular writer in the trade referred to these kind of spectacular goods as a "silly and ultimately vacant gimmick" (McRae 2004b:40).

Critics of the funeral industry's present offerings to consumers are not limited to industry participants. One sociologist writes, "American funerals are not very sad

occasions…the funeral has become an empty, shallow, and increasingly worthless ritual" (Moller 1996:97). Two psychologists too, weigh in: "The enactment of funeral and bereavement rituals in contemporary American culture is often inauthentic, a hollow and rigid practice, devoid of an opportunity for genuine healing" (Romanoff and Terenzio 1998:699). The use of novelty and spectacle in funerary rites is often justified by a desire to escape rigid and arbitrary rituals in which one merely goes "through the motions." However, some obviously feel that novelty and spectacle perpetuate, rather than diminish any perceived emptiness.

Similarly, rather than simply distract one's attention away from the cultural contradictions that are a part of the funeral industry, spectacular goods create their own contradictions and conflicts. For many, it seems, either death exists as a spectacle or it hardly registers at all and at least one company satirized Americans' apparent appetite for amusement. Back In the September 1998 issue, the *Atlantic Monthly* reported that a Louisville, Kentucky bookbinder named Timothy Hawley had begun selling memorials for the dead. Mr. Hawley had found a way to combine paper pulp and cremated human remains in order to create pages that could then be bound in book volumes. Mr. Hawley apparently saw a way to capitalize on the growing market for unique funerary goods and he called his invention "bibliocadavers."

The author did not miss an opportunity for a quip: "The advent of the bibliocadaver will, if nothing else, add a new facet to the idea of books being remaindered." Though it took a few years, it was finally discovered that the whole bibliocadaver idea was nothing more than a prank Hawley was trying to pull on his customers that, if you'll pardon my pun, took on a life of its own. Before the

bibliocadaver was revealed as a hoax, the product received little more than a collective

shrug from funeral insiders who have grown accustomed to new and wildly inventive

products and services appearing on the market every month. The jaded reception by the

trade goes to show the rapidity of product differentiation in the industry as well as the

way novelty for its own sake so quickly wears out its welcome as people move on to the

next exciting thing.

The *Atlantic Monthly* represents the parodic impulse (which is accurate,

especially given that the bibliocadaver was never actually manufactured). One could

understand parody as revealing something of a clustering of conflict—a messy and

contested terrain. There, actors compete to define what gets treated as serious and what is

worthy of satire. However, it is pastiche, according to Fredric Jameson ([1983] 1993) that

is more typical of late capitalism:

> Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique style… but it is a
> neutral practice of such mimicry, without parody's ulterior motive, without the
> satirical impulse, without laughter, without that still latent feeling that there exists
> something *normal* compared to which what is being imitated is rather comic.
> Pastiche is blank parody. (p. 114)

Indeed, this thoroughly postmodern trope is evident in the funeral industry. Victorians

wore jewelry made from the hair of their dead. We have LifeGem. Colonial American

families washed and buried their dead. Today we have commercialized d.i.y. funerals.

Sailors send their dead into the depths of the oceans, but even landlocked Americans

have Eternal Reefs and Atlantis. The ongoing drive for the expansion of capital can lead

to the co-optation of histories, by substituting traditions borrowed form the past with

commodified spectacles. And it does so in order to create new products and services and,

ultimately, new consumers for those products and services, the subject to which I now turn.

Making a Consumer

"If you're creating memorable Experiences, you must begin to think of your products as the families you serve. That's right—the customer is the product" (Wolfelt 2001:159).

The rise of spectacular products and events both presupposes and creates consumers. That is, marketing reports, which ostensibly make known what consumers want, are used to justify putative "need." And as with almost every area of commerce these days, marketing in the funeral industry plays an enormous role in its ongoing operations. When survey findings from major companies like Cremation Association of North America and the Wirthlin Group are published, the consequences are palpable. Trade magazines publish endless accounts on the shifting trends; bloggers post diatribes and the radical changes that need to take place in the industry to adapt; corporate "powers that be" cite results and develop brands and new product lines; and even funeral workers who are neither owners nor managers are often aware of the reported trends.

All of these actors and their responses help "create" a customer and they do so in two different ways. First of all, by adapting to cultural and economic trends, economic actors hope to produce the kinds of goods and services that will attract new consumers (i.e., "create" buyers). But, these actors also reify the consumer by accepting the marketing studies as a kind of truth that reveals something previously unknown about the

consumer. In other words, the knowledge that gets disseminated through marketing

studies allows one to order, categorize, and classify one's clientele and therefore "know"

one's customer. Since no knowledge is *tabula rasa*, these knowledges allow the funeral

worker to create a cognitive schema through which the constructed "customer" can be

perceived, interpreted, and interacted.

One sees evidence of this reification process at work by examining the manner in

which so many in the funeral industry have become fixated on the baby boomers. No

other customer segment gets discussed and written about more than this generation of

individuals who are currently burying their parents and purchasing pre-paid services for

their own funerals. While boomers are already consumers for the industry, the bulk of the

profits from this generation have yet to be realized. It stands to reason, then, that

speculation on when these boomers will begin dying borders on obsession for some

people. Everyone sees a boom in the number of customers but not everyone is sure when

it will arrive. Hand-wringing over the matter is pervasive. As a result analyzing death

rates has become a major pastime for industry participants. Consider the following

excerpt of a response to a question about death rates from the audience at SCI's 37th

Annual Investor Conference (from website:

http://insurancewsnet.com/article.asp?n=1&neID=20070919560.2_7c1c025ee936a0af

retrieved 2/2/2008)

> In 2005, we saw, or 2004 we were down 2%; in 2005 we were up 1.5%, and lo
> and behold, and not surprising to us, they came out recently and said in 2005 the
> number of deaths actually increased. And most of that increase was related to
> cancer deaths… And one thing as it relates to our relevant markets, we believe
> that they're down again, quarter-over-quarter in both first and second quarters, but
> further… but the Baby Boomers kick in, and that's very significant, and it ranges
> anywhere from 2011 to 2018, depending on who you want to believe…

This very lengthy response (heavily abridged on my part) to a very basic question demonstrates the degree of rationalization industry actors have undertaken to allay the fears of investors and take advantage of "Dead baby boomers [who] will bring many happy returns to stockholders who, unlike their source of capital, have only one foot in the grave rather than both" (Laderman 2003:181). As a result, numerous exegeses have been written in the trade literature on the flu pandemics, CDC mortality rates, life expectancy shifts, and Census population trends.

Talk around baby boomers specifically with regard to their demise pervades discourses in the trade. Corporations, as I have stated, like to talk about the coming "boom" in order to attract stockholders. Independent funeral home owners see the baby boomers as a corrective to what has been an otherwise declining market. Others are concerned that the industry may be overwhelmed by the boomers going bust. Almost everyone agrees that the industry will be universally impacted and dramatically affected. One industry consultant and regular magazine writer states: "Every facet of our business, from regulators to suppliers, from colleges to funeral home owners, from crematory and cemetery operators and beyond will need to function at a new pace in the coming years" (Hathaway 2008:27).

The assumptions behind these truths are often revealed in very public discourses such as mass media sites. In the *New York Times* for example, one could learn that, "'The body's a downer, especially for boomers,'" according to the founder of Everest, a funeral concierge (arrangements only) firm (Leland 2006). The medical internet-portal, WebMD.com, posted an article on so-called "designer funerals." The author (Davis 2003) explored how baby-boomers were opting for more "funky" funerals: "Today, people …

celebrate death. They party. They go out in style. They're putting the 'fun' back into funeral services." In a recent article in the *Los Angeles Times*, Rommelmann (2005) noted: "[Baby boomers] are the folks who wrote their own marriage vows and demanded home births and hospices, and now that they're burying parents and considering their own final arrangements, they're looking for alternatives…" (p. 10).

My point is not that it is empirically unfaithful to make such broad generalizations about clusters of individuals according to various demographic profiles. Rather, my point is that because these generalizations become embedded assumptions about ideal customers, and because business practices as well as goods and services are created to conform to those assumptions, consumers can only function within a pre-given apparatus. These assumptions have always existed—simply consider the following statement made in a funeral directing textbook: "The cremation family has the reputation for always knowing exactly what they want. It's funny, though, that when asked specifically just what it is they *want*, their answers reveal what they want is usually not what they *need"* (Klicker 1999:66). Assumptions regarding one's customer shape the interactions that are likely to emerge.

Ryan is a funeral director and an entrepreneur who operates his own business but does not work in a funeral home. Rather, Ryan has an office in a nondescript office building in his city's central business district. Ryan, an "alternative" service provider, told me:

> We have the baby boomers now. They're a different type of people than their parents and grandparents and they've dealt with their parents' funerals. They're much less traditional, much more cost-conscious, and they have much less time. Now people don't want to go to a funeral to weep and cry. They want something as simple as possible that still has dignity and respect.

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Ryan presupposes several "truths" about baby boomers that get reflected in the services and products he offers. His goods are relatively inexpensive; his rituals are short, casual, anything but morbid and depressing, and they are designed by his customers.

One might also consider Eternal Image's claim: "There are 75 million Baby Boomers in the US alone. As a generation they are used to getting not only what they need, but what they want—and what they want are brands" (from Eternal Image website: http://www.eternalimage.net/investors.asp retrieved 11/15/2007). Eternal Image, of course, has responded to this call for brands by providing them in abundance for boomers funerary merchandise.

Eternal Image's claim is ironic and likely spurious. The company's founder and CEO, Clint Mytych, is only in his 20s and, prior to Eternal Image, had no connection to or background in the funeral trade. An argument then could be made that the company has successfully manufactured a need (for brands) that did not previously exist. Thus the "truth" that is propagated by the company could merely be an exercise in *post hoc* justification. Very likely it is, but only to a degree.

The funeral industry may be seen as an apparatus, one built on logics, ideologies, epistemologies, and beliefs that are based on connections to other apparatuses, social institutions, scholarly discourses, regulatory mechanisms, and the like. Actors within the funeral industry rely on any number of sources from which they draw on knowledges and assertions regarding the world and its ordering such that it may be impossible to locate their sources much less adjudicate the veracity of the sources. As with any apparatus the tendrils connecting it with many other discourses and apparatuses are so convoluted, tangled, and intertwined as to become taken-for-granted, so that assumptions have

vanished and truths have materialized in their place. Many of these truths merely circulate in the channels and flows of gossip and word-of-mouth, online testimonials, and written texts. Thus, to ask which came first—the consumer and her demand or the ascriptive identities of the consumer and the commodities that emerge out of those constructed identities—is inconsequential and unanswerable.

Again, my point here is that the assumptions made about the consumer shape the relationships among the worker, the consumer, and the commodity. The assumptions about the consumer that the producer makes affects what goods and services will be offered. This is a restricted set of options since there is in fact an almost infinite array of possibilities. Ironically, this industry places a premium on its ability to provide today's consumer with an abundance of options because today's "ideal" customer, the baby boomer, "wants" choice. Boomers are assumed to be highly individualistic as evidenced by the following statement by Laderman (2003): "[L]ess bound by modern American traditions, baby boomers are more likely to improvise and innovate when planning rituals to accompany the dead to their final, this-worldly destinations" (p. 181). As I mentioned in both Chapter 1 and Chapter 2 "personalization" emerged as the dominant buzzword in the trade in the 1990s. Personalization became a way firms could open up the possibility to expanded choice for their customers. No longer did customers need to abide to the strictures of ritual tradition that often prescribed what were viewed as overly formalized and arbitrary routines. Instead firms encouraged their customers to create their own eulogies, bring their own music, and the like. Merchandise was created to be customizable, such as caskets with pull out shelves or replaceable cornices.

In part personalization was a response to the notion that in order for boomers to

appropriately express their own individual preferences, they needed choices.

One prominent trade consultant, Wolfelt (2001) writes:

> Boomers are not very familiar with funerals. They come to the arrangement table
> somewhat skeptical of traditional funerals, though they often would like some sort
> of service. They don't care as much about the casket and indeed, are more likely
> to choose cremation for body disposition. Instead of concerning themselves with
> the casket, they want more information about the entire funeral process and more
> ideas for personalizing the service. (p.15)

In order to personalize goods for what is characterized as a highly individualistic

generation of consumers, increasing number of choices had to be made available to the

buying public. Indeed, product differentiation in the trade is rapid and regular. Consider

the following passage:

> A recent survey by of Boomers by Batesville Casket Co., in Indiana, found that
> just 14 percent wanted the bereaved to "visit their grave." But a startling 41
> percent wanted friends and relatives to "throw a huge party." As a result,
> Batesville now helps undertakers offer theme services, such as "Cool Jazz"
> funerals… or the "Outdoorsman" package (which includes a coffin outfitted like a
> hunting lodge, complete with gun rack, bear skin rug, and elk antlers). (Weiss
> 2001:41)

Here, one sees how Batesville, a company that has been manufacturing caskets for over

100 years, is shifting its attention to a wider variety of goods and services, all of which

imagine particular kinds of consumers.

With these many choices, consumers are sold values and lifestyles and not simply

products and services (Zukin 2004). As one funeral home claims on its website: "All your

life you've had a say over your choice of wardrobe, music, hobbies and friends. So why

is it, when it comes to final wishes, there is hardly any choice?" (From Bunker Funeral

Home website: http://www.bunkerfuneral.com/ retrieved 1/22/2008). Implied in the

different choices is the notion that we as consumers are increasing our agency and ability

to direct our identities and values through our purchasing decisions.

One might counter that consumption as a form of agency is too reductionistic.

Mary Douglas (1982) has argued:

> If the choices we have are mostly of the bazaar kind, small, similar items
> purveyed at similar prices-- like the choice between numerous highly standardized
> programs on cable television-- the case for our enjoying increased options is not
> made. Quite the contrary, it has to be reconciled with a daily lament against the
> dull uniformity of our lives-- the same menus, the same clothes, the same sports,
> and the same homes. Where is free choice? (p. 11)

Indeed, within the funeral industry, consumer choice, especially with regard to small

items, is now abundant. One prominent funeral corporation provided their customers with

a 29-page catalogue of available goods. Upon closer inspection, the customer would find

a catalogue of funeral service packages in which choices were fairly superficial. Each

package differed from the next by virtue of its inclusion or exclusion of one particular

element or item. Noted trade consultant, Ralph Klicker (1999), describes of few basic

choices that have to do with the casket. Once a color has been decided on, a finish for the

exterior of the casket must be selected: polished, semi-gloss, matte, satin, painted,

crinkled, or hammertone are some of the available options. While not immediately

apparent, the thickness of the material, which must also be decided, is highly symbolic.

Note the following account by an industry leader: "On an average, 19 gauge is 16%

thicker than 20 gauge and will last 29% longer when buried in soil. Eighteen gauge is

33% thicker than 20 gauge and will last 58% longer..." (Ibid., p. 87). Thus, the gauge of

the material is associated with ephemerality versus permanence.

Indicative of progressively more fractured and fragmented realities, "Consumer

goods offer a readily recognizable and cognizable basis for social relations" (Mukerji and

Schudson 1991:19). Consumption provides individuals disengaged from grounding institutions the opportunity to cobble together new identities and new forms of expression. Thus, even in death we are able to convey our commitment and care for others through our consumptive behaviors. But this necessitates the availability of options. To many, the options one has regarding the finish, material, or thickness of a casket are precisely the sort of "bazaar"-type choices Mary Douglas critiques. Yet to some consumers, these seemingly trivial choices can be quite meaningful. In an autoethnography of a funeral he attended, sociologist Raymond Schmitt (1990), described how a family went about deciding on the products to be used for their loved one's burial:

> The family members personalized Clete's funeral... These efforts were linked to the nuances of Clete's life. George and Greg selected a cherrywood casket and 'wild-type' flowers because Clete liked the outdoors. An external observer would not understand that the wooden casket was 'distinctive' because they are used in numerous funerals in America. From the perspective of Clete's family, however, the casket and the flowers represented Clete's normal doings. A crossword puzzle book and a pencil were placed under the pillow in Clete's coffin prior to the visitation. (p. 220)

Here we can see the ways the relationships between the producer (i.e., the funeral home), the consumers (Clete's family), and the commodities (casket) contribute to Clete's identity (albeit, one that is ascribed rather than claimed). Especially given that Clete is no longer alive, the amalgam of goods (flowers, caskets, crossword puzzle book, etc.) can come to symbolize Clete. As Bauman (2007) writes: "Consumers' 'subjectivity' is made out of shopping choices—choices made by the subject and the subjects' prospective purchases; its description takes the form of the shopping list. What is assumed to be the *materialization* of the inner truth of the self is in fact an *idealization* of the material— objectified—traces of consumer choices" (p. 15). Thus, in a consumer society, identity is, at least in part, an articulation of what one consumes (i.e., I am what I buy). Since the

funeral industry rarely manufactures didactic, *memento mori* these days, and celebrations of life are becoming the norm, the funeral industry is poised to exploit the connection consumers can make between material goods and identity. This is especially true if those goods can contribute to a culture of amusement that appeals to living funeral celebrants.

Bunker Funeral Home in Arizona received some local media attention by airing humorous radio spots and showcasing a Toyota Scion around town wrapped in ads for the firm. Their homepage (from Bunker Funeral Home website: http://www.bunkerfuneral.com/ retrieved 1/15/2008) asks: "All your life you've had a say over your choice of wardrobe, music, hobbies and friends. So why is it, when it comes to final wishes, there is hardly any choice?" Bunker is not alone in the industry in offering choice. In fact, choice can be so abundant as to be spectacular. In fact, the laundry lists of items available to the funeral consumer that I have identified throughout this chapter suggest that they comprise a spectacle in their own right. Among these items many are not only spectacular but they conform and contribute to a wider culture of amusement.

Increasingly, the contemporary funeral industry engages with the public via forms of amusement. These interactions with the public are often mediated by novelty goods and spectacular services. Thinking about the changing nature of retail products merely as expanding product differentiation and the pursuit of ever-higher profit margins may lead one to be distracted from the monetary costs in addition to the social costs of a highly rationalized marketplace. Thinking about these changes in terms of the spectacle re-aligns the sociological focus by providing an entry point into the investigation of the nature of the historical moment of our consumer society. Rather than focusing on the commodities,

one might instead focus on the commodity form and the relations that are created out of that commodity form.

The spectacle can be seen to have particular functions with regard to its deployment in the funeral industry. The spectacle likely diverts the consumer's attention away from what Peter Berger (1967) has called the "lurking irreality" implied by thinking about one's own death, accomplished through the production of highly theatrical or fun funerals. The spectacle also distracts attention away from the nature of the product whether that product is a funeral ritual or the commodified dead body. As such, "these contemporary funerals glorify life itself and leave little room for a contemplation of death and demise as universal aspects of the human condition" (Crouch 2004:130). The kind of self-referentiality now available through the consumption of funeral goods challenges the tenacity of the funeral tradition by supplanting the corpse with the bereaved self as the focus for rituals. While funerals are still about the dead, they are also about the consumer's relationship to the commodity form. As Thursby (2006) writes: "The American emphasis on individuality, personal need, and connectedness has taken precedence over engagement with separation, transition, and incorporation" (45). The abject nature of death and decay then can be concealed behind the pleasant and even amusing screens provided by video, television, pleasant soundtracks, recognizable logos and brands, and unique products and individualized disposal services. At the same time, one must acknowledge that the spectacle can divert us from the mortuary rituals of the past that can often feel stifling, arbitrary, as if one is merely "going through the motions." The spectacle shifts one's focus away from what can sometimes be an uncomfortable

economic exchange. But it also normalizes novelty, maybe at the expense of memory and tradition or even the connection with others or one's own mortality.

On the other hand, maybe a little bit of distraction is okay for some people. Maybe when it comes to an entrenched ritual form rather than one that is adaptive and evolving, the spectacle can even be more than okay. Perhaps in a culture of distraction, the spectacle represents a savvy effort to re-enchant the market, to de-rationalize what can often be a rather de-humanizing experience by strategically manufacturing spectacular spaces and experiences in which human affect and a wider more expansive range of emotion can find refuge. Or perhaps the spectacle can function as a means to re-assert the power of ritual to transform one's relationship with the social. Through the inclusion of amusement, humor, parody, when it is least expected, a collective can connect in joy, surprise or even in disapprobation—thus cultivating community via cumulative reaction. All of which demonstrates that the commodity can be transformed into catalyst—providing a common reference point or an anchorage through which novel forms of communal meaning-making come to fruition.

Theming, novelty products, experiential programs, and the consumers' interactions with these services and products, can all serve as forms of amusement. They transport participants away from their own, taken-for-granted reality and can thus be diversionary. They transform death by dressing it up and even playfully poking fun at it, thus proving its value as entertainment. They reveal that death itself can be a catalyst for distraction—a distraction even from itself. Yet these things do not occur in a spatial vacuum, but instead amidst material landscapes and physical structures. Products require spaces in which they can be created and places where they can be sold. Funeral events,

likewise, necessitate particular kinds of physical environments. In the next chapter I explore the ways space and place get re-negotiated so as to accommodate the shift from solemnity to spectacle, and from *memento mori* to amusement.

CHAPTER VII

SACRED SPATIALITY AND (UN)REAL ESTATE

Introduction

"It's no secret that funeral businesses loathe change, that the words tradition *and* history *are usually engraved right on the company letterhead"* (Cullen 2006:20).

There exist two major funeral history museums in the US.[43] The first is the National Museum of Funeral History in Texas. The second, the Museum of Funeral Customs, is in Springfield, Illinois and is adjacent to the cemetery in which Abraham Lincoln is buried. As I discussed in Chapter 2, the American funeral industry was made possible via its associations with discourses around health and medicine. Specifically, that discourse involves the technical knowledge applied through the practice of embalming. Embalming, for the purpose of preserving bodies for use in the ritualized celebration of death, emerged during the Civil War and received widespread approval by the American public largely due to the circuit Lincoln's embalmed body made through heavily populated areas in the United States. The Museum of Funeral Customs is adjacent to the tomb of the man whose embalming served as a catalyst for the birth of the American funeral industry.

The larger National Museum of Funeral History, in Houston, Texas, is located almost a straight drive north from the world's biggest funeral service provider, SCI,

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[43] There is a third, smaller museum that is more an appendage to an active funeral home, and there are undoubtedly, minor museums and assorted tourist traps.

headquartered in the city's central business district. Thus, the National Museum of Funeral History occupies a site near a corporate behemoth, a company that has assumed a hegemonic presence in the industry. The coincidence that the two major funeral museums in the United States are located in Springfield, Illinois and Houston, Texas, is somewhat ironic. Both museums, after all, dedicate much of their collections to the history of the work involved in American funerary rites and both feature gift shops with humorous and novelty souvenirs. However, one site is symbolic of the funeral industry's birth and the other of its present and foreseeable future. The geographical specificity, regardless of the degree of strategy involved, might be understood as a way in which discourse can articulate itself in space and place. Ideas and ideologies can be literally emplaced and indeed history inscribes itself quite directly on memorials and funerary artifacts. Meaning can be both extracted from and interpolated in society's spaces. And of course spaces structure, surround, confine, border, channel, and direct subjects, too.

In this chapter I explore some of the ways places and people are mutually constitutive within the funeral industry. Here, the changing nature of the funeral industry is manifested in and through its literal, or spatial, fissures. That is, there are openings, absences, and heterotopias that have been created alongside the ongoing transformations within the industry. I both describe and explore these spatial figurations and give account of the ways actors in the industry make sense of them. In short, this chapter is about the changing physical landscape in the funeral industry: about eradication of *memento mori* as well as the eradication of hallowed ground itself (due to cremation) to contribute to the culture of amusement.

While one of the manifest purposes of museums is to educate the public, they are increasingly becoming sites of recreation, entertainment, or more generally amusement in order to draw visitors (Urry [1990] 2002). Similarly, the funeral industry has historically provided a kind of didacticism through the production of *memento mori*, especially *memento mori* of a religious nature. In this chapter I argue that the industry's trope of morality is giving way to that of amusement to appeal to visitors (e.g., tourists, browsers, shoppers, etc.). This becomes apparent in looking at the physical structures, material artifacts, and even by what is not present (but may have been present in the past).

I begin by providing a case study of Forest Lawn, a funeral home and cemetery in Los Angeles. Even though Forest Lawn was founded in 1917, it was far ahead of its time in nearly every regard: from its vertically integrated business model and its chain status, to its use of amusement as a marketing strategy and its self-conscious desire to become a tourist draw. MacLean and Williams (2003) write: "[The founder] created an amusement park atmosphere at Forest Lawn, charging admission for bus tours of the grounds, museum visits and scheduled tours of special artwork" (p. 748). Furthermore, Forest Lawn was one of the first funeral businesses to elide *memento mori* in an effort to provide the consumer with a landscape devoid of unhappiness. Many of these developments have only very recently spread to the rest of the country's funeral businesses. I therefore examine Forest Lawn in order to demonstrate the ways cultural values and beliefs surrounding amusement, distraction, and even spectacle, can be articulated in space.

Then I turn to burial grounds more generally and the impact cremation has had on the way cemeteries are used (or not used). Burial grounds stand as a kind of metonym for those in the trade who are concerned with the possibility that the funerary landscape may

be razed altogether. Oliver McRae (2004a) who frequently writes for the trade

publication, *The Director*, worried in one article that Americans "proactively favor… the

sequential downsizing [of the industry] to nonexistence, removing the deathcare industry

as much as possible from the equation through cremation—from funeral service to

furnace service" (p. 96). These cremation catastrophists, and there are plenty in the

industry, may be needlessly concerned over the demise of the industry as a whole. Yet

they are correct in at least on regard—the public's embrace of cremation represents an

important cultural landmark (both literally and metaphorically).

One might feel some empathy for the handwringers, though if one were to

examine the material transformations of some funeral homes. In the final sections of the

chapter, funeral homes are beginning to look a lot less like funeral homes and more like

non-funerary space. In fact some funeral homes are offering a lot more than funerals

(e.g., events, meetings, non-death related celebrations) and some are offering a lot less

than they used to (i.e., some have scaled back and only specialize in limited functions).

The literal re-shaping of funeral homes, the emergence of the virtual funerary (non-

)space, and the marketing of funeral goods as non-funerary retail—all widen the gap from

the morally inscribed *memento mori* of the past and create more pleasant spaces to accord

with a broader culture of amusement.

Forest Lawn

"Imagine... in one afternoon you can see exact replicas of Michelangelo's greatest works

such as David*,* Moses*, and* La Pieta*; Leonardo da Vinci's immortal* Last Supper *re-*

created in brilliant stained glass; two of the world's largest paintings, The Crucifixion *and* The Resurrection*; original bronze and marble statuary, rare coins, valuable 13th century stained glass, old world architecture; and much, much more. And in that same afternoon, you can even take a quiet stroll around a splashing fountain pond that's teeming with ducks and majestic swans! Best of all, it's free." (From the website of Forest Lawn Memorial Gardens:*

http://www.forestlawn.com/visitors_guide/memorial_parks/glendale/index.asp retrieved 12/20/2007)

The majority of burial grounds in the United States are commercial enterprises. Real estate is sub-divided and sold to individuals, sometimes in clusters, sometimes well in advance of being used, and sometimes it is re-sold in the Classifieds section of local newspapers. At any rate, that small piece of land, in and of itself, does little to acknowledge the weight of emotion that is produced by what is secreted beneath the surface. It is merely a piece of land designated for a single purpose and is, on its own, rather plain. A historian cites a cemetery salesman in 1944 who matter-of-factly said, "'We are manufacturers. Instead of coke, slag, pig-iron, etc., we take ground, fertilizer, seed, shrubs, trees, flowers, water, stones, top dressing, etc., and with equipment and men we manufacture a 'product' known as cemetery'" (Sloane 1991:208). However, cemeteries do the work of culture, and burial grounds are cultural goods: intentioned products of an industry that contribute to the meanings we construct around death. They inform how we relate with and recall our ancestors and introduce affective states of consciousness.

Memento mori, objects that implore and warn the living to "*remember thy death,*" have historically played a fundamental role in funerary rituals, that is, until the 20th century. *Memento mori* were elements of material culture that served as "silent reminders of the shortness of life" (Sloane 1991:160), or in the unabashed words of Evelyn Waugh (1947) "to remind a highly civilized people that beauty was skin deep and pomp was mortal" (p. 84). For instance, "The [British] Victorian cemetery was… set on high ground to remind every citizen of their final destination" (Walter 1994:176). Cemeteries and graveyards were at one time suffused with imagery of the macabre and grotesque; imagery that was intended to instill a "healthy" fear of death and thus to inspire one to live a good and decent life. *Memento mori* are catalysts for the contemplation of mortality. "Life is short," they say. The modern, commercialized burial ground, the memorial park, changed that by expunging *memento mori*. This paradigm shift began with Hubert Eaton. "A hard-headed American business man, Hubert Eaton believed in the codes and practices of American business... ingenuity, diplomacy, invention, political sagacity, advertising and public relations, and super-salesmanship" (St. Johns 1959:9).

Hubert Eaton was an unemployed Midwesterner when he learned, via a fraternity brother, that a cemetery in southern California was in need of a manager. After relocating, Eaton sadly discovered the landscape of Forest Lawn to be as desiccated and morose as the business he had agreed to supervise. This changed in 1917, however, when a confluence of variables made possible a re-visioning of Forest Lawn and indeed the contemporary American cemetery. These included: word of a fellow Midwesterner selling pre-need funeral services; a cache of credit financing mined from a newly-established network of friends; and an expanded irrigation structure in and around Los

Angeles (Ibid.). Forthwith, Eaton "removed most traces of death from the landscape" (Sloane 1991:159). Evergreens replaced the native deciduous trees. Markers were supplanted with inconspicuous plaques that lay flush with the ground. Eaton went on what was described as a "shopping spree" across Europe in search of paintings and statues that were both canonical and simultaneously representative of a theology of optimism (St. Johns 1959). Throughout Forest Lawn, he installed portraits of a smiling Jesus and he also commissioned a replica of Da Vinci's *Last Supper* in stained glass. His on-site chapel resembles a gothic cathedral—until you walk inside to find a modern day auditorium. This edifice abuts a museum (and museum store) inside of which are found no exhibits or artifacts having anything to do with cemeteries, much less death. "Eaton created an amusement park atmosphere at Forest Lawn, charging admission for bus tours of the grounds, museum visits and scheduled tours of special artwork" (MacLean and Williams 2003:748).

Eaton completely refigured the hilly landscape to resemble an urban park in which one might contentedly assume the role of a leisurely flaneur. He held weddings and christenings at his cemetery and his "Easter sunrise services regularly drew 40,000-50,000 people in the 1920s and 1930s to hear famous soloists accompanied by a major orchestra celebrate and triumph over death; for a time, the services were nationally broadcast over CBS radio" (McNamara 2002:313). Eaton's "vision was a remarkable combination of gladsome religion, commercialism, conservative American values, and avoidance of reminders of death. These components of the vision infused the landscape and the policies of Forest Lawn and influenced the memorial parks that imitated Eaton's creation" (Sloane 1991:164). Eaton's creation was so popular, in fact, that the historian

Sloane later notes that by 1935, there were over 600 memorial parks in the U.S. fashioned after Forest Lawn. Though parks as multi-faceted as Forest Lawn continue to be rare, almost every cemetery built since then contains at least a few of Eaton's original ideas. For instance, Rose Hills Memorial Park in California boasts that it hosts regular seminars on the care of roses. A tour guide calls Hope cemetery in Vermont "a huge outdoor museum" and leads "hour-long guided tours that cost $65-a-pop" (Delcore 2007). The Glendale Memorial Preserve, a green cemetery in Florida, offers trail hikes through a bamboo grove and the value-added experience of doing so amidst music "amplified by the playing of spiritual Tibetan music."[44] And the "World Wide Cemetery" is deficient of space and dead bodies, as it is completely digital (http://www.cemetery.org/).

Almost all cemeteries nowadays tend towards maintaining an environment entirely devoid of *memento mori*. Umberto Eco (1986) who himself visited Forest Lawn during an extended tour of California writes, "The idea is very simple: Death is a new life, cemeteries musn't be places of sadness or a disorganized jumble of funerary statues... So the great California cemeteries (undeniably more pleasant than ours in Italy) are immense imitations of a natural and aesthetic life that continues after death" (p. 56). A cemetery, then, is a cultural product that constructs, hides, or perpetuates the meanings society constructs around death in both a grand metaphysical sense (as is the case when death is hidden) and on a deeply personal level to the dead (since cemeteries are not the places of heartbreak and abjection that one might conventionally think them to be).

As I have shown, death is almost entirely absent from Forest Lawn. It is as though it were erased from the landscape. St. Johns (1959), an historian, wrote, "Interments at

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[44] http://www.glendalenaturepreserve.org/brochurebamboo01.pdf

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Forest Lawn... increase by 6,500 yearly, yet no one has been able to explain how it is that a visitor may be at Forest Lawn all day and rarely see a funeral procession. This is part of the magic of the man who said depict life, never death" (p. 243). I spent a day at Forest Lawn and can attest to that claim—while I saw dozens of people in the memorial park, there was a notable absence of funeral processions. The more important point, however, that I believe St. Rogers and Umberto Eco are trying to make is that memory implicitly requires some event to have occurred in the past in order to have something to recall. In commodified funerary landscapes that lack reminders, indeed lack "death," what are memories constructed around? If it is correct that "landscape is a locus of memory" (Silverman 2002:5), one might reasonably conclude that a cemetery with a cathedral that is more cinema than chapel, or that a cemetery that conducts weddings and tours is an articulation of confabulation.

Indeed, forgetting may be exactly what is being marketed today. When novelty displaces tradition, market expansion can be more straightforward, because, after all, new and different goods are conducive to capital growth. One very important stimulus for the novelty goods market is the Baby Boom generation whose members are currently burying their parents. Just as importantly, it is also looking to the near- to mid-term future for increasingly creative ways of celebrating its own demise. The journalist Lisa Cullen (2006) remarks:

> As the seventy-six million or so people born between 1946 and 1964 began to hit sixty, they were confronting death en masse in the loss of their parents or each other. And one after another of them, it seemed, was spitting on the status quo... After all, boomers stand accused of bulldozing most cultural norms, from sex to music to hairstyles. Death merely came next on the to-do list. (p. xi)

The value of this population can best be mined by the likes of corporations who maintain resources sufficient to draw on market research, incorporate new ideas on the scale of a cemetery, and redevelop and refigure buildings and landscapes.

After these corporations went through a wave of consolidations in the 1990s and incurred significant debt in the process, the market slowed (Dukcevich 2002).[45] However, activity is picking up again and the deep-pocketed conglomerates are buying up independent and family-owned firms. Many cemeteries like Forest Lawn have blossomed into their own chains and have begun offering a multitude of novelty services via vertical integration in the form of one-stop-shopping. Large corporations are particularly fond of so-called "combo" firms (combination funeral home and cemetery) that can also provide the consumer with this ostensible efficiency. During the initial consolidation boom of the 1990s, Stewart Enterprises, based in New Orleans, Louisiana, focused primarily on acquiring such combo firms. As a result, its revenues went from $143 million in 1992 to $433 million in 1996 (Research Publications Group 1997). With combo firms, funeral services can utilize the space of a funeral home in addition to the area made available by the cemetery to continue to incorporate new ideas and new services. Regardless of the direction a new model will take, funeral companies will continue "to create the modern cemetery landscape as a scene of concealment (of death) and display (of cultural values), to shift it 'from a communal sacred space toward a private commercial enterprise'" (McNamara 2002:303).

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[45] According to SCI's 2004 Annual Report, for instance, their net debt had been *reduced* to $966 million.

"The ground contains a vault which contains a casket which contains the trace of what was once present" (Frank 1990:195).

Until the mid-1960s, cremation rates were stagnant, typically hovering around 3% in the US, which has historically been much lower than the cremation rates of other Western, North Atlantic countries. A combination of factors is thought to have contributed to a steady increase in the cremation rate over the next few decades. Even though Holy Roman Catholic doctrine expressly prohibited cremation for millennia, the Second Ecumenical Council of the Vatican, or Vatican II, which began in 1962, reversed this creed. Then, in 1963, John F. Kennedy, himself a Catholic, was cremated after being assassinated. That same year saw the release of Jessica Mitford's *The American Way of Death*, an acerbic critique of the funeral industry likening it to widespread racket of death profiteers. The book became a best seller and inspired many consumer advocates (and consumers) to view cremation as a more affordable and ethical (in the face of "exploitative" funeral directors) option.

Since more than a third (and rising) of all deaths results in cremation in the US [see Appendix II for US states' cremation rates], many in the funeral industry are sounding the alarm. The depreciating importance of burial grounds necessitates that cemeteries and memorial gardens seek new ways to recoup their losses. Cremation rates have also impacted funeral homes. Funeral homes have traditionally used the mark-up of casket sales to offset the costs of the bulk of the remaining services (which lack the high margins of many of the retail goods) (Smith 1997:155). Most caskets though have been

designed for the purpose of burials (and customers used them that way). Thus rising

cremation rates pose a threat to the conventional means of profit for funeral companies.

Nowadays, some of that cost can be offset through rental caskets that are used only

temporarily for a visitation or service, but since most cremations are currently "direct," or

without a viewing, even those products will not offset the losses caused by cremations.

Alan Creedy (2005) is a writer for the *American Funeral Director* and his comments

summarize many concerns in the field when he writes, "Funeral directors are acutely

aware of the decline in funeral value over the last five years. No matter how well they

merchandise cremation they still lose $2,000 every time they do one" (p. 29). Indeed,

financial crisis is likely at the heart of most of the developments taken by the funeral

industry. However, my point is not to explicate a correlation but to account for the

negotiations on the part of actors and groups.

Cremation is, of course, also a direct threat to cemetery owners. Gould (2005), an

industry marketing executive, writes, "The greatest challenge will be for cemeteries to

remain in business. Certainly the outstanding properties will be survivors, but many will

not. It will be interesting to see how society deals with these cultural icons…" (p. 112).

According to a survey by the Cremation Association of North America (2007), only 37%

of families planned to bury the cremated ashes of their deceased. That figure may even be

inflated, since respondents in this instance were professionals in funeral homes,

crematories, and cemeteries who were polling customers on their *anticipated* actions for

the future. Given that a full 80% of the respondents' customers took possession of the

cremated remains after the cremation. Thus, it is possible that many of those customers

who had earlier anticipated burying those ashes changed their mind and, for any number

of reasons, decided not to bury the ashes. This, of course, is speculation on my part based on the rising number of companies who specialize in "scattering" that are currently making their existence known in the funeral market (in addition to the increasing number of companies applying novel technologies to process the remains as discussed in Chapter 6).

Many cemeteries are offering ornate scattering gardens and "artsy" columbaria with cremation niches. Many others, though, are turning towards other sources of revenue: undisguised entertainment in the form of tours, gardening classes, movie nights, music performances, and plays. Some of these events even draw on irony by acknowledging the unconventionality of burial grounds as entertainment sites. This is a form of pastiche, a topic I discussed in Chapter 6 in which irony becomes commodified in order to present a "new" product (albeit one that borrows heavily from the past). Cemeteries, after all, especially those that are explicitly created as memorial parks, have long been designed to attract visitors and serve the dual purpose of burial ground and recreational park grounds (for picnicking, frolicking, and the like).

So while cemeteries as entertainment sites may not be an entirely new commodity, they certainly represent a new commodity form, one that alters the relationships between consumers, producers, and commodities. The commodification of amusement has obscured the primary, or manifest, function of storing the dead, it has become merely a marketing semiotic to attract future customers. In a trade magazine, Kiernan (2006), herself an advocate for using cemeteries to stage creative events and performances, writes:

> [I]t's never too early to introduce the public to the cemetery, to get them adjusted to the idea that a cemetery is more than a grim reminder of their mortality but

rather a place for the living to enjoy life while respecting and remembering those who have passed before them. Every person who walks through a cemetery's gate is a potential customer even if they don't know it yet. (p. 10)

Amusement functions, too, as a sales pitch even as it displaces *memento mori*.[46]

Examples of burial grounds as amusement venues abound. Laurel Hill Cemetery in Philadelphia hosts a "Gravediggers' Ball" ($150 per head), and another event, "Dining with the Dead" ($50 per head), is catered but BYOB. Every April the same cemetery also hosts the "Titanic Event" where lectures are given about the connection between Philadelphians and the Titanic: "The evening is always capped off by a sumptuous feast that replicates the one served aboard *Titanic* on that final, fateful day" (from Laurel Hill Cemetery website: http://www.thelaurelhillcemetery.org/index.php?m=4&id=7 retrieved 11/22/2007). At Green-Wood, in Brooklyn, you can "Celebrate [Halloween] with tales of murder, mayhem, spirits, and ghosts." (from Green-Wood website: http://www.green-wood.com/ retrieved 11/22/2007). They also host numerous charitable events, and performing arts. Oakwood Cemetery in Troy, NY, hosts performing arts, and bird watching and has a calendar, a Halloween party, and art auctions. Many older burial grounds host guided tours (as do many not-for-profit cemeteries who have seen cuts of state funds).

Spaces matter and these changes to burial grounds can affect the way people construct and think about their relationships with the dead. As Francis, Kellaher, and Neophytou (2005) write:

Cemeteries are arenas where memories, intimate and social, are crafted and where individual and group identities are constructed and given material statement. In the public-yet-private world of the cemetery, communication between the living and

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[46] The author goes so far as to suggest handing out survey cards or evaluation forms that ask questions such as: "[W]ould you like to be alerted to future events and garden openings?" and "[W]ould you like to be placed on our mailing list?" (Ibid., p. 15).

the deceased, and between grieving family members and other mourners takes place verbally and through the non-discursive language of stones and flowers... Stones and flowers are conduits through which feelings and significance are communicated at intimate and public levels. (p. 107)

Even if the quasi-public space of the cemetery were to vanish, the "communication between the living and the deceased" Francis, Kellaher, and Neophytou describe, would still be possible, albeit through the "non-discursive language" of urns (and mantles), rather than "stones and flowers."

Some funeral companies have shifted their attention away from cemetery or burial-related goods or, at the very least, diversified their product lines. Given that cremation is expected to hover around 50% of all dispositions by mid-century, even casket makers have begun manufacturing urns. Urns, in fact, are seen as a boon for the industry since they are compact, can be molded to just about any shape, and their contents, the cremains, can be divvied up among loved ones necessitating the need for multiple urns given just one body. Even if the ashes are not portioned off, urns, like pieces of furniture, can be replaced. Urns obviously have a specific and narrow function—to hold the ashes of the deceased. But these ashes are typically ascribed a power that borders on agency. Thomas Lynch (1997) describes the wide-ranging reactions he has received when delivering ashes to loved ones of the deceased:

> Some grinned broadly and talked of the weather… Some received the package... as one would old porcelain or First Communion, as if one's hands weren't worthy or able or clean enough to touch it... [One woman] walked around to the front passenger seat, placed the parcel carefully there, paused momentarily, then put the seat belt around it before getting in and driving away. For several it was a wound reopened. And they were clearly perturbed that we should 'hassle' them... "What do I want with her ashes?" one woman asked. (p. 90)

Since many people view the ashes of a loved one as sacred, the receptacles need to be appropriately hallowed. Urns contain the dead bodies that once contained the lives of

individuals. They were people who have been troubled and loved, worried over and cared for, and, finally, lost. As Durkheim argued, the sacred is communicable, and human remains are no different. Because of the psychically and emotionally charged nature of the dead body, the urns that contain the cremains are themselves powerfully symbolic. Urns increasingly fill the role real estate once did. They emplace the dead in space.

Urns, therefore, are anything but pragmatic containers and their placement reflects this. There are plastic bags that serve that purpose just as well (if not better since bags are lighter and, though they can puncture, they will not break). Urns mediate the dead body and thus symbolize the life of the deceased. Thus, urns come in many different forms and are used in a variety of ways. There are urns that are molded into the shape of the bust of the deceased; urns that can be worn as lockets; stuffed animals that are urns in disguise; urns that are model ships or football helmets. There are biodegradable urns. The aforementioned Batesville has a line of urns portraying dolphins and another emblematized with an American flag and a bald eagle. There are, of course, novelty urns that are only temporary containers, designed to disperse cremains into outer space, the higher reaches of the atmosphere, or in a fireworks display. There are also urns that are artisanal and handcrafted. In short, there are urns available to meet nearly any funeral customer's desire.

In the Western episteme we tend to privilege knowledge that is conveyed visually, and urns are particularly salient reminders of the person one has lost. Perhaps because of this, urns often take a prominent place in the living areas of people's homes—on the mantle, for instance, above the fireplace (Hockey and Draper 2005). At the very least, urns an be a catalyst for a wide variety of mild affective and cognitive states in their

owners—melancholy, annoyance, pleasure, and curiosity, to name a very few. But at most, an urn may serve as an important expression of the sublime nature of mortality as well as a symbolic storehouse of the innumerable meanings of a life once lived. However, urns can also be a source of amusement insofar as they act as "pleasant diversions." A buyer of an artistic urn is quoted in a New York *Times* as saying: "'Once you're gone, you're gone. But at least art brings it one level up and blends in with your décor'"(Brown 2007). There is an enormous variety of urns with which to decorate one's domicile and there are more stores selling them that appear every week.

Death at the Grocery Store: Retail

Shopping is pleasurable. For many Americans it is a form of entertainment. Thus, it should come as no surprise that some actors within the funeral industry are refiguring their formerly funereal spaces to appear more like other "cathedrals of consumption" (Ritzer 1995) or at least introduce their goods to the people in the pews of such cathedrals. With the well-publicized decision by Costco to begin carrying caskets in addition to the dozens of Internet outlets offering caskets and urns, funeral homes' stranglehold on the retail market of funeral products has finally been loosed.

In nearly every major market nowadays, one can find stand alone, brick-and-mortar, funeral stores that sell products like caskets, urns, flowers, memorial trinkets, guest registries, and so on. Robert opened his store, "Caskets and More," four years ago and deals directly with his customers. He is a licensed funeral director who spent several

years in a corporately-owned funeral home and later in a family-owned firm.[47] His store

sits in an unremarkable mini-strip-mall on a well-trafficked thoroughfare. Caskets and

More does a brisk business and during my interviews with him we were frequently

interrupted by customers.

When consumers can purchase their caskets at a retail outlet or online, embalming

and storage of necessary supplies can be centralized to a single facility, and other duties

can be contracted to outside companies, I wondered out loud why there are still so many

funeral homes in any given market, to which Robert responded: "You're using 1,000

square feet at 500 dollars—that's pretty good! Because that's all the consumer is doing,

renting space! It's kind of like going to a flea market and renting a 10 by 10 space.

People are buying 50 dollars a square foot for two days!" To Robert, a funeral home is a

building for having funerals. This may seem like an obvious point but many in the

industry struggle with this concept because of the potential to preclude funeral home staff

from performing many of the duties they have traditionally performed—from the

technique and skill of embalming to the art of selling goods and financial plans. One

nationally-recognized marketing executive told me in an interview:

> Anything that a hotel or a fine restaurant might offer or club or country club or a
> yacht club type thing might offer in terms of services, foods or whatever, well
> funeral homes are doing that too because that's what a funeral home is—a
> banquet hall where people come together for the reason of celebrating the
> individual's life instead of celebrating their wedding or their anniversary.

Funeral homes too have been remodeled, revamped, redecorated, and refurbished by their

owners in order to look like other kinds of spaces. Many funeral homes have assembled

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[47] According to Robert, his state's laws prohibit a non-licensed funeral director from selling funeral
supplies to the public because of protectionist views of the members of the licensing board. At least one
member of his state legislature is a well-known, pro-funeral home advocate in favor of licensing
restrictions that would have made businesses like Caskets and More impossible (had he not subsequently
resigned after being arrested by the FBI for bribery allegations.)

special viewing areas for cremations in order to allow consumers to expand their funerary

rituals so as to allow observations. Approximately two-thirds of funeral homes now have

viewing areas according to the Cremation Association of North America (2007).[48] Also

related to cremations, more funeral businesses are providing pet cremations (along with

pet funerals). Kates-Boylston, a major publisher in the trade now includes *The Pet Loss*

Insider Desk Reference, and most stand-alone funeral stores offer pet urns.

More radical shifts are taking place with regard to traditional funeral homes as

well. One example can be found with Mark Musgrove, a former president of the National

Funeral Directors Association (NFDA), the premier trade association in the US. He

transformed the physical space of his funeral home to accommodate the shift to events in

funeral production. His funeral home is now "complete with catering kitchen and a 12-

foot screen for multimedia business (and memorial) presentations. Gone are the chapel's

pews and stained-glass windows that made it look like, 'well, a funeral home'" (Miller

2007).

While Musgrove's firm is in the Pacific Northwest, the transformation of funerary

spaces is found in areas like East Tennessee where traditional religious forms tend to be

conserved at the expense of novel cultural forms. Smith Funeral and Cremation Service

in Maryville, TN, created a "Life Event Center" where one could not merely hold

funerals but a variety of other kinds of "parties": "[O]ur Life Event Center is the ideal

place for memorial receptions before or after a service, weddings, bridal and baby

showers, family gatherings, birthdays - any event that celebrates life and love" (from

Smith Mortuary website: http://www.smithmortuary.com/html/lifeeventcenter.html

retrieved 11/2/2007). In a marketing study, Gould (2005) describes a funeral home that

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[48] However, only 10% of customers took advantage of viewing areas (Ibid.).

was bequeathed to a son who wanted to reverse the firm's declining business. He notes: "The new owner invested several years freshening the building, creating what he referred to as a 'bed and breakfast' concept… Within two years, the firm was serving 90% of the deaths in the community" (p. 9).

One could argue that the transformation of funeral homes is merely a response to the perspective that the public is averse to such spaces of abjection. Smith (1997), an economist, writes: "[J]ust as there is a distinctive aura of morbidity about doctor's offices, clinics, hospitals, and pharmacies, there is a distinctive aura of mortality about the facilities of firms that provide the components of death care to consumers" (p. 114). Funeral workers are often aware of this, too. Klicker (1999) in his funeral directing instructional text advises that firms should look "homey" and arrangements rooms ought to include elements like a "dining room type table," where one can sit close to the family: "A common grouping used is a table lamp, and two chairs... to give the families something familiar to relate to as a way to relieve tension" (p. 111).

Indeed, going into a funeral home is an anxiety-inducing experience for many non-funeral workers. Yet I would argue that the transformation of space is also about the commodification of amusement and the normalization of novelty. In the *New York Times*, Mahler (2005) noticed a similar phenomenon in mega-churches. Mahler reported on the mega-church trend and highlighted one that was in development at the time: "When the church was under construction, people would occasionally ask McFarland if it was going to have stained glass or a steeple. 'No!' he'd answer. 'We want the church to look like a mall. We want you to come in here and say, "Dude, where's the cinema?" The author goes on to note: "There are no crosses, no images of Jesus or any other form of religious

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iconography. Bibles are optional…". In fact, many megachurches now have chain stores, cinemas, and restaurants, all to provide a retail spectacle.

In funeral homes there is a similar move to emphasize commodified forms of amusement (be these events or products) and simultaneously to de-emphasize the traditional forms of *memento mori*, which are difficult to monetize given their inability to fit a consumer-friendly palate. As I discussed in Chapter 6, funeral homes are increasingly outfitted with high-end, audio-visual, media systems and I am personally aware of two funeral homes with coffee shops: Woodlawn Memorial Park and Funeral Home, an SCI firm in suburban Orlando and Bruckler & Kishler Funeral Home, an independent firm outside Columbus, Ohio. Both coffee shops are Seattle's Best, a subsidiary of Starbucks.

Grant, a funeral director once told me: "Used to be, you'd make funeral arrangements in a room like this [resembles a living room at Rooms To Go] and now we make arrangements in a room where all four walls are covered with things to buy. You've seen it. And it probably shouldn't be like that." Absent now from many funeral homes is the "homey" arrangements room, replaced instead with a room that resembles certain aspects of other cathedrals of consumption in which the consumer is encouraged to shop amid a firm's abundant surplus of products and gift ideas. A journalist entering a similarly designed funeral home described it this way:

> At first glance, the glass-fronted boutique might seem to be a card shop or the home furnishings section of a department store. There's soft music playing. Recessed lighting gently illuminates the space overall, while track lights direct the eyes to the books, gift cards, guest registers, ceramics and other knick-knacks tastefully arrayed on wood-and-glass displays. Everything is clearly priced and shoppers are welcome to browse and compare before taking their selections to the check-out register near the door. (Fujii 2007)

This refiguration of space also applies to the ways in which workers engage in other forms of impression management such as one's style of dress. As one funeral director told me "People come in here, and they see I'm in blue jeans and a polo shirt. I'm not in a suit. I'm not in dress shoes. I have no sales pitch. My walls are a bright color. There's nothing morbid about this place, it's well lit…" Not everyone presents a casual image of course, but it is becoming more common.[49] This is in opposition to the way one might have historically encountered funeral workers. The effect is that funeral businesses look less funereal and more like what one would find at a mall.

Even cemeteries can look like other retail spaces. As I mentioned, cemeteries are incorporating tourist models and enticing visitors with themed tours, gift shops (that resemble gift shops rather than an embellished kiosk for floral purchases), and various on-site events. Forest Lawn is now comprised of six memorial parks in Southern California. In drop-down and fly-out menus, online visitors can browse through the omnipresent guides to selecting funeral service merchandise, ideal burial locations, and, cremation rates. Under the events listings and above an offer to area schools on hosting commencement ceremonies one can find "grief events." Until only very recently, the Website had even incorporated the now ubiquitous "shopping cart" so many online consumers have come to expect.

The physical transformation of funeral businesses to appear more like other retail spaces may be interpreted as an appeal to the citizen-consumer inhabiting an amusement culture. Since shopping is a popular form of recreation, even browsing and buying funeral products and services can contribute to such appeasement. The sociologist

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[49] The mortuary college I had enrolled in as part of my research maintained a strict dress code: pantsuits or dresses for women and dress slacks, oxford shoes, and collared, button-down shirts for men (tie preferred). The colors of garments, too, had to be appropriately somber.

Andrew Wernick (1995) writes "Since the establishment of the National Funeral Directors Association in the 1880s the services of the 'dismal trade' have been progressively refashioned to be as feel-good as circumstances will allow" (p. 282). Clearly, one such "feel-good circumstance" is represented through the sublimation of death-spaces to shopping-places.

Space Matters

Urbanization around the turn of the twentieth century created the need for funeral homes. These funeral homes were designed to combine tasks that were previously performed in different spaces. Thus, they had a chapel, a visiting room, and an embalming room. With the decentralization of American cities and the mass migration of Americans into bedroom communities, city funeral homes, wanting to retain their customers, created local chains (Bowman 1959). Now with the loosening of trade barriers, globalization is becoming a part of the funeral industry. There are multinational funeral service providers. And we are seeing caskets being made in countries like China with low overhead and labor only to be imported to the US. Batesville, the most well-known casket manufacturer, has moved some of its assembly plants to Mexico City and Chihuahua, Mexico. Companies are both vertically integrating in order to provide economies of scale and economies of scope with a wider variety of available products and services. Simultaneously, however, some segments of the industry are becoming increasingly specialized. These companies focus on a niche of products or services to provide to the public.

While the case of funeral products stores, whether online or brick and mortar, represent a form of retail differentiation in which different goods can be purchased at different locations, the fact that coffee shops can be found in funeral homes would seem to suggest the opposite. Dedifferentiation or, "the general trend whereby the forms of consumption associated with different institutional spheres become interlocked with each other and increasingly difficult to distinguish" (Bryman 1999:33) is widely apparent now in the industry. With dedifferentiation, shopping is not simply the acquisition of goods in order to satisfy the desire or needs those goods are perceived to resolve: "consumption has become an activity that involves a production of meaning, as well as a field of symbolic exchanges" (Caru and Cova 2007:4). Shopping, which can be defined along a continuum stretching from the acquisition of goods to simple browsing (read: "window shopping"), serves multiple functions: identity-construction, fantasizing, "retail-therapy," and the like.

Implosion refers to a more general form of de-differentiation: "The term *implosion* refers to the disintegration or disappearance of boundaries so that formerly differentiated entities collapse in on each other" (Ritzer [1999] 2005:116). Thus shopping can fulfill many wants and needs including the desire to be entertained or educated (i.e., "edutainment"). Implosion is highly relevant in the present case of the deathcare industry. Here, mortuary ritual can be actively conflated with the consumerist experiences of entertainment, amusement, and diversion. As Codeluppi (2007) writes, "What we want to buy today is an experience and not merely a product... [Firms] are increasingly trying to make consumers feel physical and emotional sensations during their experiences with

products and brands" (p. 155). This is no less true for funeral businesses and thus there is a transformation of the funerary landscape that allows for new means of consumption.

Funeral homes and funeral businesses in general increasingly look less like funeral homes and funeral businesses. Instead they look more like other, more common, retail spaces. Implosion seems to suggest that ritual and retail look progressively more alike, that there is a mutually occurring isomorphism taking place. There is not. Rather, ritual is looking more like retail, and sacred spaces are looking more like shopping centers.

Throughout the dissertation I have contended that the funeral industry is negotiating and re-negotiating the meaning and justifications of funeral work, funeral products and services, places and spaces, and, by extension, funerary rites. What is evident is that these negotiations take place in an aporetic environment, where there is both an overabundance of possible meanings but a paucity of any one cohesive, coherent meaning. Indeed, literal space can be understood as a figurative fissure represented by a befuddling tension between morality and amusement.

CHAPTER VIII

DISCUSSION ON THE ADVANCEMENT OF AMUSEMENT

According to Neil Postman ([1985] 2005), amusement has little lasting social

value or depth but serves as a diversion or a source of fleeting entertainment. Postman, in

the acerbic but insightful book, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, expanded on the work of

Marshall McLuhan to explore the media and how "the form in which ideas are expressed

affects what those ideals will be" (p. 31). Largely due to the overwhelming proliferation

of signs and images, he contended that we no longer have the time to properly reflect on

our own thoughts and feelings much less meaningfully absorb the ideas of others. As a

consequence, we opt instead for what tourism scholar Jonathan Wynn (2005) refers to as

an "entertain-me-now mentality" (p. 402) symptomatic of a more general "festivalized

culture" (Ibid.).

Amusement, as I have analyzed it here, serves as a kind of social "canopy,"

blanketing many facets of cultural involvement—from news, retail consumption,

religious services, and the like. And amusement is beginning to impact the operations of

the funeral industry. Amusement alters the way the industry legitimates its own purposes

as well as its growth. In this way, amusement can be both an "end" (i.e., to provide the

public with another form of retail diversion) and a "means" (i.e., by creating an avenue

towards new growth and expansion). Thus, the funeral industry no longer needs to

emphasize its status as a sacred gatekeeper or moral entrepreneur through which both

bereaved persons and the deceased must pass. Nor does the industry need to supply goods that articulate a religious message or goods that represent forms of *memento mori*.

It would be inaccurate to presume to be speaking *only* of funeral workers or the production of funerary goods, when consumers are inextricably linked to producers, processes, and goods. Producers increasingly monitor the consumption of their products and reflexively organize their means of production in order to alter the means of consumption. Furthermore, consumers have much more control over the creation of their products and services than they did before. For consumers, the goods and services that are now being created can appeal to the desire for leisure or entertainment, thus simultaneously distracting consumers from the fiduciary demands of the funeral industry. It accomplishes this by bracketing the pain and confusion imposed by loss and replacing it with recognizable features from everyday life (i.e., elements derived from an amusement culture such as video screens, retail environs, pastiche, novelty, lifestyle brands, and so forth).

For workers, amusement alters the relationship that they have with their customers since it often de-moralizes what was long considered to be "moral" work. Funeral workers feel that, where they were once "care" providers, they are now, at best, "service workers." And in many cases, workers describe themselves as "used car salesmen" and "party planners." Amusement, though, rationalizes the relationships workers have with their customers by sanitizing the interaction and eliminating particular emotional dimensions the worker can have (or is expected to have) with her customer. This rationalization also limits the abilities of workers to contribute to the moral

economy. Regarding the advance of capital into the realm of affect and emotion,

Hochschild (1983) writes:

> [W]hen the product—the thing to be engineered, mass-produced, and subjected to speed-up and slowdown—is a smile, a mood, a feeling, or a relationship, it comes to belong more to the organization and less to the self. And so in the country that most publicly celebrates the individual, more people privately wonder, without tracing the question to its deepest social root: What do I really feel? (p. 198)

Rationalizing mechanisms have territorialized not merely one's emotions but the value-systems and moralities of workers as well. In fact, one might very well characterize the work that these funeral directors and others involved in postmortem deathcare accomplish as something like "soul" work since they regularly grapple with matters often left to the metaphysicians (e.g., mortality, being, non-existence, etc.).

Last but not least, amusement aids the stabilization of capitalizing forces and their requisite expansion by creating the possibility of new products, new markets, and, most importantly, new consumers. Amusement, at the very least, is a new discursive formation and thus allows for product differentiation, but it also appeals to a "culture of distraction" (Abbas 1996) in which citizen-consumers yearn for constant stimulation. The public is, if not accustomed to, at least inundated by, various forms of amusement conveyed through all kinds of vehicles: stores and restaurants, but also news, politics, and even religion. Thanks to expanded access to credit, economies of scale, value-added merchandising, and new attention to customer service, a larger portion of funeral purchasers now can buy access to self-actualization and recovery (via "retail therapy") rather than laboring and waiting on "grief's slow wisdom" (Mayer [1990] 2006).

Quite simply, this kind of consumption (i.e., retail), with its many features (shopping, browsing, comparing, fantasizing, etc.), can be quite pleasurable. It is, in fact,

necessarily so in a consumer society that depends so heavily on consumption and consumerism for its expansion. It is thus important to look at the adoption of amusement principles and contribution to the culture of amusement the industry makes. It is also important to examine the framing of funerals as retail and the staging of rituals that this framing engenders. This has resulted in the re-figuration of funerary rituals in addition to the consumption rituals that were already in place. But it has also subsequently launched the funeral industry into a realm of commercialization heretofore unknown. Likewise, it has created the need to provide for more experiential forms of consumption in order to appease an ever-more stimulated populace.

Here, though, lies a basic cultural contradiction between treating death as something fiscal and treating death as something ontologically sacred. The poet/funeral director Thomas Lynch (1999) in an article he called "Funerals 'R' Us" writes:

> A funeral is not a great investment; it is a sad moment in a family's history. It is not a hedge against inflation; it is a rite of passage. It is not a retail event; it is an effort to make sense of our mortality. It has less to do with actuarial profits and more to do with actual losses. It is not an exercise in salesmanship; it is an exercise in humanity.

The ethical dimensions that emerge from one's social participation demand that participants in the funeral trade attend to the dead and the bereaved in a meaningful, un-self-interested, and sincere manner. The fiduciary realm places a different set of demands on those in the industry—to be rational (disinterested with regard to non-market-related concerns), opportunistic, and instrumentalist. When a person experiences the death of a loved one, she is compelled to create meaningful interactions, both with the deceased and other bereaved individuals. Yet, this same person is also pushed to engage in highly rationalized relations with an economic actor in order to dispose of the dead. Is it any

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wonder there has been so much "cultural ambivalence" over this contradiction (Hays 1996)? Some believe that consumers address this ambivalence by conflating ritual expression with the transaction (i.e., the purchase become a means through which emotional expression is "performed"). For the industry's part, these contradictions are managed in a variety of ways—often through abeyance, which merely creates new contradictions.

Sociological Contributions

There are a number of contributions this dissertation makes to sociological discourses. The first has to do with a re-examination of the contemporary American funeral industry and its connection to late capitalism. I have demonstrated how the industry's focus has shifted to become more consumer-centric, and more globalized, and the consequences of such moves. Previous work on the funeral industry focused heavily on role strain on the part of funeral workers (Howarth 1993, Hyland and Morse 1995, Pine 1975, Turner and Edgley 1976), the demands cross-cultural differences place on the industry (Baird 1976, Kamerman 1998, Mandelbaum 1965), or the structural components of funerary ritual (Balk 2003, Davies 1997, Irion 1991). This dissertation examines the production of funerary ritual in light of other forms of cultural production (i.e., I treat ritual much like any other commodity).

Like the production of culture perspective, which highlights the accretive processes in the production of cultural goods, I have revealed the ways funeral goods and services are created in similar ways. Theoretically, I have benefited from the work of

Nigel Thrift (2006) and Scott Lash (1994) who deconstruct the traditional binary opposition between producer and consumer. This delineation is not as self-evident as it is often thought to be. Thus, the consumer is bound up within the throughput, or overall production, process. I highlight two important ways in this dissertation.

The first has to do with marketing. What I have attempted to show is the ways in which consumer segments are constructions that emerge out of a cultural imaginary. That is, consumer clusters are imparted with particular qualities and characteristics. They are imagined, for instance, to be highly individualistic or non-religious, or desirous of one kind of product or service. Marketing studies reinforce these imaginaries, in part, by providing those who work with consumers with a cognitive schema through which to interpret the customers. Consumers subsequently are faced with a pre-given template through which some options or interactions are possible and others are not. This sets up a mutually constitutive "game" whereby the "rules" for participation are reified through participation, and playing outside those rules can be a challenge.

The second way the distinction between consumers and producers is deconstructed is in the literal co-production of the final product or service. Today's consumer is included in the creation of her consumable by planning out what she wants, actually making it, and so on. This is especially true with regard to experiential or non-material products such as themed services or branded goods (in which the commodity is the experience). Related to this, my case provides a poignant illustration of "mass pseudo demassification" where one of the most personal events in life can be standardized and mass-produced and still be perceived as uniquely intimate.

This new American way of death involves the creation of new ritual forms that do not rely on the kinds of repetition that anthropologists like Van Gennep ([1960] 1977), Paul Connerton (1989), and Roy Rappaport (1999) argue(d) were crucial to rites of passage because of their ties with the past that are implicit in the reiteration of performances. Rather than give in to critics who suggest that expressions of consumerist culture are ultimately vacuous and superficial, and incapable of significance and meaning, the abundance of invention as I discuss in this dissertation would seem to suggest that novelty is not by necessity amnesic—consumers engage the past through invention and creativity.

This brings me to another contribution to sociology I make and that is with regard to the commodification of the sacred. Sociologists of religion have recently begun examining the role of the commodity form especially in Christian expressions like megachurches (Ellingson 2007) and the commercialization of religious relationships (Peck 1993). What seems of particular interest here has to do with the packaging of sacred goods for popular consumption (Shoval 2000, Kelner 2003) and the hybridization between commodified popular cultural forms and sacred forms (Chidester 2005). The funeral industry is involved with producing and marketing sacred goods in an effort to increase the number of its consumers. Mainline religion performs similar work for its congregants.

According to Baudrillard ([1994] 2006), there is a deepening implosion that affects what have previously been considered distinctive and separate social spheres. Examining ritual and amusement as co-occurring qualities of existence can offer an explanation for the monetization of sacred economies, and the subsequent ability of

economic actors to produce, market, and sell things that might otherwise be considered sacrosanct. Now, brands can do the work of religious icons and themes based around consumerist principles like values and lifestyles can become sacred performances. This has the effect of problematizing authenticity, a concern that continues to be relevant. Indeed, this elaborates on Arlie Hochschild's (1983) work. I look at the ways workers balance contributions to the moral economy and contributions to the amusement culture reveals interesting strategies for negotiating concerns over authenticity and personal meaning. Thus, in this critical theory of amusement, I have demonstrated that humans have a seemingly endless capacity for making meaning out of meaninglessness and for finding small joys in tragedy.

Furthermore, one might see parallels with another multi-billion dollar culture industry that is involved in ritual management for society: the wedding industry. Marriage is considered a sacrament to many Christians—consecrated by divine forces. Given the growth of the wedding industry (as an economic institution) in the face of cultural transformation, I might have examined the negotiated roles of its actors rather than the actors in the funeral industry by asking: How do profit-motivated individuals account for, make sense of, and adapt to more secularized weddings? Just recently, another state has legalized same-sex marriages. Some legislators want to guard what they perceive as the hallowed nature of marriage. Meanwhile, there are people in the wedding industry who see an opportunity for rapid expansion. Some clergy advocate a broader tolerance and others vocally espouse conserving their traditions. Juridico-legal discourses, theological tensions, and political-economic issues are all bound together in

this apparatus-in-transition. Much of what I have discussed in this dissertation is relevant to a shifting *culture* of weddings in addition to the *business* of weddings.

This dissertation also expands on the limited discussion of cultural contradictions. The age of Bell's thesis (it is now more than 30 years old) belies its ongoing utility. Unfortunately, few sociologists continue to conceptualize cultural contradictions. This dissertation expands on the valuable work of Hays (1996) and Illouz (1997) who both examined how care gets re-figured in the face of counter-demands implicit in fiduciary norms. There are many other areas of social life that face similar contradictory demands: religion, cognitive therapy, care of the body, and so forth. In these cases, we would like to believe that money, profit, and instrumentality are secondary to something more "authentically" focused on the self, the sacred, or in other ways personally meaningful.

Funeral work involves what Hoschschild (1983) referred to as emotional labor, or the work of expressive contrivance in order to convey an emotion or mood that is in alignment with an employer's goals. The intense dynamics of working alongside the dead and the grieving require a special form of emotional labor, which is the kind of work needed to "induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others" (Ibid., p. 7). Not surprisingly, corporatization places different demands on the kinds of interactions customers have with funeral staff not to mention the funeral services themselves. The distinctive nature of their profession shapes their negotiations and their accounts of these negotiations. This dissertation illustrates the ways care, emotional labor, and the desire to contribute to a *moral* economy and not simply a strictly economic one, are affected with the introduction of rationalizing mechanisms like corporatization. Drawing on the theoretical components of

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McDonaldization, this dissertation illuminates some of the externalities of standardization, homogenization, de-skilling (through the division of labor), and so forth. This thread will become increasingly important as Baby Boomers age into a customer segment that relies more and more on care work. Given the neoliberal tendencies toward the privatization of human services, the consequences could be especially significant in the next two decades for this population (and their adult children).

On a related note, this dissertation examines how disembedding mechanisms transform networks of meaning. These networks of meaning can include anything from workers, consumers, and brands, to firms, themes, and physical environments. Meanings get circulated and definitions of reality are co-constructed via these networks. I have attempted to complicate the perception that the funeral industry is an autonomous entity that maintains ties simply within the industry (between firms and actors). As I mentioned earlier, I have argued that producer and consumer are not two distinct entities but are in fact collapsing into more porous categories. But this applies to more than simply the consumer-producer dichotomy—the industry is a part of a larger apparatus that is connected to overlapping institutions and these connections are tangled and sometimes puzzling. While this contribution is more "theoretical" than the others, it potentially reveals the ways relations that are ostensibly "adversarial" (buyer versus seller for instance) are instead co-dependent and mutually constituted.

Finally, the work I have presented here contributes to the discourses on political economy. Amusement has become a crucial means through which capital can continue its expansion. This trope also provides a new lens for thinking through the ongoing commodification of everything including arenas not typically viewed as forms of

amusement like news, politics, religion, and education. The dissertation demonstrates that if death (and other death-related matters like morticians, funeral directors, cemeteries, and the like) can be re-figured into something that can contribute to an amusement culture, then perhaps capital can transform most anything into an amusement of one kind or another. Thus, it would seem that Durkheim got it backwards—it is not the sacred that is "eminently contagious" but the profane. The ubiquity of capital and its putative "ability" to allay pain overcomes all apparent limitations and obstacles.

The event of death historically has been a catalyst, a motivation to understand one's circumstances and to try and account for those circumstances (specifically that everything in society is impermanent—both one's self as well as society's other members). Funerals, then, have served as a social mechanism that helps its members make sense of loss—acknowledging that a loss has taken place and providing some justification for that loss. On the other hand, commodified amusement, a cultural form of "cosmetic psycho-pharmacology," to use a term coined by the psychiatrist Peter Kramer ([1993] 1997), potentially brackets or conceals loss and the need to account for it. Amusement culture therefore reveals the ability of late capital to somehow circumscribe the tedium, the banality, and at least some of the horror of loss. The manner in which one celebrates death can impact the ways in which one thinks about death; and the ways in which one thinks about death may impact the ways in which one thinks about life.

Postscript

As I was completing this dissertation, two events took place that further

illuminated the direction of the funeral industry. First, the American Board of Funeral

Service Education, in late March, barely voted against accrediting mortuary school

programs that would have allowed students to earn a degree in funeral direction *only* (i.e.,

embalming and restoration, which currently comprises a significant portion of the

mortuary school curriculum, would not be necessary). The narrow margin of this vote

suggests that the issue will return and will eventually be approved, given the current

trends in the industry. Undoubtedly this would further the corporatization of the industry

with its emphasis on the bureaucratization of labor and the emphasis on skills.

Second, the International Cemetery Cremation and Funeral Association

announced it would be holding courses this summer for funeral directors who want to

become "Celebrants." Celebrants are the latest occupational designation for workers

whose role is intended to address the needs of consumers who do not want a traditional

funeral but would prefer alternative ceremonies. These are consumers who want a highly

individualized funeral. As I have pointed out in the dissertation, many traditional funeral

directors and alternative funeral directors already provide such a service.

So why the need to create a new occupational category that is largely nominal? As

I demonstrated in Chapter 2, rhetorical shifts typically represent large-scale changes to

the practices and discourses in the industry (e.g. "undertaker" to "mortician," "coffin" to

"casket," etc.). Thus, the fact that celebrants are specialized, can now be certified, and are

recognized by major trade organizations may be the recognition by the industry that a

paradigmatic shift is taking place. Rhetorically, the shift toward recognizing celebrants as legitimate may have associations with the "celebration of life" atmosphere the industry is increasingly embracing. Funeral workers are becoming more inclined to offer a product that is unique, one that is (ideally) highly personal and consumer-focused. On the one hand, this move may simply fall prey to the rationalizing mechanisms that have affected so many other aspects of the funeral industry, resulting in the "mass pseudo-demassification." On the other hand, the funeral industry, which shapes some of our most sacred rituals, may just succeed in providing meaningful rites, not in spite of, but because of, the uniquely hyper-consumerist culture it is charged with serving.

APPENDIX A

METHODS AND ASSUMPTIONS

"I received an education that presented me with a particular theory of language, that did indeed make its own work invisible. I'm still a victim of that theory" (Steedman 1992:621).

Generalizing from Steedman's claim in the epigraph, my epistemological assumptions are inscribed and habituated and thus often concealed even to myself. Yet, as Glaser and Strauss ([1967] 1999) write, "Theoretical sensitivity… involves [the researcher's] personal and temperamental bent" (p. 46), my work is thoroughly a product of my own epistemological assumptions, theoretical presuppositions, and methodological decisions. Thus, what follows is an attempt to provide justification for my methods, before explicitly reciting those methods.

The funeral industry manufactures a number of obvious products: caskets, headstones, and embalmed bodies. I argue that these and many other not-so-obvious products make up the constitutive elements of the funerary rites of passage—either piecemeal or whole cloth. It is important to investigate the nature of these products (both descriptively and semiotically) and I do some of that work here. However, for the most part, this is best left to news journalists.[50] My sociological concern is in explicating the conditions for these products. As Raymond Williams ([1985] 1991) wrote:

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[50] I write "for the most part" because I regularly engage in descriptives. I also frequently draw on journalistic accounts because: a.) there are an abundance of them, and b.) they often utilize a distinctive perspective and tone. Thus, an important question that I ask is: What are the ways these narratives are tied to the reproduction of particular products, practices, and discourses within the industry?

> [W]e have to break from the common procedure of isolating the object and then discovering its components. On the contrary we have to discover the nature of a practice and then its conditions... I am saying that we should look not for the components of a product but for the condition of a practice. (p. 422)

I propose that the primary condition that gives shape to the funeral industry, its products, practices, and discourses, is the circulation of capital—through its avenues, directions, and flows. Thus, mine is a dissertation not so much about the funeral industry or the rituals to which it contributes (and to some extent regulates and controls), but about the circulation of capital through the industry as it affects people, goods, rituals, practices, and discourses. In other words, the circulation of capital shapes these things at points of "friction": a sensitizing concept developed by Anna L. Tsing (2005). Tsing demonstrates that in a globalized social world, the flow of both the tangible (such as people or products) as well as the intangible (language, various forms of capital, beliefs, and so on), do not circulate uninterrupted. These flows are not directionless. They move in certain channels. They coalesce and collect, diverge and depart and oftentimes, usually as a consequence of human agency, they are disrupted and/or redirected. These flows, both tangible and intangible, are shaped by, and respond to, other flows, and where they meet, intersect, clash, connect, or combine, are points of friction. Points of friction, according to Tsing, are the foci for the ethnographic eye.

To illustrate this, one might look at the phenomenon of corporatization of which I discussed throughout the dissertation but with particular focus in Chapter 2,3, and 4. Investment capital, represents a kind of flow. When a firm is bought out the influx of capital (along with codified procedures) affect the work practices of that firm. Oftentimes this also translated into shifting discursive practices as well. Similarly, one might see how discursive flows affect practices. "Management speak" (e.g., best practices, SWOT

analyses, etc.) influence the practices that then get embodied and are not in fact "mere" semantics.

Thus, I study processes rather than structures or states of things, changes rather than stasis. I contend that, as capital is directed and redirected, power, meanings, values, rhetoric, and beliefs are likewise directed in their own circulation of flows. Thus, I am interested in patterns rather than structures, becomings not beings, openings and not teleologies. Capital functions in some ways like power, insofar as "power means relations, a more or less organized, hierarchical, co-ordinated cluster of relations" (Foucault 1980:198). Capital too coordinates practices and people. It creates new typologies and, essentially, "orders things."

There is an obvious privileging of the role of capital as a "base" in my research, but I have attempted to temper its catalyzing properties. Instead I concur with Raymond Williams ([1985] 1991) who asserted that there exists a homologous relationship between base and superstructure rather than a strict causal or deterministic relationship. He wrote that the relationship is one "where there may be no direct or easily apparent similarity, and certainly nothing like reflection or reproduction... [rather] there is an essential homology or correspondence structures, which can be discovered through analysis" (p. 409). Capital, then, is not so much an arbiter as it is a means of examining parallel flows. In the case of the funeral industry, for instance, there appears to be a degree of correspondence between the reliance on amusement as a trope and the further expansion of the industry. This is, of course, an over-simplification as one would also need to take into account human decision-making, economic crises, secularization, and so on.

In order to understand the relationship between capital and its corresponding superstructure, I began by collecting the accounts provided by various actors within the industry. These open-ended conversations included face-to-face interviews, phone calls, and e-mail exchanges with 35 funeral directors, 10 mortuary school students, 3 teachers and 2 staff members of mortuary colleges, 2 consumer advocates, 2 trade lobbyists and 2 nationally-recognized consultants, 3 corporate administrators, and 3 small business owners. These were conducted across several states though most took place in my home state. Often times the aforementioned occupational roles overlapped. Almost everyone I spoke with had been, at least at one point, a licensed funeral director. Even some of the students I spoke with were employed as funeral directors and were seeking full licensure or had relocated to a non-reciprocating state and had to obtain new licensure. When there was overlap, I based my count on my own ascribed "master" identity status that depended largely on where the interviewee spent most of her or his time. For example, one business owner I interviewed is also a funeral director actively maintaining his license. Since he operates his own casket store, he is a "small business owner."

I used a digital voice recorder to record my interviews and once I had transcribed the interviews, I erased all the digital files from the recorder. All names were changed in my field notes and I assured each of my respondents confidentiality and anonymity. The only time this was not preserved was when the respondent herself divulged the fact that she had talked with me (which happened several times). Two respondents asked that I identify them by their actual names rather than assign them a pseudonym. I did not honor those requests. After having completed two separate interviews, two respondents asked me not include them in my work and I did not.

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Corporate funeral work can be particularly tenuous for some (see, for example, my discussions in Chapter 4). When I interviewed corporately-employed workers I took great length to alter not only their names and the names of their firms but sometimes their sex, locale, and any other information that might potentially identify these individuals. Aside from the aforementioned two individuals who asked that I not use their interviews in my work, the only other people who were reluctant to speak with me were all employees of SCI (see Chapter 3 for my discussion). This could have been for any variety of reasons and I was eventually able to speak with employees in SCI's ranks.

These interviews varied in length from five minutes to two hours. The tempo of funeral work is unpredictable. Some days there might not be any cases and others there may be many. As a result, my interviews were frequently interrupted by either a customer inquiry or a "call" (i.e., to retrieve a body). I often had to make repeat visits either to complete an interview that was interrupted by a service call or a customer. However, in a few cases I made repeat visits because the information was so helpful or because the interviewee was especially articulate and engaging. I readily acknowledge that this last reasons is entirely unscientific. The reader will find some recurring names in the dissertation, rather than a distraction I believe it provides some sense of continuity with respect to "voice" or "character." Furthermore, these individuals often lend depth, poignancy, and engagement, where my own words lack those qualities.

Of the funeral directors with whom I spoke, corporate firms employed approximately half and independent firms employed half. The majority of the funeral directors I interviewed were white and male. In part, this reflects a convenience sample since most funeral directors are male and white, but this also reflects my bias towards

examining a *mainline* within the industry. Obviously, there are many "ways" in the American "way" of death, but part of my argument is to examine the dominant trends in terms of economics and cultural paradigms.

Many funeral directors provided me with additional contacts and I typically followed up on them. When I used this kind of snowball sampling, I made every effort to maintain the confidentiality of the original respondent. Oftentimes, my efforts were undermined by the original respondent, who had taken the liberty of letting the next set of contacts know that I would be calling/visiting.

I readily acknowledge that the accounts I gathered from the individuals with whom I spoke are limited in their empirical robustness in at least two ways. First there is the very nature of language. As Foucault ([1970] 1994) wrote:

> It is not that words are imperfect, or that, when confronted by the visible, they prove insuperably inadequate. Neither can be reduced to the other's terms: it is in vain that we say what we see; what we see never resides in what we say. And it is in vain that we attempt to show, by the use of images, metaphors, or similes, what we are saying; the space where they achieve their splendour is not that deployed by our eyes but that defined by the sequential elements of syntax. (p. 9)

Language is intrinsically fraught with endless deferrals of meaning and imprecision. But these accounts are also bounded by the position of the speaker within a particular discourse. Recognizing the poststructuralist assertion that the speaking subject is made a subject through her discursive realities, interviews are limited by their positionality (within a network of discourses). Foucault (1980) again: "One has to dispence with the constituent subject, to get rid of the subject itself, that's to say, to arrive at an analysis which can account for the constitution of a subject within a historical framework." (p. 117). And Gilles Deleuze (in Foucault 1977) claimed: "Who speaks and acts? It is always a multiplicity, even within the person who speaks and acts. All of us are

'groupuscules'" (p. 206). The subjects in my dissertation represent articulations of particular discourse.

As I discuss in Chapter 2, the funeral industry as an entity, is difficult to enclose within definitional limits. I, nonetheless, offer an operationalized version of my case— according to Arne Kalleberg (2007), "Industries are groups of organizations that produce similar goods or services and operate in similar product markets" (p. 50). Importantly, though, the funeral industry, like any industry, is embedded in a network of connections and even though those points of connection may be constructed as the borders of the industry, those points serve as connectors to other institutionalized spheres of society. While my case of study is the funeral industry, I explore those points of contiguity with which the industry shares.

A couple brief examples of this should suffice here. The National Funeral Directors Association actively lobbied to withdraw the estate tax claiming deleterious effects on small business owners. I interviewed a lobbyist on this matter who is contracted by the NFDA to focus on particular issues. It might be reasonably argued that this lobbyist maintains only a contingent relationship with the funeral industry. Similarly, I spoke with several consumer advocates who work at the state and federal level some of whom hold fulltime jobs entirely outside the funeral industry. There are additional cases of what Adele Clarke (2005) calls "implicated actors" who directly impact the ways capital is directed within the industry through their "discursive presence." There also "boundary objects" (Ibid.) that connect two separate social arenas that I consider. As such, while I typically refer to the funeral industry as my case, my research more properly encompasses what Foucault (1980) called an apparatus which he defines thusly:

[A] thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions-- in short, the said as much as the unsaid. Such are the elements of the apparatus. The apparatus itself is the system of relations that can be established between these elements. (p. 19)

Therefore, I have not limited my research to discourses that arise within the funeral industry but rather the funerary apparatus in order to best examine "the decisions and regulations which are among its constitutive elements, its means of functioning, along with its strategies, its covert discourses and ruses" (Ibid., p. 38).

To that end, I employed Adele Clarke's (2005) situational analysis in which the funerary apparatus is examined as a dynamic and porous situation rather than a reified entity. She writes that a situation can be considered in different ways: definitionally (à la W.I. Thomas); rhetorically; epistemologically; and experientially. These domains are not mutually exclusive and where possible I have attempted to explore each of them. This is especially suited for multi-sited ethnography, which seeks to

[E]xamine the circulation of cultural meanings, objects, and identities in diffuse time-space… a strategy or design of research that acknowledges macrotheoretical concepts and narratives of the world system but does not rely on them for the contextual architecture for framing a set of subjects. (Marcus 1995:96)

An efficient approach to situational analysis, Clarke writes, is for the researcher to assume the role of cartographer, drawing maps that "descriptively lay out as best one can all the most important human and nonhuman elements in the situation of concern of the research broadly conceived. In the Meadian sense, the questions are: Who and what are in this situation? Who or what matters in this situations? What elements 'make a difference' in this situation?" (Clarke 2005:87). The goal in creating these maps is to begin to address those questions and seek connections between them. Each position on the map represents a position within a discourse or an intersection of discourses. This approach allows the ethnographer to look at the overlapping discourses that cross numerous social

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spheres and institutional fields while "deeply situat[ing] the researcher individually,

temporally, geographically, materially, culturally, symbolically, visually, and

discursively" (Clarke 2003:554). Like conventional grounded theory, in which the theory

shifts as the data collection progresses (Glaser and Strauss [1967] 1999, Corbin & Strauss

1990), situational analysis posits that the maps one has drawn similarly change. I

employed "cartography" as a heuristic that allowed me to think through what were

oftentimes-overwhelming layers and directions of discourses and information—

something that is probably inevitable when drawing on multiple sources of data. Evident

in those crudely sketched maps were "implicated actors" that:

> [S]tructurally condition the interactions within the situation through their specific
> material properties and requirements and through our engagements with them.
> Their agency is everywhere. Situational analysis explicitly takes the nonhuman
> elements in the situation of inquiry into account both materially and discursively.
> (Clarke 2005:63)

The foci of my research were the circulation and therefore the relations between subjects,

discourses, practices, and material artifacts. It is commonly assumed that subjects use

discourses and practices to make meaning that discourses and practice in some sense

structure and create subjects. The "agency" of non-human things is another matter. Yet

throughout the dissertation I assert that brands, firms, industries, capital, and products *do*

things for and, indeed to human actors. In some cases such as firms and industries this is

not as much a stretch for some readers because these things are after all aggregates of

human agents that oftentimes share similar goals, beliefs, and things with which to

communicate and practice. Other entities clearly lack a conscious sentience and still I

assert that these things, or actants, have a "power" over humans. Bruno Latour (2005)

illustrates this with a lighthearted example:

Here are four ways to figure out the same actant: "Imperialism strives for unilateralism"; "The United States wishes to withdraw from the UN"; "Bush Junior wishes to withdraw from the UN"; "Many officers from the Army and two dozen neo-con leaders want to withdraw from the UN." That the first is a structural trait, the second a corporate body, the third an individual, the fourth a loose aggregate of individuals makes a big difference of course to the account, but they all provide different figurations of the same actions. None of the four is more or less "realist," "concrete," "abstract," or "artificial" than the others. (p. 54)

Thus, when I suggest that brands act, create, or otherwise relate ideas or human relationship, I simply mean to say that like physical entities like doors, hallways, and walls, they structure human action by directing, limiting, impeding, or allowing it.

Therefore, in addition to interviewing and observing human subjects, I recorded information on funeral goods and services, trade literature, training manuals and textbooks, and catalogues and memos. I attended trade shows and enrolled in a mortuary college. At the college I initially established rapport with key administrative employees and educators but this led me to eventually enroll in the college. As a student there, I interviewed teachers and other students, and I had practically unlimited access to the college's extensive collection of trade periodicals. Additionally, my participant-observation led me to assume the role of funeral tourist. I often sought out historical cemeteries, and visited one of the US's most renowned memorial parks, Forest Lawn. I visited the American Funeral Customs Museum in Springfield, Illinois. I was also a virtual interloper, regularly watching webcasts of funeral services and visiting online obituary sites (both of which are increasingly common in funeral service packages).

As I have implied written texts were also very critical in my research agenda. Seidman (1997) writes that cultural studies

[A]nalyzes the process of encoding or the making of meanings, the rules and conventions governing the production of media texts, their ideological role in naturalizing and normalizing the dominant meaning systems and institutions, the

multiple ways individuals are positioned and defined in these texts, the multiple audiences and the varied ways media texts are decoded or interpreted and used. (p. 44)

For this reason, I also examined the artifacts (tools, technologies, texts) that are available to individuals working within the trade both as work-objects and guides. I conducted extensive analysis of the trade magazines. Among these titles are *Mortuary Management, The Director,* and *Funeral Monitor* going back at least a decade (often much farther as some periodicals such as *Casket and Sunnyside* are more than a century old). Furthermore, I made an effort to read (or skim when the language moved either toward the abstruse or the redundant as it often does in annual reports) available corporate financials (from companies such as StoneMor, SCI, Alderwoods, Keystone, Hillenbrand, Mathews, among others) including quarterly and annual reports. With publicly traded companies some conferences are webcast and I listened to a handful of those or, as was sometimes made available, read the transcriptions of such conferences. I also acquired marketing reports from the Wirthlin Group and Cremation Association of North America each of which provided a wealth of quantitative, often longitudinal data on consumer trends (Wirthlin) and firm trends (Cremation Association of North America).

All of which served a kind of triangulation purpose. I routinely found that the claims of one funeral director would be corroborated by other funeral directors, or even some phenomenon I had read about in a trade magazine was being practiced by a number of firms. This, of course, attests to the "small-ness" of this world where many persons read the same things, attend the same conferences, have gone through similar training regimens, and so on. Indeed there is little that is remarkable about this save for the generalizability applicable for much of my data (if only within the world of the American funeral industry).

I attempted to view my multiple forms of data through multiple theoretical perspectives. Foucault once suggested, "'All my books… are little tool boxes. If people want to open them, to use a particular sentence, a particular idea, a particular analysis like a screwdriver or a spanner... so much the better!'" (Foucault in Prior 1997:77). Where possible, I have attempted to integrate theoretical perspectives rather than attach myself to a single lineage or perspective. As Adele Clarke (2005) writes "Bricoleurs assemble project-appropriate tool kits from a broad repertoire of available concepts and approaches" (p. 146). In attempting sociological bricolage I have also tried to demonstrate linkages that can create novel interpretations of social phenomena, open lines of dialogue and contribute to novel threads of research. However, the most significant drawback in employing this approach is that incongruities must either be shelved or addressed. Nelson, Treichler, and Grossberg (1992) advise cultural researchers: "To make more general use of [particular ideas], they have to be delicately disinterred from their concrete and specific historical embedded and transplanted to new soil with considerable care and patience" (p. 8). Thus, when examining my case from a Foucauldean-discursive-production-of-culture perspective, for instance, I have tried to account for points of contention in addition to points of confluence. Since, even within a theoretical lineage, there exist lines of flight and divergence, the notion that any given theory (or even text within a given theory) as a toolbox provides a particularly helpful heuristic.

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