Urban Space as Memory Place or How People Play with Death ("Forest Lawn" aka "Beverly Pantheon")

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Abstract: *The article discusses the construction of personal and collective memory through the commodification of burial places and rites in what could be called the (un)conscious play with death. Described by Foucault as a heterotopia, the cemetery creates a simulated utopia that life and death are intertwined and that, through the commemoration of the dead, the living could aspire to an afterlife existence. My focus to support this view is on "Forest Lawn Memorial Cemetery" in Los Angeles, California, a perfect example of death commodification and American consumerist culture in the first four decades of the twentieth century, and on its fictional representation in Aldous Huxley's novel, After Many a Summer Dies the Swan (1939) as "Beverley Pantheon, the Personality Cemetery". The purpose of the article is to foreground the way in which in pristine urban spaces, as Los Angeles was at the turn of the twentieth century, people used their unlimited imagination to build heterotopias of deviance, such as graveyards, churches, and houses, in order to turn them into profitable businesses. Urban space and culture also mean the formation of individual and collective cultural and social memory, which usually manifests in heterotopic, hyperreal places.*

Keywords: *heterotopia, hyperreality, cemetery, memory preservation*

Introduction

Life and death are usually seen in opposition, like white and black or light and dark. Therefore, the cult of the dead and burial rituals have always been a fascinating manifestation of humankind as rites of passage to a world in which the soul is supposed to live forever. They still are, especially as they are hugely based on, and strongly related to, religion, philosophy and personal beliefs, besides politics and regional or personal gains. In this line of thought, the site, location and morphology of burial spaces are invested with meanings by those who use and develop them: individuals, social groups and/or the state (Yeoh & Tan, 1995) while space becomes the key element in the organization of burial places. The choice of the landscape to create a burial site may result in individuals' or groups' use of it as a site of control or as a site of resistance from cultural, social and financial points of view. In the Christian world, for instance, burial places were usually connected to the church or to its vicinity. However, with the increase in population number and the disenchantment of religion in the last two centuries, cremation and columbaria have been preferred in the Protestant world as an accepted way of body disposal to the classical burial of the body remains. In either case, burial sites have been part of urban space distribution and concerned with personal or collective memory preservation, probably the most important aspect of burial rites.

In this article, I will focus on a less common, and less known, dealing with death and body disposal in the American culture of the 1910s through 1940s, the shift of cemetery from a mere burial site to the purchase of a place for ever-after life and constant memory preservation in the rising metropolis of Los Angeles (the Angels), California.

A few notes on LA's urban history

There are numerous volumes on Los Angeles, many of them elaborated by the researchers of the LA School of Urban Studies, founded and developed by late Edward Soja. Edward Soja's *Thirdspace* (1996), *Los Angeles and Urban Theory* (1997), *Postmetropolis* (2000), among other references to the city in his prolific work, offer both a combined historical, geographical, economic and social perspective on Los Angeles and a view on the city from the *Thirdspace* perspective.[1] Other studies on Los Angeles by single authors or in edited volumes, such as John and LaRee Caughey (*Los Angeles (Biography of a City)*, 1977), Mike Davis (*City of Quartz: Excavating the Future of Los Angeles*, 1990), David Fine, (*Los Angeles in Fiction*, 1995), Douglas Monroy (*Rebirth (Mexican Los Angeles from the Great Migration to the Great Depression)*, 1999), Kevin McNamara (*The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of Los Angeles*, 2010) refer to its rise and growth as a city with a particular history and geography as well as to its representations in historical documents, literature, film and art.

Deeply indebted to the Marxist perspectives of Castells and Harvey, Edward Soja discusses the development of Los Angeles as a complex, yet revealing, example of their views to which he adds his own. Thus, he uses Castells's concepts of "urban ideology" and "myth of urban culture," when he refers to the rise of "dream factories," the mass-producing moving picture industry and to the invention and building of Disneyland as models of urban engineering that was "commodified, mass produced and projected world-wide" (Soja, 2000:136). Harvey's views on "urban renewal" as "poor people removal" are used by Soja to illustrate the "minority removal" plan in the aftermath of the Second World War to create new space for new, modern constructions, the Dodger Stadium, being an example in this respect

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[1] According to Soja, *Thirdspace* is "a simultaneously real-and-imagined, actual-and-virtual" lived space, "a locus of structured individual and collective experience and agency" (Soja, 2000:11).

(Soja, 2000: 134). Building on Harvey's definition of the city as a "palimpsest", made of layers, Soja describes Los Angeles as an example of simultaneous utopian and dystopian urbanization (136) stressing its characteristic of "noir city" in the fictional and cinematic representations between 1920 and 1960.

In the 1920s through 1940s, Los Angeles was advertised as an ideal place for newcomers, whether Americans or foreigners. The city was imagined to offer the settlers the space in which they could organize space in any way they wished. In time, this created the layers that form the city palimpsest of today. As Mark Davis notes in his highly acclaimed *City of Quartz* (1990), citing a 1989 newspaper article, Los Angeles turned in the early twentieth century into "a commodity," "something to be advertised and sold to the people of the United States", and to the wide world, I would add, "like automobiles, cigarettes and mouth-wash" (17).

The "selling" of Los Angeles was especially due to the advertisements and articles published by a newcomer, Charles Fletcher Lummis, in the local papers, especially in the major newspaper *The Los Angeles Times*. The city was described as the place where the gold seekers would find their fortune, health-seekers would discover a place for various cures, the tourists a recreational venue, and the dreamers the city of dream-making. Each myth created in and about the city in the process of translating image (landscape and climate) into text, and placed on the market to be sold, brought about investors, but also outlined a new layer on top of the already existing ones in the formation of the palimpsest image of the city. Lummis's crucial importance in the promotion and rise of Los Angeles lies in promoting the city not only as a tourist attraction and place for incurable diseases, but also as a way of life for which he offered his own personal example.

Lummis, himself in search of health and cures, created the image of the 'sunshine' city, mainly through his magazine, *The Land of Sunshine*, which he edited between 1895 and 1909. He managed to give a cultural and intellectual dimension to the magazine, which gave detailed descriptions of the cultures of the indigenous tribes, celebrated the Spanish past, but also the arrival of New England gentility, which meant the land's present and future. Therefore, articles written by himself or his contributors about life in the sunshine and the wealth of the place were added to attract land buyers and developers or dream seekers. One of the articles, for example, titled "Miles of Untold Wealth" by F.A. Pattee (one of the important contributors to the magazine), published in 1898, describes the Los Angeles area in a long enumeration of "scenic attractiveness, sallubrity of climate, fertility of soil, productive orchards, unfailing water, gold, and, better still, petroleum" (vol. 9:389).

The Land of Sunshine offered a romantic vision of landscapes, history and cultures, the place where "Anglo-Americans could escape what [Lummis] perceived as the maladies of modern life and adopt a life that was simpler and more connected to nature and tradition" (Culver 17). Through his articles in the *Los Angeles Times* and *The Land of Sunshine* magazine, Lummis provided a paradigm shift for leisure, which ceased to be the decadent privilege of the rich and became a right the middle-class would benefit from (Culver 17). He taught the American people to rest and enjoy recreation; he offered his readers the vision of new homes and modes of living that would create security and comfort; he sold Los Angeles as a "shelter" place which would change the new-comers' life forever to the better; he created the first Californian myth about sublime landscapes and exotic Native and Mexican cultures. However, in his promotion of the city it is evident that Lummis's more or less conscious intention was to gentrify the area, to create a new space mainly for 'white' people. The slogans in the *Los Angeles Times* and other magazine articles were directed to bring over white newcomers to take possession of the land that had been occupied first by Native-Americans and later by Mexicans.

One of the iconic images of both the town and the area surrounding it was "the orange" advertised by the citrus growers and turned into a commodity of lifestyle and place (Hartig, 298). The image of the orange was used to promote health, pleasure, even religion like in the advertisement of the rebuilt San Gabriel Mission, which read: "THE CROSS AND THE CITRUS WENT HAND IN HAND" (qted in Hartig, 299) or ORANGES FOR HEALTH – CALIFORNIA FOR WEALTH (qted in Molina, 18).

LA: a utopian or a dystopian space?

An excellent description of the city as an opposition between white and black, between paradise (or El Dorado) and an inferno is made by Mike Davis in the first chapter of *The City of Quartz (Excavating the Future of Los Angeles)*. Entitled "Sunshine or Noir?," the chapter analyzes "the indigenous process of city-myth production and its *noir*-ish antipode to European sensibilities about America" (Davis 22) in general and the Pacific coast in particular between 1930 and 1990. As Davis puts it, Los Angeles has always been the 'sunshine' city in the American imaginary since its climate and geographical position had been turned into commodities. The newcomers, especially those who visited (or settled down) and wrote about Los Angeles in the thirties and forties, looked at the town with the intellectual and cultural superiority of the European who did not stifle his disdain for the strongly emerging consumerist culture they found in California. Therefore, they debunked the pastoral myths, the El Dorado image and the health advertisements. To them, the 'sunshine' city became 'noir'.

In supporting his 'noir' theory, Davis quotes the depiction of Los Angeles from Mount Hollywood, one of the most iconic, consumerist places, by Louis Adamic, a Slovene-American journalist and writer who dwelt in the city in the 1930s:

> From Mount Hollywood, Los Angeles looks rather nice, enveloped in a haze of changing colors. Actually, and in spite of all the healthful sunshine and ocean breezes, it is a *bad* place – full of old, dying people, who were born old of tired pioneer parents, victims of America – full of curious wild and poisonous growths, decadent religious cults and fake science, and wildcat enterprises, which, with their aim for quick profit, are doomed to collapse and drag down multitudes of people … a jungle. (qted in Davis, 36)

Adamic's view is not singular. It actually represents the reading of the city by most European intellectuals who were either invited by the Studios to write scripts or found in Los Angeles an ideal exilic place during WWII. That was a period when, besides the American novelists who had been invited to write for the film Studios (e.g. F. S. Fitzgerald, Earnest Hemingway, William Falkner), Los Angeles welcomed both German writers (most of them of Jewish origin) who found refuge in America during Hitler's dictatorship, and British expatriates who decided to live in the States during the war.

LA in expatriates' view

Among the German refugees, the reputed philosophers and sociologists Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, who lived in Los Angeles between 1941 and 1949, found inspiration in the place to support their theory of culture industry and consumerism in the capitalist society, which they developed in the seminal *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944). The opening of the famous chapter, "Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception," includes a description of Los Angeles as the city of mass-produced houses, accessories and entertainment:

> The older buildings around the concrete centers already look like slums and the new bungalows on the outskirts, like the flimsy structure at international trade fairs, sing the praises of technical progress, while inviting their users to throw them away after short use like tin cans. But the town planning projects which are supposed to perpetuate individuals as autonomous units in hygienic small apartments, subjugate them only more completely to their adversary, the total power of capital. (Horkheimer and Adorno, 94)

In such a world, the two cultural forms, film and radio, had become 'industries'; they were standardized forms, which apparently derived from the needs of the consumers, but which actually revealed the deceptive component of the Enlightenment at mass level. To Horkheimer and Adorno, Los Angeles in the 1940s offered the best example of the production and consumption of culture industry. To them, that was the end of Western civilization, which, apparently, died in Los Angeles.

The German circle in Los Angeles during WWII, also famous for their current meetings in Villa Aurora, owned by the writer Lion Feuchtwanger and his wife, counted Thomas Mann among its prominent representatives. It is in

Los Angeles that he produced his major work *Doctor Faustus* (1947) while befriending the philosophers Horkheimer and Adorno, the composer Arnold Schoenberg, the acclaimed German playwright Bertolt Brecht, while he was also employed by the Studios to write a number of screenplays. Though Mann does not refer to Los Angeles in his work produced while living there, he generally shares Adorno's perception of the city as promoting sameness in clothing, music, movies and eating. (Berman 54) Likewise, Brecht notices the artificiality of the place which offers a fake image of reality:

> I feel as if I had been exiled from out era, this is Tahiti in the form of a big city…they have nature here, indeed, since everything is so artificial, they even have an exaggerated feeling for nature, which becomes alienated. from dieterle's house you can see the San Fernando valley; an incessant, brilliantly illuminated stream of cars thunders through nature; they tell you that all the greenery is wrested from the desert by irrigation systems. Scratch the surface a little and the desert shows through. (qted by Berman 55)

Unlike Mann, who seemed to feel comfortable in Los Angeles and chose to settle down there instead of going back to Germany after the war, Brecht sees himself as an alien to the city in the description cited above (which comes from his journal entry of August 9, 1941), a short time after he arrived in town. To him, Los Angeles is the image of Hell, as London had been a century before to the English poets and fiction writers. (Berman 57)

Whichever view the locals and the newcomers held, Los Angeles became the ideal place to buy and sell dreams and to build anything (houses, movie sets, castles, churches and graveyards) in any mixed architectural style possible at the time. Life and death had become commodities which could bring wealth to those who knew how to handle them.

The church and the graveyard in *After Many a Summer Dies the Swan*

The picture of Los Angeles as the place of mixed, incongruent architecture, artificiality, lack of artistic taste, in which the selling of life and death had become primordial is displayed in Aldous Huxley's novel *After Many a Summer Dies the Swan*, published in 1939. Huxley was an émigré at that time, a self-exiled novelist who, initially came to Hollywood to work on scripts, but decided to prolong his stay because of the war and the European political and economic incertitude which he wanted to avoid. Huxley's novel opens with the description of the city from Union Station to an enormous castle on top of the hill overlooking the ocean, owned by the billionaire Jo Stoyto. Both locations exist in California: Union Station is the central railway station of Los Angeles, built by the Chinese and Mexican workers in the nineteenth century, while the castle is, according to the description, the property of a real billionaire, William Randolph Hearst, who built it further north on the coast, where Huxley and his wife spent a weekend. To his, and to the protagonist's, good taste, the castle was obviously incongruous with the place and the age.

The car ride which the novel protagonist, Jeremy Pordage, a European scholar, takes, driven by an iconic black chauffeur, gives him the opportunity to describe the Africans, Filipinos, Japanese and Mexican slums through which they drive on their way west through Beverly Hills towards San Fernando valley and to the coast rock on which Stoyte's medieval castle was built. What Pordage sees is a suburban world of filling stations and billboards, of low houses in gardens, of vacant lots and wastepaper, of occasional shops and office buildings and churches – primitive Methodist churches built, surprisingly enough, in the style of the Cartuja at Granada, Catholic Churches like Canterbury Cathedral, a synagogue disguised as Hagia Sophia, Christian Science churches with pillars and pe/diments, like banks. (5) The unexpected mixture of styles reflects the mixture of beliefs, the superficiality of the church mission, the people's confusion with religion and, ultimately, alienation from it contrary to the advertisements promoted on huge billboards, such as GO TO CHURCH AND FEEL BETTER ALL THE WEEK and JESUS IS COMING SOON.

The confusing style of the churches which Pordage passes by heightens their heterotopic features by alluding to a strange mixture of religious beliefs: Catholic and Protestant, Jewish and Muslim, Christian Science (with a focus on self-healing as a result of one's love of God) and monetary science (love of money). The eeriness of the churches described by Pordage both strengthens the concept of heterotopias and described by Michel Foucault in the category of "heterotopias of ritual and purification" (Foucault 15) and questions the quality of ritual and purification.

When the black driver takes Pordage through Beverly Hills, he notices a change in the inhabitants' welfare, which has brought forward a more absurd mixture of styles, the houses looking "like the pavilions at some endless international exhibition. Gloucester followed Andalusia and gave place in turn to Touraine and Oaxaca, Düsseldorf and Massachussetts" (Huxley 12). The range of odd styles culminated with the castle in which the billionaire Jo Stoyte was living, which seemed to belong to a different space and time. It was a replica of medieval Gothic "with a Gothicity raised […] to a higher power, more medieval than any building of the thirteenth century" (Huxley 18). Though a lived-in place, the castle, with its huge number of non-lived-in rooms crowded with a large variety of artistic artifacts brought from Europe, incoherently displayed, looks more like a museum and, therefore, functions as a "heterotopia of time" (Foucault 15).

One of the focal points in Huxley's novel, connected both to the derisory church and to the megalomaniac castle is the cemetery which, in Foucault's terms, represents "heterotopias of deviation" (Foucault 14). The extremely large graveyard, named Beverley Pantheon, the "Personality Cemetery" is introduced in the first pages of the novel as one of the places owned by Stoyte.

Like any object for sale, it is advertised on billboards: AT BEVERLY PANTHEON FINE FUNERALS ARE NOT EXPENSIVE (Huxley 6), IN TIME OF SORROW LET BEVERLEY PANTHEON BE YOUR FRIEND (Huxley 7), BEVERLY PANTHEON, THE CEMETRY THAT IS DIFFERENT (Huxley 10). In the novel, the cemetery, with its graves turned into commodities, becomes the commodity which one can buy immortality or, at least, memory conservation. This is both contrasted by and complementary to the cemetery owner's desperate attempts to reach physical immortality through remedies and potions.

Beverly Pantheon aka Forest Lawn Memorial

"Beverly Pantheon" is the name used by Huxley in his novel for the real Forest Lawn Memorial Park, the famous Los Angeles cemetery, created by Hubert Eaton in 1917. The real burial site, turned into a visiting place nowadays, meant to exploit the human desire to live forever or at least to be remembered by the loved ones, reflects the Americans' drive for consumer culture and artificial aspirations to eternal afterlife.

Hubert Eaton purchased an already existent burial place, Forest Lawn Cemetery, outside of Glendale, organized like any other graveyards in the world, on the more or less good taste of individuals and families who bought and built monuments for the deceased. Eaton changed this 'old' concept around the idea of "memorial park," in the sense that it was no longer going to be marked by individual and family monuments, it was developed, instead, according to a unified style (individual plaques) and a unified landscape (trees, lanes, birds, flowers, fountains, statuary). (Sloane, 348) However, this idea led not only to its adorning with random copies of works of art, but also to its turning into a tourist attraction in the 1930s and 1940s, which brought both high praise for the inventor's ingenuity and severe criticism.

On the one hand, the cemetery started to be filled with replicas of famous statues and artifacts bought from Europe, such as a copy of Michelangelo's *Moses* made from the same Carrara marble that the artist used for the original statue and a stained-glass reproduction of Da Vinci's *Last Supper*. Both were placed in the Great Mausoleum, based on the American version of Campo Santo of Genoa, Italy. Other buildings counted a copy of a sixteenth-century English Tudor house, a Scottish church inspired by the village church of Glencairn, where Walter Scott wrote some of his works, and a replica of the English village church, where Thomas Gray's *Elegy* was written.

Just as the city of Los Angeles became a commodity, eternal life in Los Angeles was also for sale. To achieve his vision of a unique cemetery, Eaton started an aggressive advertising campaign not only on billboards (like the ones mentioned in the novel), but also on radio: an hour of music was sponsored and broadcast every day to remind the Angelenos it was time to secure a grave and plaque in the new resting place (Sloane, 349). Eaton changed the cemetery concept to such an extent that he created a space in which life was mixed with death, mourning with spectacle, the private with the public. The intimacy between the individual and the departed became a spectacle for everybody to attend because the Park, the Mausoleum and the churches were open to visitors at fixed hours every day.

Applying Foucault's theory, such a space juxtaposes several heterotopias on the basic heterotopia of deviation: heterotopia of time (the Memorial Park functioned as a museum) with the heterotopia of ritual and purification. The cemetery churches, according to Sloane, were used for ordinary and extraordinary masses – like the Easter Service, which gathered over 10,000 people –, baptisms, and weddings. (Sloane, 350) The living and the dead shared the same heterotopic space which produced the dream of eternal life through the mere purchase of a grave during lifetime and the illusion of adorning it with art (which was actually mere copies). The transfer of replicas of the original European churches and artifacts to Forest Lawn brings to mind Walter Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1939), with its comments on how reproduction undermines and ruins the 'aura' of uniqueness and originality, as well as Jean Baudrillard's idea of the hyperreal world in which reality and illusion are reversed. Forest Lawn corresponds both to the concept of heterotopias and to the idea of hyperreality.

What Eaton did in Los Angeles was to create the cult of the dead by turning the cemetery into a make-believe resting place for wealthy families. Building on Eaton's vision of "eternal life" and very poorly impressed by Forest Lawn, Huxley represents Eaton's cemetery in his fictional Beverly Pantheon, owned by a filthy-rich man, who, having everything in this world, including the monopoly on burial places, is playing with the idea of eternity in his own quest for ever-lasting life. Hence, the title and the theme of the novel. Huxley found inspiration in Alfred Tennyson's poem "Tithonus" which tells the story of a man who is granted eternal life by the gods, but not eternal youth. Therefore, in time, he shrinks and changes his human form. Just like Tennyson's hero, Stoyte is desperate to find the cure of old age and the potion to grant him everlasting youth. In Huxley's ironic tone, he allegedly finds it at his personal charlatan doctor's recommendation in a daily diet based on carp guts. Besides the fact that Stoyte's search represents Huxley's sarcastic reading of California as the place where any 'cure' is possible, including old age, his obsession with death and with Beverly Pantheon, turn the heterotopias described above into iconic images of a shallow and garish city. Moreover, the grotesque idea of making dead bodies look better in death than in life is matched by the unreasonable obsession of obtaining eternal life through a cure of old age, which heightens the heterotopic dimension of the cemetery both in the real world and in fiction.

In Huxley's novel, Pordage, the protagonist, stops to visit the fictional Forest Lawn on his way to Stoyte's castle. Besides the fact that the place is announced in six-foot neon tubes as BEVERLEY PANTHEON, THE PERSONALITY CEMETERY, it distinguishes itself by “a full-scale reproduction of the Leaning Tower of Pisa – only this one didn’t lean,” representing the “Tower of Resurrection” (Huxley, 12-13). The improved image of the tower, with its new meaning, though it accommodates the administration offices, is an example of the copy that replaces the original in the people’s mind and collective memory. The short visit to the cemetery shocked “the humorous Puritanism of [Pordage’s] good taste; he was appalled at the prospect of meeting the person committing such an enormity” (Huxley 19) The fictional copy of the English village church at Forest Lawn is “the Tiny Church of the Poet – a miniature reproduction of Holy Trinity at Stratford-on Avon, complete with Shakespeare’s tomb and a twenty-four service of organ music played automatically by the perpetual Wurlitzer” (Huxley 14). The reinforced heterotopic and hyperreal dimensions of the church are represented by “the Bride’s Apartment (for one was married at the Tiny Church as well as buried from it),” placed close by the vestry, “the Bride’s Apartment that has just been redecorated […] in the style of Norma Shearer’s boudoir in *Marie Antoinette*” (Huxley 14). Next to the apartment there was “the exquisite black marble Vestibule of Ashes, leading to the Crematorium” (14). Beverley Pantheon looks at least as eerie and spooky as Forest Lawn, the real place of inspiration to which Huxley would take all his friends for a visit. Huxley continues the description of the fictional Beverly Pantheon with the bric-a-brac of statues at the Children’s Corner (Peter Pan, the Infant Jesus, a “group of alabaster babies playing with bronze rabbits,” 15), a replica of Rodin’s *The Kiss*, a large range of statues of nude females, “all exuberantly nubile” (16).

Conclusion

Both Eaton’s real Forest Lawn and Huxley’s fictional Beverly Pantheon support Foucault’s presentation of the special heterotopia of the cemetery. Initially developed in the heart of the town or village, close to the church or temple, cemeteries have existed since the beginning of time and had held a central place in the community up to the eighteenth century. In modern times, when atheism gained more ground, the western civilization moved the cemetery to the periphery of the city but developed a cult of the dead. According to Foucault, when people are “no longer sure that they have a soul or that the body will regain life,” they start to pay “more attention to the dead body, which is ultimately the only trace of our existence in the world and in language” (Foucault 14). Moreover, the obsession, or play, with death creates the equation between death and ‘illness’ or ill omen, which made people move the cemetery to the suburbs, where every family possessed a “dark resting place” (Foucault 14).

Among the various rituals that different cultures perform for the departed, the commodification of death in the spectacle of body disposition is not only illustrative of the conscious creation of a heterotopic, hyperreal world, but also representative of a specific urban space organization in which life and death are meant to juxtapose culturally, socially and spatially.

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