Solemnity and Celebration: Dark Tourism Experiences at Hollywood Forever Cemetery

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As the final resting place of celebrities and notable public figures, Hollywood Forever Cemetery in Los Angeles has long served as a tourist attraction and a site of public memory. Unique among dark tourism sites, Hollywood Forever brings together the gravity of death and a celebratory sense of remembrance. This is made possible in part by the cemetery’s history as a tourist attraction and by its use as a site of festivals, film screenings, and other events. Tourists are encouraged to use the cemetery as social space, transforming relationships to the site. Many visitors respond warmly to these events, yet the cemetery faces disapproval from those who find these practices irreverent and lacking respect for the dead.

In a scene from the documentary The Young and the Dead (Baumel, Berman, & Pulcini, 2000), Bill Obrock, executive vice president of Hollywood Forever cemetery in Los Angeles, sits on the steps outside of a mausoleum. Obrock appears in profile with a brightly lit corridor of mausoleum crypts behind him. He straps on a pair of rollerblades and heads off to skate through the cemetery. Obrock’s voiceover provides a foundational perspective for Hollywood Forever not only as an operating cemetery, but also as a tourist attraction: “We love this place. It’s a world treasure. You step on the grounds and you can feel it. It is seething with something magical.” While the cemetery can provide a peaceful respite from the hectic pace of the city, Obrock noted that it has another dimension:

Los Angeles Magazine declares us one of the 101 sexiest places in L.A. And a lot of people do find cemeteries to be a little bit spooky, but it’s also an extremely romantic place. It’s an extremely exciting and mysterious place, and it’s a very sexy place.
(Baumel, Berman, & Pulcini, 2000)

Obrock relocated to Los Angeles to join his childhood friend, Tyler Cassity, in the operation and management of the cemetery. Cassity and his family business, Forever Enterprises, are behind the transformation of the former Hollywood Memorial Park, which he bought out of bankruptcy in 1998. Cassity wanted not only to restore the cemetery but to transform the death care industry: he espouses the idea of celebrating life rather than mourning death and encourages this shift in cultural perspectives by inviting the use of the cemetery as leisure space (Bernhard, 1998; Friend, 2005). The cemetery has long invited visitors to pay their respects to the actors, directors, and Hollywood celebrities interred on the grounds, whether through organized tours and events or as casual guests. As a dark tourism site, Hollywood Forever draws on its history, mystique, and relationship to celebrity culture. The celebrity cemetery attracts visitors who are able to experience a sense of proximity to the famous, if only by virtue of that star’s mortal remains.

Both historically and with regard to contemporary practices, Hollywood Forever is somewhat unique among dark tourism sites because the gravity of death is intermingled with a celebratory sense of remembrance. This is made possible in part by the cemetery’s history as a tourist attraction and by its use as a site of celebration, festivals, film screenings, and other events. The contradictory perspectives on dark tourism at Hollywood Forever bear examination. Many find the use of the cemetery as social space disrespectful, maintaining the perspective that as a burial site, a cemetery is sacred space that should be respected, while others embrace a shifting attitude toward death as a fundamental part of life that should be neither feared nor shunned (e.g., Lynch, 2000; Nadle, 2006; Matson, 2000; Palmer, 1993). The perceived morbidity of the gravesite pilgrimage for fans of stars buried at Hollywood Forever is tempered by the cemetery’s social events and by the increasing popularity of dark tourism focused on sites of celebrity death and disaster (Laderman, 2003; Sturken, 2007). This essay considers the questions raised by contested uses of these sites as dark tourism grows as a commercial phenomenon worldwide.

Heritage tourism is inherently interpretive, and the perspectives presented to visitors are not necessarily aligned with those who have a personal, vested interest in a site. This analysis draws on Marita Sturken’s (2007) notion of “tourists of history,” which she defined as: a particular mode through which the American public is encouraged to experience itself as the subject of history through consumerism, media images, souvenirs, popular culture, and museum and architectural reenactments, a form of tourism that has as its goal a cathartic ‘experience’ of history. (p. 9)

Although Sturken’s work deals primarily with sites of significant tragedy like the Oklahoma City bombing and September 11 attacks, the packaging of dark tourism sites as experiential and driven in part by consumption resonates with the practices at Hollywood Forever.

Cemetery Tourism

In their book Dark Tourism: The Attraction of Death and Disaster, John Lennon and Malcolm Foley (2000) excluded cemeteries from their definition of dark tourism. They argued that “visits, whether by friends and relatives of the dead or by those with other motives, can be broadly considered under similar categories to pilgrimage” (p. 14-16). In their analysis of sites related to John F. Kennedy’s life and death, Lennon and Foley singled out the eternal flame at Arlington National Cemetery as the location that holds the least reverence, despite being the gravesite of the former president. Their critique is drawn from the
commercialization at the cemetery where tourists are told they have only a few minutes to visit and photograph the site before the next tour bus arrives (Lennon & Foley, 2000, p. 88).

Tony Seaton’s (2009) more recent work took issue with Lennon and Foley’s early defining principles, dispensing with some cynicism that may be inherent in critical views of tourism that commodify death and disaster. Rather than seeing dark tourism exclusively as a postmodern spectacle, Seaton posited that “dark tourism experiences may be consumed in order to give some phenomenological meaning to tourists’ own social existence” (Sharpless, 2009, p. 17). While sites of disaster and atrocity demand introspection, a visit to the cemetery can be contemplative as well, giving visitors the opportunity to consider their own mortality. Such moments of self-reflection may be uplifting rather than morose, as one may choose to leave the cemetery wishing to make the most of the time that remains. One may also find peace in cleaning the gravesite and spending time with the memories of a loved one. This is a deeply personal experience, different from the visit to a dark tourism site that marks the intersection of individual and cultural tragedy.

This intersection is, however, commonly addressed in considering cemeteries such as Père Lachaise in Paris and Pierce Bros. Westwood and the Forest Lawn cemeteries in Los Angeles, which are the final resting places of well-known public figures. At Hollywood Forever, fans and tourists visit the gravesites of celebrities from across time and culture, from silent film stars Rudolph Valentino and Douglas Fairbanks to cartoon voice master Mel Blanc and Golden Girls star Estelle Getty. Blanc and Getty are both interred at Beth Olam, the Jewish section of the cemetery. In addition to its stars, more than 80,000 everyday Angelenos are interred at Hollywood Forever. The cemetery is thus a site of both personal and cultural memory, and often the two are intertwined as tourists seeking the gravesite of a favorite celebrity cross paths with mourners leaving a funeral or paying respects to a loved one.

The cultural conflict and ambiguity created by varied uses of sites of death and disaster is a longstanding concern. While meaning-making by a local or affected community remains primary, the tourist gaze becomes a norm of interpretation for those whose understandings of place are shaped by tourism’s point of view. Claude Jacobs (2001) drew on John Urry’s notion of the tourist gaze as assigned to rhetoric and interpretations that are “socially organized, systematized, and culturally specific, with consequences for individuals who have this sort of vision as well as for the places, events, people and things that become its object, i.e., tourist attractions” (p. 311). Anthropologist Jack Kugelmass (1995), for example, made a distinction between Jewish tourists, particularly from the United States, who transformed Auschwitz from a site of Polish memory and martyrdom to a site of Jewish memory. In her study of German memory, Karen Till (2005) considered how physical places that are landmarks of Nazism and World War II should be marked and understood and what kind of commemoration is appropriate and necessary.

Studies of Day of the Dead celebrations in Mexico and the United States point to the difficulties of dark tourism in an instance of cultural convergence. Tourists visiting cemeteries in Mexico find the celebrations colorful and charming, yet view the holiday as culturally “othered” from the distance of the tourist gaze. Stanley Brandes (1998) observed that Day of the Dead rituals have been transformed in many Mexican villages as certain practices are enacted to meet expectations of tourists. This is not uncommon for heritage tourism sites. Brandes reported that some villagers mourn the loss of longstanding traditions while others enjoy the financial benefits of inviting tourists to observe Day of the Dead rituals. Greg Palmer (1993) also found Day of the Dead traditions being threatened by commercialism brought on by tourists who lack reverence for the cultural traditions that bring them to the cemetery for celebration.

Hollywood Forever is among the few cemeteries in the United States that invite observation of Day of the Dead, hosting a community-wide celebration with more than 30,000 visitors building altars and enjoying live music, face painting, crafts, and food. As Day of the Dead blends respect and humor, celebration at the cemetery blends Mexican tradition with Hollywood kitsch. At most cemeteries, family members come to clean and decorate the graves of their loved ones, but Hollywood Forever invites anyone interested to build an altar. Hundreds of altars honor and remember the personal, political, and famous as both Latinos and non-Latinos invite the dead to return and spend time among the living. These cultural practices reflect the perspective embraced by Hollywood Forever, celebrating life rather than mourning death.

As theoretical work in dark tourism progresses, many researchers question motives for seeking out sites related to death and disaster. Not only is there a broad spectrum of reasons for such experiences, but the sites themselves offer varying degrees of shock, horror, reflection, and introspection. Recognizing that both are well-known and popular tourist attractions, it is clear that a visit to Auschwitz has a different tenor than a visit to Graceland. Richard Sharpley (2009) offered a typology of dark tourism in which he envisioned these practices fitting into four areas of consumption: dark tourism as experience, dark tourism as play, dark tourism as integration, and dark tourism as classification. In his discussion of play, Sharpley noted the importance of shared experiences:

That is, although it is the death of an individual or group of people that is the initial driver, it is the collective celebration, remembrance or mourning that is the dominant factor. Thus, dark tourism becomes pilgrimage, or a journey followed by the experience of ‘communitas,’ either as ‘one-off’ events such as the funeral of Princess Diana or at annual celebrations like the anniversary of Elvis Presley’s death at Graceland. (p. 18) As Sharpless (2009) asserted, dark tourism at death sites and cemeteries may involve both mourning and celebration. This is certainly the perspective embraced by Hollywood Forever, where both pilgrimage and revelry are common and encouraged. Along with the Rudolph Valentino memorial service, held every year since 1927, Hollywood Forever hosts memorial events celebrating the lives of Douglas Fairbanks, Tyrone Power, and Johnny Ramone. Each of these events blends solemnity and celebration with performances of live music, film screenings, and – in the case of Fairbanks – champagne and cake.

Tourists who enjoy Hollywood Forever for its social events or for its green space (as Bill Obrock contended), may not be aware that they are reviving social practices that began in the 1830s in America. This period marks the establishment of Mount Auburn Cemetery in Boston and similar “rural cemeteries” that used it as a model. Established on the outskirts of urban areas, rural cemeteries provided a refuge of nature for city dwellers. The rural cemetery also became leisure space, a location for strolling along shaded paths and picnicking before the development of city parks allowed citizens to escape the noise and chaos of urban life. Cemeteries provided the primary space available for enjoying the outdoors in an urban context (Linden-Ward, 1989).

Public parks began to take over some of the green space functions of cemeteries
at the turn of the last century; however, Hollywood Forever continues to draw people to its gardens and paths. Visitors stroll through the cemetery and are welcome to do so. Yet the quiet and peace of the cemetery easily yields to public events, whether a memorial event in honor of a celebrity or an outdoor screening at the cemetery’s film series Cinespia. The transformation of space is influenced by traditional use of Hollywood Forever for tourism and cultural activities and also because of the landscape. For Cinespia, visitors gather on the Fairbanks Lawn, the vast expanse of green space behind the sarcophagus of Douglas Fairbanks, Sr. and Jr., and films are projected on the external wall of the Cathedral Mausoleum. Having open space away from gravestones and mausoleums is unusual, and the lawn provides a welcoming open area for a variety of events including musical performances, plays, and yoga classes.

The events at Hollywood Forever are unconventional, yet sites like Arlington National Cemetery and Green-Wood Cemetery in Brooklyn have attracted tourists as well as those on a pilgrimage to see the final resting places of politicians, military leaders, celebrities, and artists they admire. Many cemeteries offer guided tours as well as maps for visitors to locate the gravesites they seek. Like Hollywood Forever, Atlanta’s Oakland Cemetery provides a quiet respite in the city center. The last lot at the cemetery was sold in 1884 so visitors are far less likely to encounter mourners at Oakland than at Hollywood Forever, which is still accepting new interments. Priding itself on its architecture, horticulture, and historical significance, Oakland Cemetery positions itself much like a museum or city park, offering tours and hosting both an annual Easter egg hunt and Arts in the Park – ten days of performances, lectures, and art installations on the cemetery grounds (Historic Oakland Foundation, n.d.).

The Cemetery as Social Space

The practices of tourists at Hollywood Forever demonstrate the significance of celebrity culture, showing how people use their relationships to celebrities as sites of identity formation and expression. Flowers and remembrances they leave behind draw the interest of other visitors and are material evidence that a particular celebrity is remembered and commemo-
rated. Along with official events sponsored by the cemetery, Hollywood Forever welcomes fans to initiate events in honor of stars. The Douglas Fairbanks Memorial, for example, is organized by Fairbanks fan and film historian Sparrow Morgan. Announcing the 2008 event (Laugh & Live Festival, 2008, para. 5), Morgan echoed the philosophy of Hollywood Forever:

Fairbanks wanted to be remembered through his films, which is why I do this. I feel it’s more in keeping with the Fairbanks joie de vivre to host a celebration, so I chose to throw a birthday party instead of mourning the anniversary of his death. While there’s no doubt he’s missed, I can’t imagine Doug thinking a wake in his honor was anything short of ridiculous.

The Fairbanks Memorial temporarily transforms the cemetery into a space of celebration. Using the cemetery as social space raises questions about protocol. If these are unconventional practices, what are the guidelines for appropriate behavior? How should tourists and visitors behave in the company of mourners? Who decides what constitutes respect for the living and the dead?

Should dark tourism sites be used only for a moral or social lesson? If tourists spend time at the Gettysburg Battlefield, for example, critics argue that visitors should mourn the loss of some 50,000 Civil War soldiers in a violent and bloody battle rather than cavort through the grounds searching for evidence of ghosts (see Stone, 2009 for discussion of moral implications of dark tourism). The implication of such perspectives is that those who celebrate life without the guise of solemnity typically associated with the cemetery intend disrespect for the dead. In popular discourse and within the death care industry, many reflect the sentiments of those who find such activities in the cemetery irreverent. In his book of essays, Bodies in Motion and at Rest: On Metaphor and Mortality, essayist, poet, and funeral director Thomas Lynch (2000) found fault with the performance of a play at a community cemetery. When family members of those buried in the cemetery complained about the play, the thespian group argued that the performance was a celebration of the lives of the dead. In the town’s newspaper, opponents argued the cemetery:

…is full of fathers and mothers and daughters and sons who have no obligation to educate or entertain or instruct the living. Museums and libraries, art galleries and public parks, serve these purposes. The bodies of the dead make Oak Grove a sacred place. (p. 240)

Lynch added his own concern to that of his neighbors, warning that “the harm, of course, is that once the gate is opened it is hard to close, and lost forever is the sacred and dedicated space that is only a cemetery and needs be nothing more” (p. 242). Lynch maintained a traditional perspective on burial and was unwilling to allow what he saw as corruption of the sacred space of the cemetery. Yet this is also a perspective on death: that the lives of the dead should be revered, but not celebrated, in the cemetery. For Hollywood Forever, the effort to change the public’s relationship to the cemetery means overcoming opposition from within the death care industry as well as encouraging new social practices within the cemetery space. Such arguments are strained by the use of the cemetery as a venue for entertainment for which visitors are charged admission. These paid guests are, as Sturken (2007) described them, tourists of history who are experiencing the past through the lens of consumption and popular culture. This perspective colors the experience of the cemetery as a site of leisure and pleasure rather than a site of mourning.

Cinespia: Cinema and the Cemetery

On a typical summer Saturday night, more than three thousand Angelenos enjoy picnic dinners, music, and movies on the cemetery grounds. Cinespia, which draws large crowds and has become a popular cultural outing in Los Angeles since its inception in 2002, works to change the public’s meaning-making about Hollywood Forever. When thousands of people visit the cemetery for leisure and entertainment, how that space is understood in public discourse is transformed. Because of the festive environment created by the comfortable rituals of sharing food with friends and gathering with hundreds of others to listen to music and watch a film, visitors can easily forget they are in an operating cemetery where burials still take place. The cemetery may cease to be ominous or morbid through its transformation into social space. Cinespia creates and perpetuates a temporary but recurring public space. Jackson (1980) posited the idea that a landscape like the Fairbanks Lawn at Hollywood Forever can serve a social function merely by virtue of being space shared among individuals within a community. It is, after all, in public space that people can spend time with others and establish the bonds that form community. Jackson wrote:

A landscape should establish bonds between people, the bond of language, of manners, of the same kind of work and leisure, and above all a landscape should contain the kind of spatial organization which fosters
such experiences and relationships; spaces for coming together, to celebrate, spaces for solitude, spaces that never change and are always as memory depicted them. (p. 16-17)

By situating Cinespia on cemetery grounds, Hollywood Forever becomes a space that can alternately provide both celebration and solitude. The conjunction of these two things – the social space of summer Saturday nights and the everyday space of quiet and reflection – allows Hollywood Forever to become a uniquely meaningful place for visitors.

Horror films have become an end-of-season tradition for Cinespia, with George Romero's Night of the Living Dead screened at the end of the 2006 season. The film opens in a cemetery in which the dead come back to life to search for living humans who will be their cannibalistic prey. Originally released in 1968, Night of the Living Dead was added to the National Film Registry in 1999, one of 25 films selected that year because they were deemed "culturally, historically or aesthetically significant" and thus worthy of preservation for future generations (National Film Preservation Board, 1999).

Despite the recognized significance of Romero's work, screening horror films in the cemetery lends a different aura to the space than a silent film or film noir, which can enhance the appreciation for the historic significance of Hollywood Forever by virtue of the stars and directors buried there. When the film was suggested for the 2003 season, LA Weekly reported that Tyler Cassity "ruled that zombie films in a cemetery pushed the boundaries of good taste just a little too far" ("Alfresco Theater," 2003); eventually, he relented and deemed the Romero classic as acceptable fare for the venue.

Events at Hollywood Forever are somewhat in keeping with the social and cultural functions carried out at other cemeteries, albeit with a Hollywood twist. Many who feel comfortable with the presentation of a play or performance of classical music at a cemetery disapprove of Cinespia: showing films in the cemetery and projecting them on the mausoleum wall seems disrespectful toward the dead. In some regard, this disagreement veils a highbrow/lowbrow critique, namely that "culture" can find its place on sacred ground but popular culture cannot. Similarly, Stone's (2006) typology of dark tourism experiences demonstrated degrees of comfort with these cultural practices. On one end of the spectrum are "dark fun factories," where death and the macabre are presented for commercial entertainment. At these sites, visitors may tolerate a lighter mood and interpretation compared to "dark camps of genocide," which occupy the far end of the spectrum and focus on widespread human atrocities.

BEYOND CINESPIA

Building on the experience of Cinespia, participatory audiences now gather at the cemetery for a variety of events, often focused on premiering television series, films, and new musical releases. Many of these events capitalize on the relationship between these cultural productions and the cemetery as a site where, quite plainly, the dead are buried. Jay Boileau, executive vice president for Forever Enterprises, told this to the Los Angeles Times:

"When you walk on the grounds here, you go through a mind shift. You look at life differently. That, in itself, is a cultural resource. And you have all of these stories, the ritual, the remembrance. You can look at it as a collective artwork. So it's a logical place for there to be gatherings and cultural events." (Lee, 2007, para. 10)

Hollywood Forever’s notion of a cultural center is expansive, including historical tours, summer theater performances, and a series of Shakespeare plays using the Fairbanks sarcophagus as part of the scenery. Events at the cemetery also draw on the darker sensibilities of the site, such as those held by the heavy metal band Korn. The band began its 2007 Family Values Tour with a party held in the Cathedral Mausoleum. At the event, Korn lead vocalist Jonathan Davis, who is also a former coroner’s assistant said, “We just show up, brother. You’re having a party in the cemetery and it’s like OK, cool. We did it last year, too. It’s a cool place to throw parties. Not a lot of people get to party in a cemetery” (Miller, 2007, para. 3). If the cemetery is an ominous place after hours, then the spectacle of a heavy metal tour party seems to add to perspective of disrespect often voiced in response to alternative cultural uses of the cemetery space.

Yet Korn is not the first metal band to use Hollywood Forever as social space. In 2001, the thrash metal band Slayer held a listening party for the album God Hates Us All at Hollywood Forever. While many metal bands were critiqued during the "Satanic panic" of the 1980s for their seemingly evil content, Slayer’s lyrics are overtly and deliberately anti-Christian. Music critic Adrien Begrand (2006) described the 2001 album as one that "had the band looking inward more, exorcising their own personal demons….The album’s rampant anti-Christian theme was as heavy as the music, with enough lines to stop even the most hardened metal fans in their tracks" (para. 3). Slayer’s use of Hollywood Forever is another means of the band appropriating cultural symbols for their own purposes, to render what might be deemed sacred as something not only secular but a manifestation of malice and evil. The executive producer of God Hates Us All is Rick Rubin, who has a long history with the cemetery. Rubin co-founded Def Jam Records with Russell Simmons in 1984. When he discovered the word “def” was one of the new words scheduled for inclusion in the 1993 edition of Webster’s dictionary, Rubin bought a burial plot at Hollywood Memorial Park and organized a funeral for “def” with Reverend Al Sharpton presiding (Keister, 2004). Rubin’s relationship to the cemetery offers evidence that Hollywood Forever has a long history as a space where the solemnity of funereal practices does not exclude the possibility for whimsical or social uses.

CONCLUSION

Sturken (2007) argued that “people make pilgrimages to sites of tragedy in order to pay tribute to the dead and to feel transformed in some way in relation to that place” (p. 11). This perspective can be enlarged to address tourism more generally: the desire to experience a place is a strong driver to destinations of cultural significance. Yet how one chooses to experience a place, and the opportunities available for visiting and interpreting that site, can determine not only the personal meaning but can shift the public understanding of a place as well.

The multiplicity of meanings attached to Hollywood Forever is not unique to cemeteries, nor is it unique to public spaces in general. As a site of both personal memory and cultural memory, visitors have different reasons for coming to Hollywood Forever: some to mourn, some to commemorate, and some as a pilgrimage. At the celebrity cemetery, these meanings can overlap, not only as tourists walk discreetly past mourners, but also as each visitor intent on paying respects to an admired celebrity has his or her own personal reasons for doing so. Seaton (2009) noted that “although most thanatourism sites are historical ones, they are often bound up with important issues of personal identity for people who encounter them in the present” (p. 97). His examples include visitors to antebellum plantations who feel the resonances of slavery in the South, yet cemetery tourism provides innumerable instances of those
who aspire to pay their respects to actors, musicians, political leaders, and others whose public and creative work provide avenues of identity formation for fans. In these instances, one’s parasocial relationship to a particular celebrity may serve as motivation for the cemetery visit. Along with those paying respects to a celebrity or a loved one, Hollywood Forever invites tourists who are interested in the natural or architectural features of the cemetery as well its history. For these tourists, the cemetery is largely seen as a heritage site. Further, the events hosted by the cemetery create another kind of relationship with the space. In addition to offering yoga classes on the Fairbanks Lawn, the cemetery has renovated the Masonic Lodge on the grounds and uses it as performance space for music, live theater, and the “Comedy is Dead” stand-up series. The cemetery that hosts this comedy series, and those who attend, are clearly comfortable with a lighthearted perspective toward death.

Hollywood Forever can host these cultural events with minimal conflict because of its long history as a tourist attraction, its location in Los Angeles, and its position as a cultural destination. The cemetery now has a substantial history of hosting Cinespia, live music, and comedy performances, establishing itself as a cultural center in ways that enable visitors to be comfortable with the reality of being entertained while thousands are buried nearby. These events have normalized the use of Hollywood Forever as leisure space, and those who choose it as a final resting place now do so with the understanding that the sanctity of the cemetery is often colored by other rituals and practices.

As previously noted, many cemeteries welcome cultural, social, and historical events that have a positive effect on the community and on public perceptions of the cemetery. Some communities remain adamantly that, as Lynch (2000) argued, the cemetery need only serve one purpose, to be the final resting place of the dead. As a contested space, Hollywood Forever has pushed the boundaries of entertainment by hosting metal bands and horror films, as well as the carnivalesque celebration of Day of the Dead. This cemetery could be dismissed as unique by those who fear cultural experiences among the dead are irreverent. Yet the increased popularity of sites of heritage tourism and dark tourism, along with changing attitudes toward death and dying, indicate that events like those at Hollywood Forever are likely to become more commonplace.

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