

# The Contribution of Implosion to the Exuberance of the Dead

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## Introduction

As with any economic sector, the funeral industry is a social product that, through the process of institutionalization, has disguised its constructed nature to become, more or less, taken for granted by the public. However, despite common beliefs to the contrary, consumers do not need the funeral industry to dispose of their dead, and in many states bodies can be interred in one's backyard after conducting a do-it-yourself funeral. The greatest portion of consumer spending in the funeral industry is, therefore, discretionary spending. Yet for over a century now, most Americans have accepted the role of the funeral industry as a natural part of the lifecourse. In reality, there is nothing intrinsically necessary supporting the existence of the funeral industry. Instead, it faces an ever-present crisis of legitimation which can be an implicit obstacle to expansion. Thus, one of the funeral industry's most important creations is its own **raison d'être**.

In this paper I discuss "implosion," or the ways formerly separate and distinctive social spheres break down to create a new commodity form (Baudrillard [1994] 2006, Ritzer [1999] 2005). Implosion legitimates discretionary service industries and makes the ongoing expansion of those industries possible. In the case of the funeral industry, the funeral can be a sacred ritual and a shopping ritual and a form of entertainment. More generally though, implosion allows industries to overcome many barriers to demand by expanding the reach of the commodity form. That is, implosion works through explosion—the explosion of the discursive relations between the buyer, the seller, and the commodity. The "imploded" commodity form creates the possibility of surplus meanings for the consumer by collapsing previously distinctive social spheres into a novel bricolage. The consumption of funerals, for instance, can entail more meanings and establish more relationships than ever before, whether those meanings and relationships exist between the buyer and her self, the buyer and the producer, the material good(s) she has purchased, other funeral attendees, the deceased, and so forth.

Historically, the funeral industry has had to rely on external discourses to legitimate its goods and services, particularly public health and psychology. Implosion however, provides its own legitimation since the funeral industry's identity deficit has been replaced with a surfeit of meanings. Nowadays the industry not only disposes of American consumers' dead, it also sells them some recreation or entertainment to go with their sadness. It provides a delimited space for mourning as well as a space to throw a party, even as it manufactures the sacrosanct and the profane, tradition and novelty, and so on. Implosion therefore aids the legitimation of discretionary goods and services by creating new commodity forms. Here I highlight one in particular—the **commodity gimmick**.

This is not meant to be an exegesis on Baudrillard's conceptualization of implosion.[1] Instead, I use implosion as a heuristic through which to explore the ways in which use-less-ness gets ascribed a use- and subsequent exchange-value. I begin my discussion by summarizing the dominant claims around the relative value of commercialized funeral care as those claims have evolved through the history of the American funeral industry. These introductory remarks highlight the funeral industry's legitimizing positions and the manner in which these positions have shifted over time. The purpose of presenting this historical piece is to demonstrate the mechanisms through which the industry has linked itself to other areas of expertise in the past and to suggest that the present turn to techniques of

implosion were necessitated by financial crises.

I spend most of my efforts focusing on the most recent period in which sacred funeral rituals have become increasingly participatory on the part of consumers. In short, the sacred has become democratized via the commodity gimmick. So while funerals have long been highly commercialized affairs (cf. Mitford [1963] 1998) the insidious adoption of techniques of implosion suggests that funerals, as a commodity form, can also be a kind of amusement. Here, I demonstrate how implosion has affected American funerary ritual as a commodity form and allowed the industry to grow even in the face of declining death rates and various fiscal crises.

My arguments are based on multi-sited ethnographic research and document analysis in the funeral industry.<sup>[2]</sup> Utilizing many of the methods espoused in Adele Clarke's situational analysis (2003, 2005), I have attempted to trace the circulation of discourses (and capital) as they engage, guide, constrain, and give shape to the ways actors in the funeral industry accomplish meanings.

## Truth

The funeral industry was born quite literally out of a culture of warfare. The bodies of soldiers who were killed during the American Civil War had to be returned home in order to be properly funeralized. The mainline culture of the period necessitated that the dead be washed before the wake and then transported from the family home to a church for a religious service and then buried in the church graveyard or family burial ground. Embalming, which was previously done for the purpose of preserving cadavers for medical study was modified by using less potent chemical solutions to inject bodies of dead soldiers.

Because the earliest (strictly) funeral professionals were battlefield embalmers, the end of the war necessitated a different paradigm for marketing their services. Since the American funeral industry emerged around the practice of embalming, the discipline of medical science became a reference point for the legitimation of the trade. Physicians were largely responsible for battlefield embalming, and embalmers were for some time thereafter referred to as "embalming surgeons." It should come as little surprise then that the legitimating discourse around embalming were related to matters of health. Indeed, the training of embalmer emphasized public health and sanitation. Some of the earliest instructional 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 also appealed to the burgeoning science of germ theory to account for the necessity of embalming. "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" (Foreman 1974: 233). Events like the flu pandemic of 1918 undoubtedly 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 those bodies and the assurances that public health standards would be upheld. Thus, the expertise of embalmers gestured toward the truths asserted by practitioners in the disciplines of biology and medicine.

## Beauty

The introduction in 1897 of formalin (formaldehyde) into embalming procedures eliminated the discoloring

caused by earlier preservatives. 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. All of which reflects a shift within the industry that began taking place in the 1940s. This in turn 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, served as a kind of frame for the “precious contents” (Steiner 2003) (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 and selling. 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 agreeable. 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).

The “memory picture” served as a product through which funeral directors facilitated healing. Grief therapy then became the funeral industry’s ideal product for the “sick,” bereaved consumer. Increasingly turning to the discipline of psychology, 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 the services were marketed on their ability to ease the suffering of the bereaved and assist the consumer through difficult times.[4]

## Crisis

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.[5]

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.

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

| Year | Death Rate [6] |
|------|----------------|
| 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 members of the baby boom generation were only beginning to bury their parents. 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, another major corporation, expanded into Australia and Mexico.[7] However, as this acquisitive stage progressed, corporations incurred a great deal of debt.

As these economic crises continued, a new era emerged and the disciplinary legitimation also changed. The most recent shift is towards an articulation of a new “science”—the logic of late capitalism. The contemporary synthesis of globalization and consumerism more accurately reflects our present market dynamics. This era is characterized by a shift toward a consumerist society constituted by “mass participation in the mass-industrial market” (Ewen 1976: 54).

By re-figuring itself as a culture industry, the funeral industry has become an increasingly consumer-centric, flexible, and niche-oriented producer of symbolic goods and services. The dexterity (and flexibility) to serve an ever more diverse market is also 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” (Ewen in 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 sophisticated marketing instruments that continue to grow both in number and complexity.

## Implosion, or, the Commodity Gimmick

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 has been, throughout most of the funeral industry’s history, centered on the dead body. In other words, 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.

In the 1990s, the funeral industry began manufacturing more “cultural” products that 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 shift in focus went from material goods to immaterial ones.[8] 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. In more and more cases, consumers are not buying the kinds of embalming and therapeutic expertise that formed the basis of the industry’s legitimation claims in the past. Instead, consumers are purchasing the opportunity to symbolically represent, to themselves and others, the lives and social relations, lifestyles, tastes, and interests of the dead. Furthermore, these consumer goods are designed to simultaneously appeal to the lives and social relations, lifestyles, tastes, and interests of not only the purchaser, but funeral attendees more generally. This is something that is readily accomplished through implosion, or the “absorption, contraction and collapse of differential poles” (Merrin 2002:377).

Using implosion, a given commodity can contribute to a heightened perception of value. Quite simply, implosion increases the value-added to a particular good. One is not merely buying a good for its purported utility but for its symbolic and expressive qualities and for its ability to amuse, enlighten, entertain, etc. Products can be marketed to fulfill a number of functions and the more functions the product can serve, the more use-value a product can be seen to have and the more necessary it can be seen.

This transition to a more explicitly-identified culture industry that focuses on the creation of cultural goods and that is highly responsive to the consumer represents a successful re-framing that extends beyond mere rhetoric. It represents a change that affects the kinds of products and services that are now available to the public. As one will soon discover, this newer generation of goods and services rely on techniques of implosion. Specifically, this is

accomplished by performing any or all of the following functions (each of which I discuss more fully below):

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

## Co-Production

First, implosion works by engaging the consumer in creating her own end product, thus providing her not only with a product but providing her with the activity of making and personalizing that product. Funeral products need to address the needs of a progressively more ethnically, religiously, and ideologically diverse marketplace but be narrow enough in scope so as to appear intimately personal. As discussed earlier, the funeral industry had made customization of nearly all of its products and services possible.

Memory boards displaying mementoes, letters, pictures, and the like, are almost pervasive in today's funerals, but these things only scratch the surface since more and more funeral homes are also investing heavily in multimedia equipment. Software that assists funeral workers in developing memorial or tribute DVDs for their customers is commonplace in funeral homes these days. Loved ones are encouraged to bring in pictures, videos, and favorite music—all of which create the basis for appealing and occasionally extravagant funerals.

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.

Another way to involve the customer is through the theming of funeral services. Theming, or the use of “overarching symbolic motifs within consumer milieus” (Gottdiener 2001:7), is a socially manufactured relationship between discursive entities within a particular context. Theming, most often in this context, combines retail consumption with representative symbols from mass (non-retail) culture. 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 adoption 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.

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. Indeed, the theming of funerals succeeds in part because of the possibility of hypersignification (i.e., in which symbols utilized in the funeral ritual represent the process of signification itself).

Many funeral directors might more accurately be referred to as party planners since many funerals resemble theme parties. 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. 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 shares this observation. 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: NP).

Theming 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 a time “[w]hen roles and statuses were ascribed by tradition [and] 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 orienting schema they provide, themes provide a convenient way to celebrate the passing of a life even as they situate individuals within a broader amusement culture.

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 the consumer may find narrative purchase. That is, the work of theming can emplot a consumer in a grand(er) narrative or canopy of meaning. It creates 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.

## Spectacles

Sometimes themes can result in rather spectacular productions. By “spectacle,” I deliberately wish to invoke the conceptualization offered by Guy Debord (1967). Debord contended that the spectacle represents a commodified form of distraction and is a product of Western culture’s economic moment. Debord critiqued the vacuity of much of contemporary western mass media, but the spectacle can be seen in other arenas of social consumption—including retail and ritual—both of which are integral to the funeral industry. 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.

One funeral director I interviewed, Edward, who works out of a suburban firm that caters to an upper middle class clientele, proudly guided me through his facilities. There was a dining room and kitchen and also two visitation rooms—each with its own big-screen television. The chapel, where the actual services are held, holds an even larger projection-screen television occupying front and center.

Like many funeral homes today, both music and video figure heavily into the funerals that are conducted under Edward's care. He was one of the first in his area to begin including memorial DVDs in his funeral service packages. 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 his area. It is part of a large corporate network of firms. As Kevin took 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." In my discussions with him, it became very apparent that Kevin's intent was 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 either Edward's or Kevin's firm may be a lot like a cinematic experience, with high-definition television, surround-sound, and the like. 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 kind of collective effervescence.

This represents an unequivocal 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 sometimes even invisible.

Cremins—or cremated remains—are processed human ashes, and they 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). 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 charcoal pencil out of them. Then an artist is commissioned to sketch a portrait of the deceased with that pencil. Similarly, Ashes to Portraits mixes cremins with oil paint before painting a portrait of the deceased. Most of these novelty goods presuppose cremation as a disposition.

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, Last Supper caskets, patriotic, red, white and blue caskets, and bio-degradable, environmentally friendly ones too.

Ashes can be launched into space to circle the globe or even the moon by Celestial Services. Now a relatively well-known company, Life Gem, transforms the carbon-artifacts of human remains into precious jewels. Another company, Celebrate Life, packs the cremins 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 cremins to the four winds. All of which, whether one is referring to material products or experiential goods contribute to the commodification of the spectacle through techniques of implosion.

## Levity

Finally implosion, in the case of the funeral industry, can be manifested through the utilization of humor, irony, and pastiche. Death, of course, is not funny, but the commodity gimmick can attempt to elicit chortles and smirks in spite of that fact. Perhaps, as you read about the variety of novelty items available to today's funeral consumer, you yourself were inclined to find them mildly humorous. Or perhaps you were already aware of the company that processes cremated remains into wearable jewelry. LifeGem, as earlier mentioned, makes short order of the carbon-laced ashes to create synthetic diamonds. When popular news outlets first caught wind of the company, pun-filled headlines commenced:

[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)

The kind of parody could be found in other media accounts as well.[9] 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 and, therefore, suitable for satirical derision.

Nevertheless, a rising number of funeral firms are adopting an ironic, and even humorous stance with regard to their services. 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 (retrieved 1/15/08 from URL: <http://www.bunkerfuneral.com/>) 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.

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. 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 that Hawley was trying to pull on his customers that 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 attests to 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 piece in 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 from 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.

## Conclusion

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 signifiatory 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.

Theming, novelty products, experiential programs, and the consumers' engagement with these services and products, are forms of implosion. In producing goods that contribute to the larger culture (not merely funerary rites but memorial codes, representations of death, and so on) these goods quote, appropriate, hide, and exaggerate elements from other industries, social institutions, and subcultures. It is therefore important to examine other instances of discretionary consumer goods for parallel mechanisms. These goods may transport participants away from their own, taken-for-granted reality and can thus be diversionary. And they can transform death by dressing it up and even playfully poking fun at it, thus demonstrating its potential value as both ritual and entertainment. These commodity gimmicks that rely on techniques of implosion reveal that death itself can be a catalyst for distraction—a distraction even from itself.

But it is not merely funeral goods that utilize techniques of implosion. One might find many areas in which “meaning and messages flatten each other out in a neutralized flow of information, entertainment, advertising, and politics” (Best and Kellner 1991: 121). Implosion aids the stabilization of capitalizing forces and their requisite expansion by creating the possibility of new products, new markets, and, most importantly, new consumers. Implosion, at the very least, is a new discursive formation and thus allows for product differentiation, but it also appeals to our present-day “culture of distraction” (Abbas 1996) in which citizen-consumers yearn for constant stimulation.

Funeral goods though, 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 naturalizing and normalizing the dominant meaning systems and institutions” (Seidman 1997: 44). To be sure, the funeral industry disposes of dead bodies but its goods can also entertain, comfort, enlighten, shame, inspire, or simply frustrate the consumer. In doing these things, it regulates and inscribes consumers. 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.

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## Endnotes

1. Such an exercise would be virtually impossible given Baudrillard's apparent reluctance to offer an explicit definition himself. No less a “cult stud” than Angela McRobbie (1986) has even called Baudrillard's term “vague” (p. 114).

2. 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.

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

4. 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. What has changed are the ways these elements are perceived, thought about, and discussed.

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

6. 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.

7. Suffice it to note that the world's largest casket company, while headquartered in the U.S., maintains factories in Mexico and there are Chinese casket companies exporting their wares to the US.

8. On the same day that SCI finalized its acquisition of North America's second largest funeral company, a spokesperson stated in a webcast: "Forty percent 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." (Author transcribed from webcast retrieved 1/15/07 from URL: <http://www.veracast.com/webcasts/ml/healthservices06/62111144.cfm>)

9. 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!"

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