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## The presence of the dead

*Cemeteries, cremation and the staging of non-place*

**TIM FLOHR SØRENSEN**

*University of Aarhus, Denmark*

### **ABSTRACT**

In academic literature, death and the dead are often treated conceptually and with little regard for the aesthetic and tactile experience of the materiality of the corpse. In this way the agency of the dead body is ignored, and the reciprocity between the deceased and the bereaved remains obscured. In effect, the corpse assumes the role of a neutral object, which blurs the particular potency of the dead body's materiality. This article proposes an alternative to this inadequacy, and discusses the changes in cemetery culture in rural Denmark within the past 50 years, addressing identity, emotions and attitudes to the materiality of the dead body. It is argued that an immaterial and subjectified recollection of the dead has, in part, replaced the previous externalized and collective commemoration due to an altered recognition of the corpse's materiality. In this way the adoption of urn burials, unmarked communal graves and lawn cemetery sections may be seen as ways of creating paradoxical yet tangible non-places, where the forging of identities and meanings of dead individuals are relieved of their material presence and proximity.

**KEYWORDS**

aesthetics ● body and place ● cemetery design ● cremation ● death connotations ● disposal practice ● presence/absence

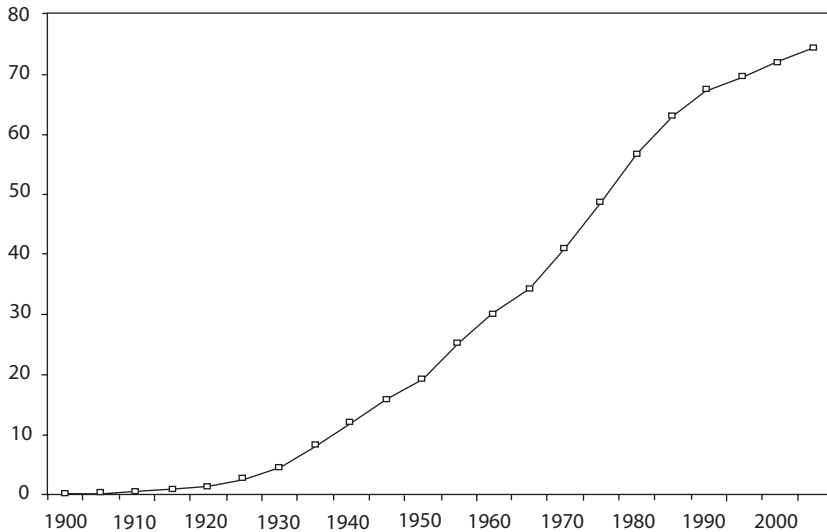
**■ INTRODUCTION**

Two categories of bodies are present at funerals: the bodies of the bereaved and the body of the dead. What is the basic difference between these categories of bodies? The bodies of the bereaved attend the dead, look upon it or upon its coffin, act on the body, sing for it, carry it, and part with it. What does the dead body do? It does nothing. It is a corpse, and we all know that corpses cannot do anything: dead people do not act.

While this assumption may be agreeable at the level of commonsense inference, it does prove to be utterly wrong at closer examination. First of all, the corpse is in motion; it moves and transforms with the gradual putrefaction of tissue, fluids and gases. Second, the corpse moves the bodies around it; it makes the bereaved act in certain ways, makes them gather, makes them dig a hole in the ground or light a fire, and it may make them shed tears: the bereaved are ‘moved to move’ (Sheets-Johnstone, 1999: 275).

In recent years it has become commonplace to note how funerals and cemeteries bear more witness to the concerns of the living than of the dead (Jacobsen, 2001: 119; Metcalf and Huntington, 1991: 24; Reimers, 1999: 149; Sommer, 2003: 262). In this light, the challenge to the emotions that is posed by the confrontation with the death of a relative would suggest a pronounced traditionalism and continuity in burial forms. When facing the loss of a dear relative it may seem much easier and more manageable to pursue a prescribed tradition and repeat clearly defined practices, rather than having to delineate or relate to a new procedure (Walter, 1996).

Nonetheless, Denmark has witnessed a striking shift in burial forms within the past 50 years, primarily influenced by the changes cremation has entailed. Since cremation was legalized in Denmark in 1892 and the first cremation was conducted the following year, cremation has gradually become the most dominant way of disposing of the dead. More than 70 per cent of all current burials assume the form of urn burials (Figure 1). This shift not only addresses the fact that by far the majority of deaths today result in cremation and urn burials instead of coffin burials, but the practice of cremation and urn burial has, moreover, affected the design and materialization of Danish cemeteries fundamentally in the form of urn graves and unmarked communal graves, which, furthermore, have led to the development of lawn sections at many rural cemeteries. The important issue is therefore not just the cremation practice itself, but also how cremation has



**Figure 1** The percentage of deaths resulting in cremation in Denmark during the twentieth century (based on Andersen, 1994, and statistics provided by the National Association of Danish Crematoria)

led to small-scale grave plots in grass lawns, including unmarked communal graves, which has changed the appearance of Danish cemeteries in profound ways.

This article argues that these new grave types materialize a staging of non-places – places of transience and transfer that are not conceived of as manifest enough to be perceived as places per se (Augé, 1995: 85–6, 103; see also Kymäläinen, 2005: 107ff), because they are characterized by ephemeral presence and *not-being-present-here*. This implies that cremation not only represents a new practice for the disposal of the corpse, but more importantly that it materializes radically altered attitudes to the dead body and the cemetery's spatiality. This includes paradoxical social and emotional facets that are demonstrated below.

## ■ DEATH AND BURIAL IN DENMARK

It is crucial to understand the embodied interaction between the bereaved and the deceased – as well as the very significance of the dead body – in order to overcome the rendering of the corpse as neutral, which is an inherent problem in much writing on body, burial and cemeteries. One reason for this inadequacy is that in the western world death is widely

regarded as the ultimate failure of the body (Lock, 2001: 201). Where death was previously an inescapable fact of life, it is now a defect of the body, a fault in the individual's life strategy. In Baudrillard's words, 'To be dead is an unthinkable anomaly' (1993: 126). Death is thus, in a paradoxical way, conceived as something that can be avoided, and should be prevented by the individual as s/he is responsible for her or his own health, as argued eagerly in political and ministerial agendas in Denmark, for example by the Ministry of Health (Sundhedsministeriet, 2000). In this connection, it needs to be made clear that the present article is based on instances of so-called 'good death' (Walter, 1994: 59–62) and does not include deaths resulting from violence, suicide, accident or murder or the death of children.

By connecting health and death, and especially by pitting them against one another, death becomes the body's ultimate failure and impotence. The corpse has thus assumed the role of not only a dead thing, but, more crucially, a powerless thing without potency. In this way, the dead body is stripped of agency: thus, at a funeral a number of actions are carried out by the bereaved on and to the dead body, but the corpse remains still, silent and drab. While most of academia no longer believe that the dead can act – as we do not believe in physical ghouls and ghosts, and corporeal rebirth and resurrection is disputed – the dead body has been deprived of its active role as a dynamic accomplice in the formulation of mortuary practices (Williams, 2004) and in the designing of cemeteries. In effect, the dead have been obliterated (Baudrillard, 1993: 126). Hence, actions are done to the dead body, but the question remains, what does the dead body do? What agency does the dead body have on the bereaved? What implications do the dead have for the material and spatial construction of death?

An account of the formalization of burial under Danish law is in order, as this will help clarify the positioning of cremation in a cemetery context: the law largely serves to situate the ashes of cremation within the cemetery and not anywhere else. Danish legislation poses a number of restrictions on the deposition of ashes at other places than a cemetery, which makes Danish legislation very restricted in comparison to burial legislation in, for example, the USA or Britain (Prendergast et al., 2007: 883; Prothero, 2001). Urns may only be interred on private property after application to the Ministry for Ecclesiastical Affairs, and can only be permitted on property of no less than 5000 square metres, provided that the place of deposition is not demarcated as a place of burial. Within the past 15 years the number of applications for urn burial on private property has never exceeded 29 per year (Kirkeministeriet, 2007: 7), which amounts to less than 0.1 per cent of all burials annually. Likewise, the scattering of ashes outside a cemetery may only be executed after application to the Ministry for Ecclesiastical Affairs – by the person who wishes to have her or his ashes scattered after death – and can only take place over open water, i.e. at sea or larger inlets and bays. Approximately 2 per cent of all deaths resulted in the



scattering of ashes in 2005, which is a number that does not appear to be rising (Heinsen, 2006). Danish law does not permit urns to be kept at home or deposited in small private gardens, nor can ashes be scattered over land.

Even though cremation was legalized in 1892, it was only formally granted equality of status with inhumation burial in 1975, meaning that vicars could no longer refuse to participate in cremation services. In Odsherred – a peninsula in north-western Zealand, Denmark, of approximately 350 square kilometres with currently ca. 33,000 inhabitants – nine out of 11 cemeteries were either refurbished or expanded in the 1960s and 1970s, when cremation was beginning to increase markedly. All of these reorganizations adapted to the practice of cremation and urn burial to varying degrees. A new style in cemetery design thus materialized in selected sections of these cemeteries, in the form of lawn sections. These sections and the legislation are an expression of how burial practices and cemetery culture are suspended between conventions and law, bereavement, notions of death and changeable material practices and customs.

## ■ CHANGING ATTITUDES TO THE BODY IN DEATH

Seen in a long-term historical perspective, the movement towards cremation in late nineteenth-century Denmark was connected with practical as well as ideological topics. It is important to understand the historical development of modern cremation as a way of thinking that not only concerns the onset of a new burial practice, and its relation to religious concerns. More crucially it should be connected with the way in which a shift in burial customs affects how human beings understand and relate to death as an emotional phenomenon and to the dead body as an aesthetic and material experience (see also Tarlow, 1999, 2001).

### **The twofold aspects of the corpse**

Among other things, these issues relate to the large urban cemeteries that were gradually filled up in the course of industrialization in the mid-nineteenth century. European cities began to expand dramatically, and the massive numbers of new people caused an acute overcrowding of cemeteries, creating severe health problems as corpses were often buried with neglect to sanitary matters. Among medical experts working to solve hygienic problems, these concerns framed an idealist and rational attitude towards the disposal of the corpse, where the cleanliness and purity of fire and ashes were seen as the most desired materiality of an aesthetic death and a hygienic cemetery (Levison, 1881: 33–5; Salomon, 1891: 3–5; Thompson, 1874). One such example of the problems with lack of space and sanitation was the extraordinary permission of 1844 to use the gas

works in London to cremate people who had died imprisoned or in almshouses. Their corpses were cremated amongst the waste from the city's butcheries (Eassie, 1878: 230).

Over the longer term, the hygienic aspects of cremation were connected with the rationalist and idealist lines of thought that characterized the cremation movement from its early days, where the burning of the corpse was seen as a solution to the body's material decomposition (Levison, 1881; Salomon, 1891). This view was epitomized at the World Exposition in Vienna in 1873, where the Italian pathologist Lodovico Brunetti presented a crematorium model. Alongside the model was a glass box with the ashes of a cremated human body, which was accompanied by the exhibit text: 'Saved from the worms, we are consumed by the flames' (Prothero, 2001: 9).

But while doctors in particular advocated the adoption of cremation, there was also a strong Christian resistance to disposal by fire. The reason was primarily the traditional association between cremation and pre-Christian, pagan burial customs, the medieval executions of witches and heretics by burning (Stein, 1893: 11–13), and biblical references to fire disposal as a capital punishment (Joshua, 7:25; Leviticus, 20:14 and 21:9), which altogether made cremation controversial and decidedly repulsive for many theologians. Furthermore, the Catholic Church associated cremation directly with freemasonry, which was considered by the Vatican to be a serious moral and societal threat. One must also keep in mind that the clerical opposition to cremation throughout Europe was based on the fact that the proponents often derived from atheist and scientific circles that emphasized a strong idealist view on the body and a strictly rational understanding of death, which may be tracked back to German idealism. Where doctors saw the disposal of the corpse by fire and ashes as pure in a hygienic sense, cultural critics considered it purifying and purified in a spiritual sense (Jensen, 2002: 153; Sommer, 2006: 52–4), thus approaching the body and the corpse through a completely opposite lens from the Christian opponents of fire disposal.

Most importantly, however, critical concerns about the bodily resurrection constituted a major reason for the Christian resistance towards cremation. In the heated debates on cremation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Christian opponents of cremation repeatedly argued that the burning of the corpse would render the bodily resurrection impossible (Rochard, 1891; Stein, 1893: 21), partly based on biblical references (e.g. Deuteronomy, 34:5–6), but probably more importantly on Christian tradition. Even today, this concern about resurrection may be encountered among contemporary Christians opposing cremation (Schmidt, 2005).

On these grounds, cremation was seen as a blasphemy and the agents in the movement were considered decidedly unchristian, working for a secularization of European societies (Stein, 1893: 16; see also Prothero, 2001: 11–12). Historically, the resistance towards cremation has been most



strongly pronounced by the Catholic and Orthodox churches, while the Protestant churches have been less condemnatory towards the practice. The Vatican lifted the ban on cremation in 1963 (Walter, 2005: 181), while the Orthodox Church still maintains the prohibition against cremation.

### **The onset of modern cremation**

The Cremation Society of Great Britain was established in 1874 and was greatly inspired by a deeply rationalist impetus and the work of the Italian cremationists (Jupp, 1990: 14; Prothero, 2001: 9). The society furthermore gained political support when Queen Victoria's personal surgeon, Henry Thompson, published his influential article on 'The Treatment of the Body after Death' (Thompson, 1874) in which he argued on medical and hygienic grounds for the adoption of disposal by fire. Despite the Catholic opposition to cremation, the world's first modern crematorium – incineration in a furnace instead of on an open pyre – was opened in Milan, Italy, in 1876 as a result of the experiments that were conducted by Brunetti and others (Davies and Mates, 2005: 461). Gradually, more cremations began to be conducted in several European countries and Germany was the second country in Europe to construct a crematorium, which opened in Gotha, Tübingen in 1878 (Jensen, 2002: 158). The first British crematorium was built in 1879 in Woking, southwest of London, but was only inaugurated in 1885 due to opposition from the House of Commons (Lahtinen, 1989: 41). Similar movements took place in the USA and Australia at around the same time. The first North American crematorium was constructed in Washington, Pennsylvania, in 1876, and the first cremation was conducted that same year (Prothero, 2001: 213). Cremation also gained momentum in Australia, where it had been debated and advocated for since the 1860s. Nevertheless, the first modern crematorium was not constructed until 1903 and in the meantime cremations were conducted on open-air pyres on the outskirts of the larger cities such as Melbourne, Sydney and Perth (Nicol, 2003).

In Denmark the growing interest in fire disposal in medical circles and among cultural critics gave rise to the Danish Cremation Society, which was formed in 1881 and constructed a crematorium in 1886 (Sommer, 2006: 56). The Danish debate over cremation largely concentrated on hygienic issues, but it was clearly also related to the aesthetics of disposal. The movement resulted in the legalization of cremation in 1892 and the subsequent inauguration of its crematorium in 1893. The early proponents of cremation were quick to frame the practice in accordance with Christian mortuary rituals and sought not to situate cremation in opposition to the Church and Christian values (Sommer, 2006: 54). Whether this succeeded is somewhat dubious as several clergymen and theologians regarded the cremation movement as a deliberate attempt to oppose bourgeois Christianity and instead promote secular values (Secher, 1956: 76–7; Stein, 1893). The

legislation and gradual adoption of cremation nevertheless meant a wider acceptance of the cremation practice in the early twentieth century, which also reached into clerical circles as clergymen from time to time also chose to be cremated.

While the proportion of cremations slowly rose to ca. 20 per cent during the first half of the twentieth century, the Danish Cremation Society began agitating more vigorously in the years after the Second World War, which resulted in a rise in cremation. The number of cremations increased and reached 30 per cent in 1960, 41 per cent in 1970, 57 per cent in 1980 and 67 per cent in 1990 (Andersen, 1994). Since 2004 the percentage of deaths resulting in cremation seems to have plateaued for now at around 74 per cent. Cremation has persistently been more popular in eastern Denmark, including the area under investigation, than in the western part of the country. In 2006, 86 per cent were cremated in eastern Denmark as opposed to 65 per cent in western Denmark, where Christian traditions as a rule tend to be more pronounced.

## ■ CREMATION AND THE CEMETERIES OF RURAL DENMARK

During the past 200 years, the cemeteries in Denmark have changed continuously and the advent of cremation has eventually influenced their design. After cremation was legalized it initially remained an urban phenomenon. The first provincial crematorium was not built until 1923 in Aarhus, soon after which several provincial towns opened crematoria. As cremation gradually began to gain popularity, by the beginning of the Second World War crematoria had been built in all parts of the country.

However, the material impact on the cemeteries in the rural parts of Denmark did not become manifest until the 1960s, when numerous cemeteries were expanded (Kragh, 2003: 261). While the actual burning of the corpse and the values that were the foundation of the cremation movement were the centre of the debate over cremation in the first half of the twentieth century, the aesthetics of cemetery design began to assume a more critical role in the debate during the postwar years (see Bøttiger, 1950; Exner, 1948, 1961; Lindhardt, 1950). This meant that the decisive part of the debate now lay on the shaping of urn sections and communal cemetery sections rather than the ethics of cremation. Up to the 1960s, urns had been placed in traditional inhumation grave plots, which made it impossible to discern inhumation burials from urn burials at the surface of the grave. Hence, the appearance of traditional cemetery sections in the rural districts is often not affected by urn burial. This does not mean that changes have not taken place over the past 100 years, only that the regulations imposed





on the structure of cemeteries – typically between the 1920s and 1950s – were focused on a strategy to formalize the cemeteries according to a ministerial agenda (Kragh, 2003: 229ff).

These regulations resulted in the kind of traditional cemetery section located around the church that we still encounter today (Figure 2). The sections are organized by gravel and pebble-covered paths, rows of grave plots separated by low box tree and thuja hedges. Typically, within the boundaries of each grave plot, there are granite gravestones with the name or names of the interred individuals and their dates of birth and death, sometimes adding the place name of their residence, commemorative words, a psalm verse or a biblical quote. Apart from the gravestone, the grave plots are usually decorated with plants and shrubs, gravel and stone arrangements. In addition to the individual or double grave plots, family grave plots characterize the rural cemeteries, where a single large stone simply reads the family name or the name of the (male) founder of the grave plot.

The majority of the cemeteries in Odsherred were refurbished or expanded between 1960 and 1977. The expansions and reorganizations all anticipated or adapted to urn burials by adopting a lawn design along the lines of a relatively uniform idiom. The largest of the lawn sections (Nykøbing Sjælland new cemetery) covers more than 10,000 square metres, while the smallest (Asnæs, Grevinge and Nørre Asmindrup) cover up to ca.



**Figure 2** Traditional cemetery section, Asnæs cemetery, 24 July 2007  
(All photos by the author)

750 square metres. The average size of the lawn sections in the middle category (Fårevejle, Højby, Odden, Rørvig and Vig) is ca. 2500 square metres. Unlike in Britain, where lawn cemeteries were subject to coffin burial (Rugg, 2006: 224), the lawn sections in the rural cemeteries of Odsherred were laid out as simple grass carpets in which urns were to be buried. Apart from the lawn there is normally only a scatter of trees – oak, birch or beech – and an encircling or divided beech hedge (Figure 3). The gravestone is normally a flat, rectangular or square granite stone, level with the grass carpet or slight tilted toward the rear of the stone. These gravestones often bear very personal inscriptions with only a first name, or an everyday designation, such as ‘Grandfather’ or ‘Aunt’, or sometimes even just a message, a personal quote or a terse saying, for example ‘So long’ or ‘Sweet dreams’. In addition to these urn burial sections, unmarked communal graves were also established in the cemeteries, often as part of the lawn sections. The unmarked communal graves materialize as a monument over the deceased who have been cremated and whose remains have been interred at an unmarked locality in the cemetery, and the monument is meant as the place for depositing of flowers to commemorate the dead, while the burial site itself remains unmarked.

Urn and communal burial, which were increasing in popularity during the 1970s and 1980s, resolved the problem regarding lack of space in the urban cemeteries, but Odsherred’s rural cemeteries did not face the same



**Figure 3** Lawn section, Vig cemetery, 25 July 2007 (All photos by the author)



spatial restrictions. In fact, some of the areas that were prepared for expansion have never been put to use; for example at Egebjerg cemetery, a grass field that was reserved for a future lawn section in the 1960s has instead been turned into a park. Also at Nykøbing Sjælland new cemetery, a large part of the prepared cemetery has not yet been put to use.

Rather than solving spatial problems, as in the cities, the lawn sections in the rural cemeteries resolved other concerns, which were caused by the gradual increase in the obligations posed on the cemetery personnel with the expansion of the cemeteries. The lawn sections were much quicker, easier and more inexpensive to maintain than the traditional cemetery sections, and were furthermore popular with the landscape architects of the time. The designers of these new cemetery sections were largely inspired by the Moravian cemetery in Christiansfeld in eastern Jutland through the influential gardener Gudmund Nyeland Brandt, who by and large has set the fashion in Danish landscape architecture throughout the twentieth century (Sommer, 2006: 59–62).

## ■ THE SENSUOUS MATERIALITY OF LAWN SECTIONS

The question still remains, though, why and how the local users of the new and radically different lawn cemetery sections adopted this design. In these sections, the bereaved family is usually only allowed to place cut flowers in a vase at the gravestone, and is not allowed to plant flowers or shrubs in the lawn, nor grow a hedge around the grave plot. There are no demarcated boundaries between other graves in the vicinity and the grave site is thus only marked by the presence of the gravestone lying horizontally in the grass carpet. In this way, even though cremation and inhumation co-exist to some degree, the spatiality and materiality of lawn cemetery sections posed a radical break not only with burial form and the design principles of the cemetery, but also with the social and bodily practices conducted at cemeteries.

This change addresses the issue of the materiality of the cemetery concerning aesthetic phenomena such as sound and smell. In the traditional cemetery sections the bodily movement on paths entails the crunching sound of pebbles and gravel under one's feet, which is replaced by the soft sensation of grass and its recessive silence on the lawns. Similarly, the traditional section will most often possess the aromatic scent of box trees, yew trees and thuja, while the lawn section offers an indefinable complexity of different odours. Altogether the lawn section offers a widely different aesthetic experience from the traditional cemetery section, suggesting a radically transformed sensuous interaction with the place as a space of embodied activity. One's own body appears less intrusive in terms

of sound on the grass, odours are less distinctive and apart from leaving cut flowers on the grave, no activity is required. There are no shrubs to be trimmed, no flowers to be watered, no gravel to be raked and no weeding to be done. Altogether, the lawn section has fewer demarcated boundaries than the traditional section, emphasized by the lack of vertical separations in the form of hedges and fences. This means that the ordinary separation of public space, the paths, from more private space, the grave plot, has been removed at the benefit of a more collective space, which can be seen as both public and private, emphasized by the similarity of the gravestones and the evenness of their profiles.

Interestingly, while the pre-1960s urn burials were inserted in traditional coffin burial plots, and made to appear like coffin grave plots on the surface, the opposite process is now taking place at some cemeteries. This was noted, while conducting the field observations for this article, at the cemeteries in Fårevejle and Rørvig in Odsherred, where the rectangular imprint of newly interred grave sites in the grass carpet revealed the presence of a coffin and not an urn beneath the surface (Figure 4). In this way, it appears that the development of the cremation practice has come full circle. The urn burial plot no longer mimics the coffin burial plot, but vice versa, indicating that the spatial logics of the lawn cemetery section have had a far-reaching cultural impact.



**Figure 4** Coffin grave plot in lawn section, Rørvig cemetery, 19 July 2007  
(All photos by the author)



Altogether this testifies for a change from the cemetery as a well-defined and easily recognizable spatial and material regime to a place of burial which to a large extent resembles the layout of an urban park. This is particularly evident when visiting the old cemetery in Nykøbing Sjælland, Odsherred, which is located around the church in the centre of the town. The cemetery was discontinued around 1880 due to the lack of space and a new cemetery was established half a kilometre away. Apart from a few family grave plots still in use, several old gravestones are preserved today, all of which are located in a park-like environment with large grass lawns, paved paths, and a varied vegetation of yew tree bushes and old oak and copper beech trees. Most of all, the old cemetery resembles a memorial park, where old gravestones stimulate contemplation rather than commemoration. This discontinued cemetery bears a wide range of similarities with the active lawn cemetery sections. Materially, they resemble the grass fields of parks, but more importantly they share the same spatial effects and locomotive consequences: both the park and the open cemetery lawn are subject to a limited spatial framework and thus pose diminished choreographic effects on the user or visitor.

## ■ THE ABSENCE OF THE BEREAVED

When explaining the changes in Danish cemetery design from the 1960s onwards, economic and demographic movements are often drawn out as a key factor (Kragh, 2003: 261ff). Since the end of the Second World War demographic changes resulting from the gradual change from an agricultural economy to industrial and service economies have characterized many rural districts (Dilling-Hansen and Smith, 1995; Petersen and Smith, 1989). The changes led to a significant increase in emigration from the countryside to the cities and an increased mobility between the different parts of the country, which has furthermore risen markedly over the past 25 years (Indenrigs- og Sundhedsministeriet, 2004: 64–6, 113–14). Local communities were gradually transformed from being characterized as family communities when many people moved away from their native soil and the home of their lineage, making local family ties less closely knit in social terms than previously (Kragh, 2003: 261).

The altered settlement pattern resulted in a gradual increase in the number of individuals who chose cremation for themselves or their deceased relatives: compared to a traditional coffin or family grave, an urn grave does not necessarily require much maintenance and care, and thus reduces the costs of the funeral and the grave plot. People a generation or two younger than the deceased were to a larger extent than earlier residing

in remote locations, which prompted the abandonment of a habitual and frequent maintenance of the family grave and graves of relatives.

The small and easily maintained grave plots are not just in the interest of the relatives of the deceased, but are also favourable for the cemetery staff. The mowing of a lawn cemetery section is markedly cheaper than the maintenance of a traditional cemetery section, which requires continuous trimming and pruning of trees and hedges, and raking and weeding of paths. Thus, the social and emotional relationship to the place of burial has been altered with the changing demographics, affecting at first the rural cemeteries in eastern Denmark and subsequently the rest of the country (Andersen, 1994).

In continuation of these demographic changes, post-war Denmark has witnessed an extensive institutionalization of marginal areas of society, most dominantly the care of senior citizens, the sick, and pre-school children. In addition, it is evident that the mortuary sector is part of this growing institutionalization and professionalization, also testified for in Britain (Davies, 1996: 83–94; Walter, 1994: 9–13, 2005: 187), which has distanced the bereaved from the material and sensuous confrontation with corpses. To people not working within fields immediately connected with death and the dead, the practical and functional aspects of death have largely been displaced at the expense of the material intimacy of death and in particular of experiencing the tactile, dead body. What may be referred to as the institutionalization of death during the twentieth century has thus been one of the reasons why the materiality of corpses has been shifted from the immediacy of the relatives of the deceased to the hands of professionals.

## ■ CORPOREAL ABSENCE AND THE STAGING OF NON-PLACES

As mentioned earlier, modern urn sections are stylistically inspired by the layout of the Moravian cemetery in Christiansfeld in eastern Jutland, Denmark, which was established in 1773 (Kragh, 2003: 148). It has never adopted the gardenesque style of ordinary cemeteries, but is instead organized as a strictly composed rectangular space with rows of uniform gravestones on a gravel surface with no vegetation. In the 1920s the design of the Moravian cemetery inspired G.N. Brandt, who saw the possibility for creating simple, coherent and unpretentious cemeteries that would emphasize the communal aspects of death and thus replace the bourgeois monumental tombs in the metropolitan cemeteries (Brandt, 1922). Brandt would later, in the 1940s, let these ideas be articulated at the renowned



Mariebjerg cemetery north of Copenhagen, where one of several urn sections was formed according to the principles of the Moravian cemetery, accentuating unity, dignity and modesty (Sommer, 2006: 60–1). Even though Brandt is ordinarily credited for disseminating this simple cemetery design, it had nevertheless already been anticipated at several institutional cemeteries of which the cemetery attached to the psychiatric hospital at Nykøbing Sjælland (Figure 5), Odsherred (established 1915) is the most original and iconic. The only difference between the Moravian cemetery and the one in Nykøbing Sjælland is the forest location of the latter and its adornment of each grave with small periwinkle shrubs (Sørensen, 2005).

In a similar vein, soldiers and refugees from Germany who died in Denmark between February 1945 and February 1946 were interred in large, institutional cemeteries. Approximately 10,000 Germans died in Copenhagen within these 12 months, and by far the majority of them were cremated and interred in cardboard boxes in the communal grave sections at the Vestre Kirkegård cemetery in Valby, Copenhagen, with the ashes of up to eight individuals in each grave (Clausen, 1999). The largest of these cemetery sections assumes the form of a conventional soldiers' cemetery with long lines of granite crucifixes with four names on each side, while a smaller adjacent section is composed of large, flat horizontally placed stones, each containing eight names. Likewise, the cemetery section for Greenlanders dying in Denmark (also at Vestre Kirkegård) is laid out in a fashion



**Figure 5** The cemetery at the psychiatric hospital in Nykøbing Sjælland, 2 November 2005 (All photos by the author)

clearly anticipating the development of lawn cemetery sections of the 1960s onwards with granite stones lying horizontally in a grass carpet dotted with black locust trees. The psychiatric patients, the German soldiers and refugees as well as the Greenlanders were laid to rest far away from home and separated from their relatives, thus giving an impetus for the staging of non-places – cemetery spaces without the presence of phenomenologically situated and emotionally present bodies. Instead, they are only attended by the fleeting company of people casually passing by. Similarly, the simplicity and modesty of the lawn sections at Danish rural cemeteries materialize a possibility for social and emotional distancing from the body of the deceased.

The conversion of the corpse into ashes and bone fragments by cremation terminates the concept of a person as made up of body and mind, emphasizing the separation of body and person. The person instead becomes an idea, and yet the physical manifestation of that person has been obliterated. Cremation transposes the corpse rapidly to a completely altered materiality, which is fundamentally inconsistent with the idea of a bodily and physically present person, thus in effect exercising the Cartesian body–mind distinction (Casey, 1998: 154; Leder, 1998: 117–18). Not only does this distinction offer a solution to the need for a material proxy for the organic putrefaction of the corpse, as argued previously, but it also makes it possible for relatives of the deceased to be spatially distanced from the grave, contrary to what is the case with the traditional coffin and family graves. As the body may be conceived as *place* quintessentially (Casey, 1998: 220, 227; Lyon and Barbalet, 1994: 54ff), the burial of the whole corpse signifies the manifestation of embodied and personalized death. With the destruction of the body by fire, the person has been surpassed as a locus and transposed to the realm of ideational and disembodied existence (Sørensen and Bille, 2008).

## ■ THE PROBLEM WITH CORPSES

On the whole, we may thus identify a distance to the tactile experience of the dead – as *corpse* as well as *deceased* – which at a psychological level appears to have assumed a self-perpetuating effect: as the proximity and contact with corpses decrease, the familiarity and intimacy with them also diminish. It thus seems that the presence of the dead in late modern Denmark requires a certain translation or a form of proxy that relieves the materiality of the corpse of its corrupting immediacy.

In order to understand this immediacy adequately, we may employ Julia Kristeva's notion of *abjection*. According to Kristeva, abjection is the act of letting go of something we would like to keep, something we see as part





of ourselves, yet *other* at the same time (1982: 8). The abject was once a subject, who has not yet been expelled to the state of object: it does not fulfil its role as object, since it is still part of oneself and thus persists making an inter-subjective claim. In the process of abjection, the abject is familiar, yet strange, formerly part of a personal or social constitution, which has now been partially dismembered or corrupted. Kristeva coins abjection as the process of rejecting the object, where the abject itself is neither subject nor object. In Kristeva's own words, the abject is:

Not me. Not that. But not nothing, neither. A 'something' that I do not recognize as a thing. A weight of meaninglessness, about which there is nothing insignificant, and which crushes me. On the edge of non-existence and hallucination, of a reality that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me. There, abject and abjection are my safeguards. The primers of my culture. (1982: 2)

Kristeva argues that the abject refers to the human reaction to that loss of continuity which is experienced when subject and object cannot be distinguished; that is, when self and other cannot be separated. Emotionally, the reaction articulates as profound horror, the most powerful cause of which is the corpse, because it traumatically reminds us of our own materiality. The corpse is death unsignified, because signified death – the casket, the cenotaph, the burial plot – masks the true nature of what we strive to avoid in order to stay alive (Kristeva, 1982: 3). In other words, when confronted with the corpse, we effectively reflect on our own future materiality; we see ourselves in the dead body – decayed, ruined and corrupted.

During the later twentieth century, the traditional Christian view of the body as a prerequisite for resurrection rarely surfaced as a reason to oppose cremation. While theologians fought cremation fiercely in the early days of the cremation debate, cremation has gradually become commonplace in most segments of Danish society, which is primarily influenced by Protestantism. Thus, the body has assumed an inferior position in the conceptualization of redemption, which means that a more abstract and disembodied understanding of resurrection eventually has become dominant. In short, this may be described as the shift from a belief in the resurrection of the body to a belief in the immortality of the soul (Jupp, 2006).

Furthermore, the transfer of the corpse from the sphere of the relatives to a rationalized, professional and institutionalized sector not only relieves and speeds the process of decomposition and thus shortens the life-span of the grave (coffin graves are preserved for a minimum of 20 years before they can be levelled; urn graves are only preserved for a minimum of 10 years; Kirkeministeriet, 1996: 18). More crucially, the difference is not just the obligation to maintain the burial plot, but a more fundamental and inherent understanding of the materiality of death as represented by the bodily decomposition under ground. Cremation thus forms the contrast to

the putrefaction of the corpse: the deceased itself is distanced materially and spatially after being reduced to ashes, representing a radically different materiality from the decomposing corpse (Prendergast et al., 2007: 884). The ashes of the deceased could in theory – and perhaps also in practice – be anywhere, and the deceased is to a higher degree than in inhumation burials constituted as an emotion and an idea than as the memory of a person of physical presence. Thus, the consciousness of the destiny of the deceased under ground – her or his bodily putrefaction – creates a more intimate spatial bond between the deceased and the relative than the consciousness posed by the ashes of cremation.

## ■ PRESENCE AND PROXIMITY

The combination of the disembodied cremated person and the distance between the grave site and the bereaved sets the scene for an understanding of the lawn cemetery section and the unmarked communal grave as paradoxical non-places. The most pronounced difference between the traditional cemetery sections and the lawn sections at the cemeteries in Odsherred is manifested by the pronounced dissimilarity in their choreographic orchestrations. Where the traditional coffin burial sections are defined by clear paths and borders, the lawn sections are organized with less explicit routes and boundaries, which has consequences for the relationship between the presence of place and the mode of commemoration.

At a traditional funeral in rural Denmark, the coffin is transported out of the church by six bearers and taken to the grave plot, where it is lowered into the grave. In the course of the movement between church and grave, the bearers and mourners will typically be led by the vicar, following the route to the grave, which is framed by the cemetery's paths and hedges. According to tradition, the coffin leaves the church feet first and is to be oriented east–west in the grave with the head of the deceased to the west, so that s/he will sit up and face the light of the rising sun on the Day of Resurrection. The route from the church to the grave is organized so that the coffin arrives at the burial plot and can be lowered into the grave without the need to turn the coffin to achieve the required directionality, which is considered awkward and inappropriate. The burial of the coffin is witnessed by the mourners standing on the paths in the vicinity of the grave. These bodily movements, the cumbersome procedure of transferring the coffin from the church to the grave and the positioning of the mourners structure the need for choreographed movements, which are orchestrated by the cemetery's material framework.

Contrary to this process, the typical cremation service will cease shortly after the coffin has been transported out of the church. Instead it will be put into a hearse that takes it to the crematorium. The cremated ashes are



not deposited in the urn grave until days later, which is a ceremony that is not always attended by the bereaved and rarely by more than the closest relatives. This means that the act of *situating* the deceased remains elusive for anyone but the immediate family, if experienced by any relative at all. The need for choreographed movements is thus diminished with urn burials, since no coffin needs to be carried out of the church and into the grave, and since there are rarely very many people attending the burial of the urn.

In turn, the minimalism of the ashes after cremation is transferred to the simplicity of the grave plot with its simple and flat stones lying down in a lawn (Figure 6). This has the role of constructing simple, functional grave plots, which lead to a diminished and unbounded choreography of movements in relation to visits to the grave plot, and which furthermore have consequences for the emotive experience and response to the materiality of the cemetery.

## ■ FURTHER PERSPECTIVES AND CONCLUSIONS

The intersection between bereavement, material culture and disposal is particularly interesting for the possibility of positioning archaeology at the



**Figure 6** Nykøbing Sjælland auxiliary cemetery, 12 July 2007 (All photos by the author)

intersection of material culture studies and social studies, which needs to include an eclectic embrace of different disciplines. Such an interdisciplinary dialogue may be of special relevance for the practice of an archaeology of the contemporary past and present-day society, which recently has been called for (Buchli and Lucas, 2001: 171; Burstrøm, 2007; Holtorf, 2007, pers. comm.; Olivier, 2001: 187–8). A contemporary archaeology and a more traditional archaeology need not be drawn out as essentially different, even though the synchronic character of the relationship between the archaeologist and her or his object of study does pose other challenges and potentials than a more traditional archaeology. Regarding contemporary cemeteries, an archaeological study involves the exploration of the dead in a synchronous past of which the researcher her- or himself is part, and necessitates an appreciation of the presence of the dead in our present day. This condition allows for an exploration of how both material culture (the dead) and immaterial culture (death and the idea of the dead) affect human social life across intersecting temporalities. The dead are present in the material inventory of the living, and the dead deny the logics of a linear time conception, because they cannot simply be abandoned or left in the past.

Thus, this article has focused on how we may understand the particular connection between the understanding of the dead, cremation and the specific development of cemetery designs in the light of an approach to the corpse as an active and potent material agent. It underlines the relevance of an archaeology of contemporary society, since it allows for an exploration of social relations by approaching material culture (see also Hallam and Hockey, 2001), which may open up insights and perspectives that complement those acquired by other disciplines, such as anthropology (Prendergast et al., 2007), sociology (Clark, 1993), history (Kragh, 2003) or art history (Sommer, 2003).

I have argued that the materiality of the corpse fixates place in a way that the ashes of a cremated body in late modern society do not, creating fundamentally different experiences of and relationships to the materiality of death. I have further argued that the means of consuming the dead, through fire and the conversion to ashes, need to be connected with the mode of deposition and the practices of disposing of the ashes. The corpse and the dead constitute active and dynamic factors in the making of mortuary spatialities. This means that the deceased, cremation, ashes and cemetery design have to be seen as a continuum, rather than as separated practices and processes. In other words, cremation alone does not account for the staging of non-places in relation to modes of commemoration in late modern Denmark, since these emerge out of cremation's situation within contemporary cemetery practices and cemetery spatialities.

To recapitulate the historical basis for these local developments, I have suggested that demographic factors have made the rural districts



susceptible to a burial and commemorative culture that requires a certain relief for the bereaved of the necessity for regular maintenance and presence at grave plots. The distance of many people from the locality of their deceased relatives transformed the mode of commemoration, so that it was no longer staged or particularly stimulated at visits to the grave plot, but could instead be activated through the ideational commemoration of the person, for example through photographs and internet memorial sites and obituaries. However, when the small urn burial plot or the unmarked communal grave is emphasized by funeral directors as ideal for the family that cannot carry out regular maintenance of the burial plot, it does not reflect merely practical considerations. More importantly, it indicates at a more deep-seated level that the unfolding of identities and the meaning of the dead person are relieved of their material presence and proximity in the living community. Cremation and lawn burial thus satisfy the late modern individual's need for proximity and mobility at the same time (Hockey et al., 2007: 35; Sommer, 2006: 64); or rather cremation and lawn burial is the idiom that for historical, legal and social reasons has become predominant as the solution to this necessity in Denmark, but which assumes different expressions in other countries (Prendergast et al., 2007).

In this way, cremation and urn burial in grass lawns is tied up in an immaterial memory of the dead as a personalized idea, rather than the localized, physical and collective memory that emphasizes family relationships. This also means that it is important to understand the unmarked communal grave not as an anonymous grave, eradicating the deceased as a person, as proposed by some commentators in the Danish debate (Arendt, 1994; Jensen, 2002: 182; Wulff, 2000: 34). The buried persons may be unknown, but they are not anonymous. What is materially simple and minimalist at the grave plot may yet be both socially potent and meaningful, because the unmarked communal graves and the minimalist grave plots in lawn sections represent the previously discussed idea of the strongly personalized and subjectified memory of the dead. We may thus pose the externalized and collective commemoration against the subjective memory in the shift from coffin burials in bounded plots to urn graves and unmarked communal graves in grass lawns.

The dead move us, the living, as we react to the presence of death, its social and mental affinity and the materiality of the corpse. Like any other kind of material culture and like all other forms of bodies, we relate to the texture, sensation and the very aesthetics of the dead body, and we are moved by the emotional, social and cultural effect provoked by the body (Hockey and Draper, 2005: 43, 47; Tarlow, 2001). Dead people *do* act, and that is the very reason why we bury or burn them; but it is also why we have to embrace the dead, consume them and make them part of our identities (Hallam et al., 1999: 125).

Basically, late modern industrial cremation relieves the corpse of the decaying process, thus in an instant terminating the constitution of the deceased as a material agent. It is this capacity of cremation that makes it possible for the relatives of the deceased to be spatially distanced from the grave yet still close to the loved one. The materiality of the deceased itself is absent after cremation: the person could be anywhere and is better defined as a concept and an emotion than as situated personhood.

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**TIM FLOHR SØRENSEN** is a PhD student (University of Aarhus and University of Cambridge) and studies the relationship between cemeteries, choreographed movements and material culture in the landscape of prehistoric and modern Odsherred, Denmark. Other research interests include material culture studies, transitory materialities and destruction practices.

[email: farktfs@hum.au.dk]