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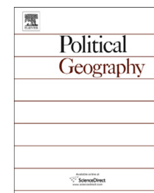
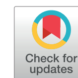


Survivor Trees and memorial groves: Vegetal commemoration of victims of terrorism in Europe and the United States☆



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ABSTRACT

In commemorations of human lives lost in terrorism, European and American memorials increasingly appeal to the aesthetics of 'nature' to symbolise societal regrowth. This article interrogates the ironic and ontological registers involved in commemorating human life through vegetal symbols, paying particular attention to the World Trade Center site in Manhattan. Memorials traditionally conceive of human life as distinct from material and living ecologies, rarely commemorating the deaths of non-humans. As such, the use of trees and vegetal landscaping to represent and memorialise the dead human involves a complex and ironic ontological relationship. Post disaster place-making through vegetal symbolism equates vegetal and human being, on one level, but it also ironically emphasises the fundamental gulf between them. Survivors and visitors are confronted with regenerating vegetal life which evokes idealised ecological conceptions of networked human and non-human lives. But we do not live or die in the same way as a plant, so vegetal symbolism simultaneously invokes human alienation from the natural world. The aesthetic registers of the survivor trees bring a complex, unresolved and ironic reflection on human mortality to memorial landscapes.

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Introduction

After recent terrorist attacks in Madrid, New York and Brussels, memorial groves were planted by civic authorities. These arboreal groves serve as focal points for remembrance ceremonies, aesthetically balancing the figurative representation of lost human lives with symbolism of natural regrowth. Each tree stands for a lost person, but taken together the groves also emphasise the passing of seasons and the progression of time. Memorial trees enact two temporalities by representing both the past event, and subsequent societal recovery.

This article explores the turn towards vegetal aesthetics in contemporary memorial design. It combines theoretical analysis of the place of trees in human thought, with research interviews with designers of contemporary post-terrorist memorial sites in London and New York. Taking the stated intentions of memorial designers alongside anthropological analysis of trees, the article explores the significance of trees within human imaginations of death, life and place after terrorism.

Memorialisation is almost exclusively a human pursuit. The trees and animals which perish in disaster events are not commemorated. Memorials enact the presence of lost *human* lives upon public space so that the dead are not forgotten. But why do contemporary memorial designs use vegetal symbols to reflect human violence, loss and recovery? This question of vegetal symbolism is interesting because vegetal life is relegated beneath the human in modernist ontologies,[1] so the convergence of human and vegetal beings at the memorial landscape seems surprising. The anthropomorphised hierarchy of lives in Europe and America appears suddenly abandoned, when the tree is able to stand in the place of the human.

But, contemporaneous to their subjection, trees are also powerful referent objects in nostalgic and ecological discourse. Trees are centrally placed within nostalgic imaginations of 'simpler times', contra human alienation under capitalism in the post-Christian era. This multiplicity plays out in memorial trees planted on disaster sites.

Trees have been planted – and sometimes anthropomorphised - in Paris, Brussels Madrid, Oklahoma and Manhattan to memorialise

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[1] Although one must note Michael Marder's (2014) reclamation of the vegetal presence within European philosophies.

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terrorist attacks and symbolise social resilience. This memorial aesthetic draws from previous practices whereby war memorialisation has deployed arboreta, and genocide commemoration has occurred through forest plantation. But an important distinction needs to be made between these commemorative landscapes. To memorialise contemporary terrorist attacks, civic authorities design and landscape within tightly bounded urban space – where it not possible to plant an entire arboretum or forest. Vegetal commemorative landscaping has undergone a shift whereby a single tree, or a collection of trees, becomes representative of the event, its victims and social resilience. Where commemorative arboreta deployed treescapes, single trees have increasingly become symbolic living relics of disaster events. In the extreme examples of 'survivor trees' in the United States, they are even anthropomorphised, provided individual identities and given the ability to speak. Trees have come to fore of memorial symbolisation, becoming active participants rather than aesthetic, sylvan backdrops.

This article explores the ontological tensions involved in representing lost human life through vegetal symbolism, as well as the powerful irony of such arboreal representation. I am using 'irony' to refer to the multiple levels of meaning that result from such an aesthetic register. Firstly, modernist ontologies do not afford remembrance to vegetal life[2]; it is treated as non-individuated collective force. Using trees to represent human lives conflates the boundary otherwise established between the two.

Secondly, it is normally 'nature' which enacts the forgetting and deindividuation of human bodies – so the repurposing of the vegetal in service of human memory is heavily ironic. This article uses Robert Pogue Harrison's work on burial and forests to show how human societies developed in response to our absorption by nature. Dead bodies are consumed by bacterial and animal incursion; they cease to be distinct personages upon decomposition and absorption into the earth. This 'forgetting' of human life stimulated human societies to make the first memorial landscapes, or necrogeographies (Leshem, 2015). Bodies were buried below ground to conceal this de-individuation, and to simultaneously enable the imagination of perpetuity above-ground (Pogue Harrison 2003). Headstones mark, and constitute, the patch of ground as a significant place: that where the lost person continues to reside.

So, the irony is two-fold. Vegetal, fungal and bacterial processes are marked as the outside of human existence, and the dismantler of human individuality. But human societies respond to this decomposition of the subject by repurposing the natural properties of earth to perform memory and to define burial sites. The earth is used to conceal the decaying flesh, and organic markers constitute the symbolic endurance of the person in memory and place. Putting bodies underground constitutes a spatial and temporal duality. The embodiment of the person is absorbed into the past, underground, while an above-ground marker symbolically holds their place into the future (Pogue Harrison 2003). So while this article draws from Memory Studies, it also points to the intersection of time and space in necrogeography.

Memorial trees perform the same ritualised transference upon post-terrorist sites. The persons killed were 'disappeared' on those sites, literally (in cases where human bodies are atomised by extreme forces) or ontologically (the change from a living person into non-living tissue). To resolve that disappearance, or absorption, memorial trees make both a figurative representation of the individuals lost, and a collective simulation of resilience and recovery. They represent the past event, and the time passed thereafter. The trees sublimate the absence of the person in the present with a figurative imagination of the body that once existed (a tree stands for each body). But, like the headstone, memorial groves also connect the time zones of past and present. They demonstrate the passing seasons and the continuity of time through their growth, colour changes and leaf fall.

These trees can be understood as compromises forged between political and societal conflicts over the meaning of disaster sites. The work of the geographer Kenneth E. Foote explores American landscapes of violence and tragedy, typologising their reconstruction through sanctification, designation, rectification or obliteration (2003). Memorialisation is explicitly situated within the 'sanctification' response to disaster and conflict, where a 'lesson learned from tragedy' (usually about heroism and sacrifice) is deemed worthy of inscription into the landscape. Foote explores how battlefields – and, in the revised edition of *Shadowed Ground*, terrorist sites – become sacred landscapes of memory through their consecration and architectural amendment (2003). The historic event becomes written into the present as legacy and as a lesson about values.

Rectification, however, occurs when a site of violence is deemed incompatible with the values a nation wishes to take forward into the future. For example, Foote shows how locations associated with the witch 'trials' have not been marked for posterity. The sites are allowed to develop economically, as if nothing of importance occurred there.

But the reconstruction of post-terrorist space often demonstrates political conflict between two of Foote's categories: sanctification and rectification. Family groups and survivors fight for such sites to be memorialised and sanctified, almost frozen in time to mark the absorption of their loved ones into the void. But political authorities and commercial interests simultaneously drive for post-terrorist sites to be 'rectified' through reconstruction, commercialisation and economic development. The overt marking of tragedy can be considered detrimental to these goals.

Such conflict was especially apparent in the public disputes between family organisations for the victims of 9/11, the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation which organised the reconstruction and memorialisation of the WTC, and Larry Silverstein's efforts to reconstruct the site as a profit-making venture (Sagalyn, 2016). These differing visions pulled the site in opposite directions – frozen as a representation of the moment of attack, or pulled towards grand imaginations of growth and urban redevelopment.

Balancing sanctification and rectification is difficult to effect, with many post-terrorist memorial sites generating public protest over commercialisation and redevelopments perceived to be profane uses of sacred ground (Heath-Kelly, 2016). But memorial trees are useful symbolic objects in this context, given their flexible and liminal situation in human temporalities. The planting of a highly symbolic, emotionally charged, and ontologically complex object on a site of mass death can go some way towards balancing sanctification and rectification. Memorial trees, as non-human but living objects, perform significant amounts of ontological and emotional labour upon a post-terrorist site. They mark the place of the dead, standing in for them and precluding total absorption. Thus they do not surrender the dead to the void of forgetting. However memorial trees are not only retrospective devices. Collectively, memorial groves aesthetically demonstrate the passing of time between the event and the present. They continually mediate between then and now. Time is not frozen on the site, because the trees' change with the seasons and grow over time. As such, the rectification of the disaster site (its continual

[2] An exception can be found in the MEMO project (Monument to Mass Extinction) which takes extinct species of animals and genus's of plants as its subject. This monument, planned for the South Coast of England, fundamentally overturns the custom of memorialising only human life.

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