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31 January 2025

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Abstract
Cultural understandings of the Afterlife are often embedded in spatial thinking and spatial metaphors. This article, first develops an understanding of the Afterlife as a relational virtual space populated by absent presences. Second, the article explores the possibility of investigating the Afterlife with ethnographical approaches. Exploring three fictional vignettes, the article discusses alternative spatialities of the Afterlife, in order to emphasize the pervasiveness of spatial thinking in conceptualizations of apparently nonspatial phenomena, and to challenge dichotomist spatial interpretations of presences/absences, the living and the postliving and life/Afterlife.

Introduction

The imageries of death and the Afterlife are crucial for various cultures, religions, and philosophies (see Hockey, Komaromy, & Woodthorpe, 2010; Kearl, 1989; Seale, 1998; Segal, 2010). The impossibility of a direct experience or a phenomenological account of the Afterlife, at least according to current "mainstream" scientific knowledge, has apparently annihilated spatial analysis (see Romanillos, 2015). Many authors have investigated the social, cultural, and emotional geographies of cemeteries, memorials, and other elements of the deathscape (Cameron, 2009; Hartig & Dunn, 1998; Kong, 1999; Teather, 2001; Teather, Rii, & Kim, 2001; Yeoh, 1999; see the essays in Maddrell & Sidaway, 2010; Romanillos, 2015), but nothing has been published specifically on the geographies and the spatialities of the Afterlife.[1] Specifically, many articles published in *Space and Culture* have explored the connections between space and death, and particularly representations and imaginaries of death (see Grech, 2002; Heathfield, 2001; Siemens, 2014; and the various contributions in the special issue *Dark Spectacles*, vol. 17, no. 4, 2014), the role and meaning of cemeteries and commemorational spaces (Curtis, 2004; Haskins & DeRose, 2003; Miller & Rivera, 2006, Mookherjee, 2007; Nichols, 2008; Verdi, 2004; Watts, 2009) and touching encounters with death and loss (McGhee, 2001; see many contributions in the special issue on Hurricane Katrina, vol. 9, no. 1, 2006), but nothing has been written explicitly on the spaces of the "after."

This article aims at filling this gap. Specifically, it proposes an understanding of the Afterlife as a relational virtual space, accommodating the living and the absent presences of the postliving, and it explores alternative conceptions of the Afterlife through three fictional vignettes.

To develop the argument, the next section reviews notions of relational space, virtuality, and absent presences. The following section discusses spatial perspectives on the Afterlife. A methodological discussion is then followed by the analysis of three fictional vignettes. The conclusion summarizes the main findings and discusses possible lines of development.

Relational Spaces, Virtualities, and Absent Presences

The conceptualization of the Afterlife proposed in this article is based on a relational understanding of space. It is well known that, over the past few decades, various authors have suggested moving away from structuralistic conceptions, where space is interpreted as a static entity characterized by partitions and closures (see Massey, 2005; Murdoch, 2006). A "relational turn" has then gained momentum, emphasizing the need to "think space relationally" (M. Jones, 2009). In fact, according to Harvey (1996), space is generated by interactions and interrelations. In a similar vein, Massey (2005) emphasizes the networked and open-ended nature of space; according to her, space can be imagined as a "meeting place" where relations intersect. As it will be discussed,

this article focuses on the imaginary space of contact with the nonliving, through imagination, memory, visions, or by any other means. This space is deprived of a material basis: The geography of the Afterlife is, apparently, disembodied. The exploration of disembodied spatialities is however coherent with the theoretical perspectives developed by those authors—particularly Rob Shields (2003)—who analyzed virtual spaces. Although the virtual is often used as a synonym of cyberspace, a number of philosophers (Bergson, 1896; De Landa, 2002; Deleuze, 1966; Lévy, 1995; Massumi, 2002) have discussed how the virtual is wider, as there have been many examples of virtualities in history, such as rituals, miracles, or beliefs in transubstantiation. Second, the virtual is not in opposition to the real. Lévy (1995) distinguishes between the virtual and the actual/concrete, while Shields (2003) maps the virtual along two conceptual axes: One dimension makes a distinction between the ideal and the actual, the other between the real (existing) and the possible (nonexisting). The combination of the two axes produces four different articulations of the virtual and the concrete: (a) virtual (ideally real), (b) concrete present (actually real), (c) abstract (possible ideal), (d) probable (actual possibility). It is possible to map, along these axes, various forms of virtualities, including déjà vu, rituals, symbols, myths, predictions, miracles, and premonitions.

In the same way as the virtual, recent contributions in geography have stressed that absences may also be real and meaningful. Specifically, absences have been mostly mobilized from two perspectives.

On the one hand, various authors have analyzed how specters, memories, and other signs of absence have agency and cohabit with "us" in space (DeLyser, 2014; Wylie, 2009). These absences may, for example, become visible in landscapes (DeLyser, 2001; Gibas, 2013; Meier, 2013): The expression "absent presences" has originally been introduced by Edensor (2005, 2008), in order to describe the ghostly effects of abandoned material structures, which were once connected to the presence of working-class people. According to Edensor, elements such as old housing estates, old railways, and old cinemas may have sensorial, half-recognizable, and imaginary qualities, which have an ambiguous status between presence and absence.

On the other hand, absences have also been mobilized within the geographies of consumption: Authors such as Hetherington (2004), Mansvelt (2010), and Crewe (2011) analyzed the relations between objects and human subjects and have argued that memories are not simply internal processes; instead, memories extend outward into the material environment, for example, in objects bounded in a temporal flux of past, present, and future. In fact, past events and their emotional tenor can be brought forward in time via encounters with objects and images (Cook & Woodyer, 2012; Degnen, 2013; Miller, 2008). Hetherington (2004), working on secondhand objects, has argued that absence can have just as much of an effect on relations as recognizable forms of presence can. To put it another way, social relations are enacted not only around what is there but also around the presence of what is not: Objects die but do not disappear; things (and, in analogy, human subjects) are destroyed and dispersed but may persist

in a number of forms, including traces, fragments, and memories (Crewe, 2011; see also Degnen, 2013; DeLyser, 2014).

The Afterlife

According to archaeological evidence, human views of the Afterlife, intended as a posthumous transposition to other worlds, can be traced to prehistoric times, before the founding of world religions (Lee, 2013). In most religions, the idea of the Afterlife is linked to principles of salvation, insisting on the belief that death leads to alternative postliving states (Johnson & McGee, 1998). It has to be pointed out that a large number of imageries of the Afterlife, across different cultures and religions, intend the Afterlife as a kind of space, more or less similar to the worldly space we experience on Earth. Many idealizations of heaven, paradise, hell, or the underworld are often described by means of spatial referents or spatial metaphors. For example, in many religions and mythologies, the underworld—located deep underground—is the place where the souls of the departed go. According to Hinduism, *Svarga* is a heaven where the righteous live in paradise before their next reincarnation; it is located on and above Mt. Meru, a sacred mountain considered to be the center of all the physical, metaphysical, and spiritual universes (supposedly located in Kashmir). Also the ancient Greek idea of the Afterlife is deeply geographical: According to Homer's *Iliad*, the soul of the dead goes straight to the underworld, and the soul has to cross a river, the Styx, as described in Plato's *Phaedo* (Bremmer, 2002; L. Jones, 2004).

The imagery of the Afterlife as a worldly space has been in existence throughout the whole of the European Middle Ages, but then disappeared with modernity. Today, most religions and spiritualities believing in the existence of an Afterlife tend to define it in spiritual and not material terms. This opens interesting questions concerning the nature of disembodied spatialities (cf. Young & Light, 2012); for example, where is the self located in experiences without or outside physical bodies?

In order to frame this question, what has to be taken into consideration is that in most religions and spiritualities, transition to an Afterlife implicitly provides assurance for self-continuity after death (Johnson & McGee, 1998; Lee, 2013). And, despite the diffusion of modernity and secularization, with their emphasis on hedonism and the here and now, the Afterlife is still crucial in many new spiritualities and philosophies (Lee, 2013). Outside specific religious paradigms, it is possible to mention the large body of literature on near-death experiences (Eaton, 2013; Long & Perry, 2011; see later in this article) and on the peregrination of consciousness beyond embodied forms (Moss, 1996; Waggoner, 2009; see later). Both traditional religions and these new spiritualities theorize that, despite the collapse of the physical body, other experiences will take form after death. This idea implies that our basic selves are external to our bodies, which means that the body is simply something that we "have" and not something that we "are." In fact, the disembodied self lives on after death with

a distinct form of consciousness. This is not surprising if we consider that the imagined location of the self, and the relation between the self and the body, varies according to different cultures and discourses. For example, in Japan, "death" does not coincide strictly with the cessation of the heartbeat, since the individual remains socially "alive" until the gradual outcome of family-based processes of transition (Hockey et al., 2010). In popular narratives, spirits and the souls of dead people are characterized by social identities that are strongly connected to their former physical bodies, one aspect being gender.

As anticipated, this article suggests that the Afterlife may be conceptualized as a virtual and relational space, connecting the living and the absent presences of the postliving. It is a liminal space: Using Shield's taxonomy of the virtual with death, the people we knew move from the concrete present to the virtual or abstract, as they are reputed to have existed, but have no material substance (apart from the decaying, physical body). They can cross over into actuality in the form of emotional manifestations, for example, in the form of sadness, regret, or love, or to quote controversial examples, in the hypothetical cases of ghosts, visions, and contacts through dreams and near-death experiences (see later in the article). Therefore, death produces an imaginary geographical bifurcation: On the one hand, there is the "actually real" materiality of the decomposing body, and on the other hand, there is the virtuality of the Afterlife. In this bifurcation, the location of the self is hybrid, depending on personal and social beliefs. But how is it possible to produce spatial explorations of the Afterlife?

Methodological Remarks

There are at least two ways to investigate the kind of the Afterlife proposed in this article.

On the one hand, it is possible to embrace autobiography or autoethnography as a means of achieving an attunement of bodies, subjects, and objects between the researcher and his or her own imagination of the Afterlife (see, e.g., Crang & Cook, 2007; Probyn, 2010; M. Smith, Davidson, Cameron, & Bondi, 2009; Vanolo, 2014). These methodologies, in fact, allow the development of intimate relations with the objects of analysis, in ways that maintain interiority and idiosyncrasy. In this sense, the Afterlife may be explored through the analysis of specific, subjective, and individual conceptions.

A second option, not strictly in opposition to the previous one, may be to analyze absent presences in people's lives. Given the impossibility of "following" objects in the Afterlife, it is still possible to follow the "shadows" of the objects, that is, to investigate the contact of people with their absences. From a methodological point of view, these contacts may be explored using both autoanalysis and ethnographic methods (Brewer, 2001; Humphreys, 2005). Using a different vocabulary, this approach implies the analysis of the simulacra of Afterlife, as the simulacrum is literally a copy without an original, an image without relation to an external reality (see Baudrillard, 1981). Since it is

impossible to have an experience of the original absence of life, the analysis of the simulacra of the Afterlife consists essentially in the analysis of various kinds of imaginaries, stories, phantasies, or ideas. In fact, simulacra are commonly produced by writing and imagining things and spaces that often do not exist outside our minds (Baudrillard, 1981; R. Smith, 1997). But, as anticipated, these imaginary landscapes may be explored through the mobilization of ethnographic and autoethnographic techniques.

In the next section, the two methodological perspectives are mobilized for the analysis of three fictional vignettes (cf. Fine, 2003; Humphreys, 2005), which could be considered as kinds of "portraits" (Miller, 2008), or exercises in ethnofiction (Augé, 1999; Byler & Iverson, 2012). The three vignettes are not "real" from an empirical point of view. The vignettes are closely related to discourses and events observed and experienced by the author, but they are nonetheless fictional. The rationale is to produce authentic representations of feelings and beliefs, without interest in the strict adherence to narrative truth (cf. Ellis, 2003; Elliott & Lemert, 2006; Orbach, 1999). I have to mention, in order to describe my positionality, that I am a 39-year-old European academic; I received a Catholic education, but I am now an atheist. The three vignettes share features, which resonate with my own biography: The vignettes are always embedded in "Western" cultures and in nonorthodox religious beliefs. From a methodological point of view, the analysis of the vignettes is halfway between ethnography and autobiography, as characters and situations that were invented by me, and that resonate with events from my own life, are apparently explored with an ethnographical approach (on this perspective, see the classic work of Clifford, 1986, as well as the contributions of anthropologists such as Ellis, 2003; Elliott & Lemert, 2006; see also debates on creative writing in geography: Eshun & Madge, 2012; Marston & De Leeuw, 2013; Shaw, DeLyser, & Crang, 2015; Thomas et al., 2011).

The three vignettes present people in different phases of their lives. The girl who is the protagonist of the first vignette is 13 years and the vignette reflects the vision of death I had when I was a child. The protagonist of the second vignette is a 39-year-old male nurse, and although all the details in the story are fictional,[2] his vision of the Afterlife echoes my current atheism. Sonia, the 66-year-old woman at the center of the third vignette, has an interest in the study of near-death and lucid dream experiences: The vignette is based on ideas and fragments of stories extracted from the reading of Long and Perry (2011), Eaton (2013), and Lee (2013).

It has to be stressed once more that the vignettes never seek to claim their validity in terms of correspondence with social reality, but are supposed to be useful for the exemplification of the arguments proposed in this article (cf. Miller, 2008), discussing how the living and the postliving coexist in geographical spaces.

Locating the Afterlife: Three Vignettes

Mary, Missing Her Grandfather

Mary is 13 years. She received a Catholic education, but she is not particularly involved in the liturgy, religious practices, or prayers. She basically believes in a quite abstract loving God "above us."

Recently, she has had her first painful contact with death: Her beloved grandfather died at the age of 83 years, after a brief and unexpected illness. Despite being aware for a long time that dying is "natural" and universal, Mary feels sad, torn, and confused. She is sad, partly because of the fact that she (apparently) will never meet him again, partly because she has just seen her mother crying and pain is somehow contagious, and partly because she is simply scared.

She has been told that only the body dies, but the spirit, the most important and meaningful essence of a human being, carries on existing. Her grandfather is no longer inside his sick body but "in the sky," and she feels comfortable with the idea that he is still watching and smiling on her. She knows that "the sky" does not mean the space in the clouds: It lies on another plane, and God and all of the spirits of good, dead people populate it. These people "still live" in harmony, waiting for their beloved ones. Also her grandfather's parents are probably there. She is also partially aware that one day she will die too, and she does not need to be scared of that event because it will be the start of a new life with her beloved ones. But deep inside her, she never really thinks that she will eventually die, after all, she is only 13 years old.

Christopher, Working on the Wards

Christopher is 39 years and he works as a nurse in a hospital. He is an atheist, and he is more interested in the material struggles of everyday life than in religious thought.

During his years at work, he has seen many people dying. At the beginning, he was struck by death, but in time, it has become a kind of routine and banal event. However, Christopher is quite scared and depressed when he thinks about the possibility of his own death. He thinks that we live on this planet, right here and now due to incredible and unimaginable coincidences of fate. With death, we simply disappear. There is nothing that resembles an Afterlife. He had much fun in reading David Eagleman's *Sum* and his fascinating stories about the Afterlife,[3] and he thinks that ideas about reincarnation are pretty interesting, but nothing more than fantasies for avoiding the crude reality of death. He thinks that, after his death, his body will be buried in a cemetery, he will decompose and after a number of years, there nothing but bones will remain. But he is seduced by the idea that his cells and his atoms will become part of *something else*. This is the physical law of conservation: Nothing may be destroyed nor created. Maybe he

will become part of a flower, of a plant, or of an animal. Maybe in the future he will have children and part of his DNA will keep on living in his descendants.

Sonia and Her Lucid Dreams

Sonia is 66 years. She does not formally adhere to any religion or movement, but she is deeply interested in spiritual issues and she is somehow close to many New Age philosophies. For many years, she has become particularly interested in literature on near-death experiences, and she has read many books ranging from scientific to sensationalistic. These books describe and analyze the experiences of people who went on "journeys" to the Afterlife and back. These people, who included medical patients, accident victims, and survivors of traumatic events, died momentarily and have lucid memories of the events and experiences they had. They describe out-of-body experiences, their lives passing before their eyes, travelling through tunnels of darkness or light, encounters with beings made of light, and meetings with people who are deceased.

Sonia believes that these reports are important materials for developing postreligious understandings of the Afterlife. There are, in fact, a number of similarities characterizing these postmortem experiences. Most of the protagonists do not attribute a specific religious understanding of their experience, but rather they describe generic ideas of "union with the light," "merging with the divine," and a deep inward sense of the presence of God without any need for reference to an institutionalized religion (see Lee, 2013).

Sonia is particularly interested in experiencing direct contact with the Afterlife. Recently, she started to practice neoshamanic techniques in order to make contact with the dead through the exploration of her dreams. Most of her interest in these techniques originates from the reading of Robert Moss's (1996) *Conscious Dreaming* and Robert Waggoner's (2009) *Lucid Dreaming*, and she found a vast group of practitioners and scholars on the Internet. According to people who practice these techniques, the idea that there is a clear distinction between the waking and the dreaming state, and that the self in dreams is just a distorted reproduction of the waking self produced by our unconscious, is merely a production of modern perspectives and Freudian theories. According to "other" perspectives, including ancient cultures and Jungian theories, dreams are much more; something that goes beyond the personal and that holds the key to the Afterlife. It is therefore possible to explore dreams by getting into a state of "conscious dreaming" (or "lucid dreaming"), where the dreamer wanders among dream sequences and occasionally, he or she is reflective and able to manipulate events. In conscious dreaming, it is possible to experiment with alternative identities, and even to modify the self by redefining the separation between the waking and dreaming states. Conscious dreaming could also bring the dreamer into contact with deceased relatives and friends, by moving the dreamer's consciousness in the dream-state to other worlds. To master conscious dreaming, dreamers need the help of (neo)shamans that support the

development of dreaming reflexivity. Sonia found a trained shaman: a former academic professor who had mastered these techniques.

Sonia feels that during one of her lucid dreams, she was able to make contact with her father, who had died 10 years previously. She had not had a particularly good relationship with her father during his lifetime, but in the dream space, she was able to perceive a deep feeling of love, and she immediately realized how important her father was to her. She rarely speaks to people about her spiritual encounter with her dead father, but she keeps practicing lucid dreaming in order to seek greater self-knowledge and to keep exploring "other" worlds.

The Spatialities of the Afterlife Within the Three Vignettes

The three stories are characterized by different imageries of the Afterlife. The Afterlife for Mary is a simulacrum of the worldly life: The deceased are supposed to simply "live" in another place. In her imagination, the inner self of her grandfather is located inside his spirit, which is characterized by bodily features, as it can perform mundane actions such as watching, smiling, and loving. In this sense, Mary's Afterlife mirrors, in many ways, the worldly space as we know it. The idea that with death, affective objects are "moved" from the worldly space to the virtual space of the Afterlife, is quite reassuring for her, because affective objects are apparently fully accessible, knowable, and stable.

On the contrary, on the basis of Shield's taxonomy, Christopher's Afterlife is "actually real," that is, crudely material and positivist. Christopher's conception of death (and, arguably, of life too) is the one you can find in biology textbooks. Here, the absent presence is death itself: There is life if there is not death, and there is death when life ends. Christopher's material and bodily vision of life and death resonates with romantic, holistic visions of nature, and with the idea of the actual possibility, through death, of melting into something else: The cells and material structures composing the human body are deconstructed to be reassembled into "something else." The self, intended merely as the physical body, will become absent, but at the same time, it will still be physically present in the world.

Finally, Sonia's vignette is immersed in New Age spiritualities. From a theoretical point of view, Sonia's conception of death is complex, as it blurs the boundaries between the dead and the living, the bodily and the spiritual self, and between dreams and awakened states. Sonia's beliefs are compatible with the presence of multilayered, postphysical dimensions of existence that are, according to Shield's framework, virtually real. From Sonia's viewpoint, alternative realities and alternative worlds of the mind are accessible in life. Dreams, as well as near-death experiences, are supposed to be doors to alternative worlds, and the exploration of these worlds may be a quest for self-realization in life. The fusion of experiences between the actually existing world and "other" worlds implies that the Afterlife is a space located, in a certain sense,

inside of us. Affective objects, such as Sonia's father, are both absent presences in worldly life and accessible objects in the sphere of dreams.

Concluding Remarks

The attempt of this article is to embrace a spatial understanding of the Afterlife. The thesis proposed here is that the Afterlives may be conceptualized as relational spaces, calling into question the traditional dichotomy between the living and the postliving. With death, people "move" to different "worlds" or "states" based on personal beliefs and imagination, as reported in the three fictional vignettes. Despite the many differences between the Afterlives described in the three stories, they share many spatial and geographical ideas: As discussed in the previous sections, the three Afterlives assume alternative forms of virtuality and relationality, different conceptualizations of the nature, and the location of the self and different imagined boundaries between the space of daily life and the space of the Afterlife.

This article implicitly suggests that scholars dealing with space may have a lot to say about the imaginary spaces of the "after." This article has only explored some preliminary ideas in this field, and further contributions may greatly expand this field of investigation. I would like to propose three examples.

First, it is possible to analyze and map popular understandings of the Afterlife in the framework of different cultures and religions. Comparative analysis may be produced to detect alternative ways of imagining the spaces of the "after."

Second, alternative understandings and contacts with the Afterlife may influence our daily, worldly lives, and it is therefore possible to think about the Afterlife in political terms, as different ways of imagining the Afterlife may suggest different ways of living.

Third, spatial perspectives may challenge dualistic visions of life and the Afterlife and call into question conventional conceptions of the self and of the body. As discussed in this article, reflections of the Afterlife suggest the possibility of exploring alternative geographies connected to disembodied conceptions of space, the transformative potential of postreligious spiritualities, and the possibility of "alternative" realities.

Notes

1. Nevertheless, Chapter 6 in Thrift (2008) has to be mentioned, as the author mobilizes reflections on the Afterlife, in order to discuss nonrepresentational theories. The Afterlife is also mentioned in Ginn (2014), but the expression is used in a metaphorical sense.
2. I do not want to indulge in autobiography, but most probably the age of the protagonist and the setting of the story evoke my recent experience of a long

period in hospital as a visitor. The whole article probably resonates with my attempt to "locate" an absent-present person.

3. *Sum: Forty Tales from the Afterlives*, is a 2009 fictional book by the neuroscientist David Eagleman. The stories in the book are staged in a wide variety of possible afterlives, to stimulate new ways of imagining the Afterlife, beyond the most common ones.

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