

**ГРОБЉА:**  
*Књижевно-културна  
материјализација смрти*

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**Marija V. LOJANICA<sup>1</sup>**

*University of Kragujevac  
Faculty of Philology and Arts  
Department of English Language and Literature*

## AMERICAN HORROR STORY: LIFE, DEATH, AND REAL ESTATE<sup>2</sup>

By examining both current trends in death-care industry in contemporary America and spatio-political practices that influenced the development of suburbia, the paper attempts to explore the culture's attitude towards death. The analysis then turns to the Indian burial ground trope, a prolific pop culture sign relevant during the 1970s and 80s, with special attention paid to Stephen King's novel *Pet Sematary*, so as to further explore the correlation between fear of death and post-industrial capitalism, as well as intricacies of American collective identity.

*Keywords:* contemporary American culture and literature, suburbia, death, Indian burial ground, simulacra

*And in those days people will seek death  
and will not find it. They will long to die, but death will flee from them.*  
(Revelation 9:6)

*Hey! Ho! Let's go!*  
Ramones

According to the data available on the United States Economic Census Bureau web site, the U.S. funeral industry accounts for about \$20 billion in annual economic activity, with a typical funeral costing between \$8,000 and \$12,000, and casket on average having a mark-up of 289% from wholesale to retail<sup>3</sup>, thus making the funeral rites, after cars and homes, the third highest monetary investment of households in the West<sup>4</sup>. Additional factual and/or legal information concerning burial practices in contemporary America are as follows:

1 myalojanica@gmail.com

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3 P. Boring, "Death of the Death Care Industry And Eternal Life Online", in: *Forbes Magazine*, available at: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/perianneboring/2014/04/25/the-death-of-the-death-care-industry-and-eternal-life-online/#49e4594b1c1a>,

4 Although the provided data reflects the current situation in the American funeral industry, the same trend is noticeable in other highly developed societies. For example, the burial industry in the UK currently has a value of around one billion euro and is expected to increase by 3.3% in the coming years. For more information see: Tandelilin, Dwi Lestari, and Purnama Sari 2018: "The Motivation Behind Mortuary Beauticians in the Funeral Business" in: *The 2018 International Conference of Organizational Innovation*, KnE Social Sciences, p. 1087–1100.

- The use of coffins, vaults, and embalming, except under rare circumstances, is not required by law in any state yet the mentioned is a preferred option of the majority;
- According to the World Health Organization, each year Americans bury enough embalming fluid, mostly formaldehyde, a known carcinogen, to fill eight Olympic-size pools and as much reinforced concrete sufficient to construct a two-lane highway from New York to Detroit<sup>5</sup>;
- The trend of the drive-thru funeral homes, services that allow the bereaved to pay last respects without entering the premises or, for that matter, exit their vehicles, is on the rise. The trend has evolved “from the 1980s Gatling Chapel’s visitation services that offered mourners a close-up video image of the deceased on a television screen outside the home. Like a fast food drive-thru window, drivers would push a button and specify which body he or she was there to see to the person in the control room”<sup>6</sup>.

An Old World reader of these lines, particularly one originating from deeply traditional cultures such as Serbian, where burial customs have been used to honor the dead and give the living a time and space for grieving, inviting the mourners to acknowledge the interconnectedness of birth, death, decay, and rebirth, may find the above rather confusing. For isn’t embalming reserved for Egyptian pharos and demigods of totalitarian regimes? Concrete in graves: how, and more importantly: why? Vault: isn’t that a place you put money in for safekeeping not your dearly departed? It goes without saying that cultural codes differ, and, understood as signs, death and burial are polysemic structures operating differently within various systems of signification. So, in order to comprehend the semiotic value of graveyards within the context of contemporary American culture, it is necessary to take a closer look into the reality of the American way of death. Or whatever is left of it... First of all, it is worth mentioning that embalming, the replacing of the bodily fluids with a cocktail of preservatives and chemicals, like formaldehyde, has been a widely spread practice in the United States since the Civil War, when the Union Army, wanting to transport slain soldiers from the battlefields back home for burial, resorted to such measures (Sehee 2007). Although the immediate need for such a practice disappeared, the practice itself has endured under a pretext of public health concerns. Under the same pretext, American graves became, in fact, burial vaults, deep holes clad with concrete grave liners, whereas coffins lost their hexagonal, even anthropoid shape, and were replaced with rectangular caskets, lined and padded, often reinforced with or entirely made of metal<sup>7</sup>. Death and the dead have been exiled from homes and

5 J. Sehee, “Green Burial: It’s Only Natural”, in: PERC Reports: The Magazine for Free Market Environmentalism, vol.25, no. 4, <https://www.perc.org/2007/12/15/green-burial-its-only-natural/>

6 For more information see: Laura Stampler, “Drive-Thru Casket Viewings Are Now an Actual Trend”, in: Time Magazine, October 17, 2014, available at: <https://time.com/3517280/drive-thru-casket-viewings-funeral-home/>

7 In the patent documentation for a “proto-casket” submitted by A.C. Barstow in 1859, it was stated that: “The burial cases formerly used were adapted in shape nearly to the form of the human body, that is they tapered from the shoulders to the head, and from the shoulders to the feet. Recently, in order to obviate

communities – the messy business of “corpse handling” which induces “disagreeable sensations” is left to hospitals, retirement and funeral homes, without the need, or even will on the behalf of the bereaved to touch, smell or see the departed. Except, maybe, through a bullet-proof window of a drive-thru visitation service venue...

Seemingly factual and dispassionate, the above listed data bear a far more sinister undertone. They are a telling testament of the commercialization, commodification and sterilization of death taking place in the highly developed societies, in which burial rituals are increasingly becoming arcane and impersonal practices best entrusted to death-care industry professionals. That being said, a cynic with a soft spot for black humor might ask: when did we turn dying, grieving and burying into a profit-driven “funeral-industrial complex”, and why do Americans pay up to 12 thousand dollars to avoid the reality of death? And: are the drive-through funeral homes merely a sign of the sloth that pervades and runs our civilization or are they yet another, excuse the pun, nail in the coffin of a death-phobic culture unable to cope with the inevitability of mortality? Did our civilization, in fact, come to regard death as a taboo? “Ashes to ashes” – is that even an option anymore? And finally: which amount of make-up is deemed appropriate on the face of your deceased loved ones?

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Production of space in contemporary cultures follows the same guidelines that control the totality of semiotic exchange. Bearing the mark of heritage and curse of Enlightenment ideologies, perversely manifested within the logics of Late Capitalism, our reading of spaces designated both for the living and the dead inevitably becomes a spatio-political issue, inextricable from the questions of urban planning and ownership. So, to limit the understanding of “the curious heterotopia of the cemetery” to a transcendental locus of blurred ontological coordinates would be a grave oversight of its social or even economical functions. Foucaultian theory recognizes graveyards as once important sites of communal integration and congregation, which have since been subjected to the same exclusion practices at work in all other areas of cultural production. However, parallel to the process of urban, ideological and ontological marginalization and ghettoization of the dead, compartmentalization and radical individualization took place as well. Or, in Foucault’s words: “In any case, it is from the nineteenth century onward that each of us has had the right to his own little box for his little personal decomposition” (Foucault 1997: 335). Self-contained, neatly interred, sterile as much as possible, and seepage-proof, we might add... Contamination with death is to be avoided with unwavering force and resolution in order to preserve the sterility of life. “Because antiseptic came to equal safe, disinfectants, deodorizers, and synthetized smells first obscured, than

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in some degree the disagreeable sensations produced by a coffin on many minds, the casket or square form has been adopted, and of this kind, the metallic burial cases have for many reasons been preferred”. Source: <https://patents.google.com/patent/US23652A/en>, 15.08.2019.

neutralized, and ultimately replaced the natural” (Lojanica 2019: 382), just like caskets replaced coffins, burial vaults collective ossuaries, formaldehyde decaying human mater...

Contemporary American cemetery as an antiseptic heterotopia came to mirror a space it has been banished from – the antiseptic suburban utopia, where

a multitude of uniform, unidentifiable houses, lined up inflexibly, at uniform distances on uniform roads, in a treeless command waste, inhabited by people of the same class, the same incomes, the same age group, witnessing the same television performances, eating the same tasteless prefabricated foods, from the same freezers, conforming in every outward and inward respect to the same common mold (Mumford 1989: 486).

Characterized by segregation, exclusiveness, uniformity and consumption rather than production (Mumford 1970: 215-217), American suburbs have been carefully constructed as a meticulous illusion of an innocent world to be preserved at all costs, without encountering the inconvenient reminders of neither social brutality nor immanent mortality.



Image 1 – *Blue Velvet*, David Lynch (1986), opening sequence

Being “a specialized urban fragment”, it “lacked the necessary elements for extensive social cooperation, for creative intercourse, for an expansion of the social heritage as a whole” (Mumford 1970: 217). It is understandable, then, how graveyard lost its social dimension: detached from churches or other communal buildings, it too became merely a self-contained spatial fragment of the already heavily compartmentalized suburban experience, radically marked by individualization, de-politization, sanitation, exclusion... Space, be that for the living or for the dead, has been produced and systematized by the same relentless Cartesian logics that Blanchard sees as “an actual technocratic life-machine that incorporates humans into social order so as to facilitate the improvement of its functions”(Blankar 2003: 90). The uncompromising preservation of

geometric organization of urban landscape seems to indicate the importance of maintaining dominance of order over chaos, culture over nature, rational over irrational. However, such spatio-ideological interpretation of the mentioned binary oppositions is a priori limited since it does not take into account the inherent link between culture, space and capital that Jameson posits as the main determinant of contemporaneity. Consumer society logics (for suburbia is a place of consumption not production) “seemingly caters to suburban tastes and desires while, in fact, instigating and shaping them” (Lojanica 2019: 382). Following the vein of black-humored cynicism, yet soundly grounded on theoretical tenets, we can conclude that burial vaults or concrete grave liners are not there to minimize public health risks but to prevent the freshly dug up earth from caving in thus facilitating easier mowing and maintaining a carefully manicured look of the cemetery. Paradoxically, such hypocritical concern with sanitation, that emerged from the inner workings of post-industrial profit-driven capitalism, only deepened our fear of the dead and, for that matter, death itself, making it all the more horrible, mysterious, and abrupt. As a consequence of such exclusion, what is even more sinister, in order to pacify the terror, death has been transformed into a commodity and graves into prime real estate. For if I can buy it, I possess it; if I possess it, I control it. In turn, what I possess defines me. Or, to quote Thomas Lynch, a funeral director in Michigan, who offered a succinct diagnosis of the American ownership ontology by commenting on the increasing demand of the aging baby boomer generation to erect extravagant mausoleums akin to the McMansions they acquired during their lifetime: “Real estate is an extension of personhood” (Trebay 2006). Death, once a crucial ontological determinant, evidently shared the fate of all signs: it became a radically non-referential structure, senselessly fluctuating through hyperreality, easily translatable into monetary units. Understandably, superficial, yet all-important utopian impulse to preserve youth and body-beautiful that informs the American way of life has found its counterpart in the American way of death. Or, as Baudrillard would put it: “The care taken of the body while it is alive prefigures the way it will be made up in the funeral home, where it will be given a smile that is really ‘into’ death” (Baudrillard 1999: 35). It seems that the extreme individualism and entrepreneurial spirit, the building blocks of American identity, have manifested themselves into narcissist obsession with the apparent even when it comes to death. What is more, the need to control the image reflects the need to control death, just like any other commodity or property can and must be guarded. The cynic speaks once again: staking a claim over death by neatly surrounding it with a white picket fence...

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To state that American collective identity is heavily reliant on the following myths and ideals: the settlers, frontier mentality, the Self-made Man, the American Dream, would be an overly used and even trite truism. Yet a closer etymological and denotative insight into the words themselves would reveal the crucial

yet undeniably monolithic ideological core of all the concepts mentioned. For if “settle” implies: establishing a residence, furnishing with inhabitants, colonizing, and if the conquest of the “frontier” is in essence gaining territory, new field for exploitative or developmental activity<sup>8</sup>, then American Dream is clearly profiled as a lofty ideal best reached through acquiring property/land. Home ownership in particular has always been at the heart of Americana. In a world ruled by the evil forces deeply interred, obscure yet latently lurking, to paraphrase Burroughs<sup>9</sup>, the only way to keep malign intruders at bay was to conform to the all-American ownership imperative. Real estate came to equal comfort, safety and security, so any intrusion into the stability of such a system was interpreted as a direct threat, anxiety inducing and even unholy.

Unsurprisingly, the described ontological condition has found various ways to manifest itself throughout the history of American popular culture: from 1950s “alien invasion” trope that thinly veiled the Red Scare to the most recent “terrorist threat” that became a pop culture sign as soon as it entered political discourse. The 1970s and 80s horror boom, however, was a birth place of a pop culture sign that attests to the same fear, the same ontological fissure or identity marker, yet one which is radically different from the other two tropes for it warns of the threat from within. From the mid 1970s onwards, the Indian burial ground trope, or IBG, an abbreviation commonly used in popular and theoretical discourse, was widely cited, used, reused, and ultimately turned into a cliché. Contrary to the popular belief, IBG is not a relatively new addition to the collection of American imagery. It was introduced as early as 1787, by the Revolutionary poet Philip Freneau in his poem “The Indian Burying Ground”<sup>10</sup> that best sums up the ambivalent relationship of White Americans towards their Native compatriots. Freneau warns, with clearly expressed respect and foreboding:

Thou, stranger, that shalt come this way,  
No fraud upon the dead commit –  
Observe the swelling turf, and say  
They do not lie, but here they sit.

And concludes:

And long shall timorous fancy see  
The painted chief, and pointed spear,  
And Reason’s self shall bow the knee  
To shadows and delusions here.

Two ideas comprise the ideological framework of Freneau’s poetic text: firstly, the “runder race” chiefs may be dead, but they are not absent – they sit proudly underneath the soil inhabited by the living, vigilant of any potential

8 The source of lexicological information: Merriam-Webbster’s Dictionary, On Line Edition, accessed 18.09.2019.

9 “America is not a young land: it is old and dirty and evil. Before the settlers, before the Indians. The evil was there waiting.” (Burroughs 2009: 11)

10 Available at: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46094/the-indian-burying-ground>

debasement of their image or dwelling, and, secondly, the Irrational is infinitely more powerful than Reason. Interestingly enough, despite the changing cultural matrices and socio-political climate, it did not vary and was present, without exception, in all subsequent narratives of the haunted Indian graveyards. The subgenre owned its popularity primarily to the Jay Anson's 1977 bestseller, *The Amityville Horror*, which inspired not only an entire series of cinematographic adaptations of this pseudo-documentary text, but also *Poltergeist* series, Stephen King's novel *The Shining* and Kubric's adaptation of the text, and numerous lesser known TV shows, movies, comics, and pulp literature<sup>11</sup>. In the context of this paper, however, a particular attention should be paid to King's 1983 novel *Pet Sematary*, a horror story that reinterprets the IBG trope as a profound metaphor of American thanatophobia and posits the issue in the midst of a contentious debate concerning the relationship between the Rational and the Irrational, Culture and Nature, Life and Death, and finally, Ownership and Identity. Set in rural Maine, the territory fraught with centuries long ownership conflict between local Native American tribes and the white settlers, the plot of the novel follows the conventions of the American small-town horror stories: Louis Creed, the protagonist, has moved his family to take a job as a doctor at the local university. When his daughter's cat is hit by a car on the nearby highway, his new neighbor Jud Crandall takes him to a Micmac burial ground that has the power to bring the dead back to life. They bury the cat, which returns the next day, alive but changed: mean and smelling of death and foul earth. After Louis's two-year-old son is killed on the same highway, Louis, overcome with grief, attempts to resurrect him in the same manner, to predictably horrific consequences (Dickey 2017).

As conventional as it may seem, the narrative tissue of the novel is enriched by subtly and indirectly introduced commentaries on the profoundly ambiguous relationship Americans have with death and dying. Unsurprisingly, King's description of ancient, haunted graveyards and their supernatural powers is as detailed as his meditation on contemporary burial sites and practices. The idiosyncrasies of American funeral homes and cemeteries, presented in a brutally meticulous and precise manner, come to serve as powerful horror motifs, but they also expose the death-phobic nature of the culture in question. Mundane minutiae of death, further translated into signs (casket models, sickly smelling flowers, condolences books) and dollars<sup>12</sup>, disclose a complex mechanism

11 It is interesting to point out that even though the trend died down in the early 1990s, and has been heavily parodied since, Hollywood has recently been producing remakes of the mentioned films (*The Amityville Horror* – 2005 and 2017, *Poltergeist* – 2015, *Pet Sematary* – 2019). The renewal of interest in the subgenre can be attributed to the current nostalgic turn towards the cultural models relevant during the 1980s, or, more cynically, to the diminishing influx of original screenplays.

12 "The East Room was furnished with neat rows of folding chairs – the expensive ones with plushy seats and backs. At the front, in an area that seemed a combination nave and bower, was Gage's coffin. Louis had picked the American Casket Company's rosewood model – Eternal Rest, it was called. It was lined with plushy pink silk. The mortician agreed that it was really a beautiful coffin and apologized that he did not have one with a blue lining. Louis responded that he and Rachel had never made such distinctions. The mortician had nodded. The mortician asked Louis if he had thought about how he would defray the expenses of Gage's funeral. If not, he said, he could take Louis into his office and quickly go



of symbolic transposition whose sole aim is to first pacify and then exclude death as something unnatural, alien and even far removed from life. Something that once “came into the house and said howdy and sometimes it took supper with you and sometimes you could feel it bite your ass” (King 2011: 58), something immanently present and ontologically crucial comes to be seen as an unwelcome and unnatural intruder<sup>13</sup>, and, if encountered, best left unexperienced, unprocessed, clouded by sedatives, shots, “colorless liquids”... American, or, maybe even increasingly global, inability to accept death as a natural occurrence, as an integral part of human experience is, then, what King transforms into a literary trope aptly named IBG. What is more, such discursive conversion adds yet another layer to the already polysemic nature of this sign – pushed into the realm of the unnatural, death becomes irrational as well, something that “refuses to be broken down into normal causes and effects that run the western world” (King 2011: 94). A foreign body, a disruptive particle, an “alien invasion”, or “terrorist threat”...

What underlies the overt dread of death and dying is a latent anxiety concerning perhaps the least stable element of American individual and collective identity – ownership logics. Epitomized in the questionable stake over the Micmac territories in Maine, King’s text treats this sign as a multifaceted semiotic structure, easily incorporated and highly functional within various ideological aspects of the textual framework. Control over land as a major theme of the novel is put to forefront early on – at one point Louis’s wife Rachel enquires about the part of the woods in which the ancient burial ground is located:

‘Honey, do we *own* this?’

And before Louis could answer, Jud said: ‘It’s part of the property, oh yes.’  
Which wasn’t, Louis though, quite the same thing. (King 2011: 32)

Now, what history books taught us, at least those written in the West, is that “territory is which defines all else” (King 2011: 60). By that analogy, Louis Creed and his family are defined by the real estate they own. Death and graves are, thus, markers of their identity, and the Wendigo spirit, a malevolent demon reigning over the woods adjacent to their house, the cannibalistic destroyer of environment and life-death balance, is an irrational, indefinable yet highly potent force threatening to push their lives off kilter. The text, however, calls the mentioned axiom into question, not by contradicting it but by stating that the undisputed, uncontested ownership is never possible<sup>14</sup>, and that the

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over three of their more popular plans – In Louis’s mind, an announcer suddenly spoke up cheerfully: *I got my kid’s coffin free, for Raleigh coupons!* Feeling like a creature in a dream, he said: ‘I’m going to pay for everything with my Master Charge.’ ‘Fine’, the mortician said. The coffin was no more than four feet long – a dwarf coffin. Nonetheless, its price was slightly over six hundred dollars. Louis supposed it rested on trestles, but the flowers made it difficult to see, and he hadn’t wanted to go too close. The smell of all those flowers made him want to gag.” (King 2011: 263)

13 “There is nothing natural about death. Nothing.” (King 2011: 52)

14 “Now the Micmacs, the state of Maine, and the government of the United States are arguing in court about who owns that land. Who does own it? No one really knows, Louis. Not anymore. Different people laid claim to it at one time or another, but no claim has ever stuck. (...) The Micmacs knew that place, but that doesn’t necessarily mean they made it what it was. The Micmacs weren’t always here.” (King 2011: 289)

vain, even egomaniacal delusion that land, life and death<sup>15</sup> can be controlled, owned, bought and sold is in fact a doomed endeavor. Moreover, the urge to possess and control is the exact demonic presence, lurking in the shadows surrounding the seemingly stable, secure and protected small-town American pseudo-utopia.

The horror narratives of the haunted Indian burial grounds thus disclose the deeply embedded, yet suppressed fear of the white, middle-class America that the land they own is, in fact, not theirs to own to begin with. The Creeds, the Freelings in *Poltergeist*, or Lutz family in *Amityville Horror*, average families living their average lives in their average homes, can be perceived as victims of the collective imperative to acquire the good life by acquiring goods. The commodification of life and death is in direct correlation with the universally valid suburban credo of possession – my large automobile, my beautiful house, my beautiful wife, my beautiful life, my beautiful casket... But if we agree with Derrida that death is “the necessary impossible”, that we cannot testify to its instant, only to its imminence (Derrida 1993), then the issue of “my death”, or for that matter the very syntagm is a subject of deconstruction, an aporia of the purest form, an impasse par excellence. For death is never accessible to the self, implying it is unattainable, and thus beyond the principles of the popular mechanics of ownership. It is uncommodifiable. Death is not, and can never be a real estate. Is that what America is afraid of? Not of death as such, of rotting corpses or bodily transience, uncertain transition to alternate ontological planes, but of the fact that there is something so foreign to its mindset of ontological economy... If that is the case, death functions as the radical Other reminding America that its practices are, in fact, unsustainable, that they are a mere discursive construct, and as such prone to deconstruction and alteration, and ultimately dispersal into hyperspace. Following this line of argumentation, one option presents itself as the only viable: in order to rid the civilization of the trauma deeply suppressed, death needs to be turned into an industry, commodity, equity, real estate... Into amusement parks. Into simulacra. As easy as that...

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15 Throughout the novel, the urge to ensure possession is highlighted as a crucial ontological marker of the characters, as exemplified in the following excerpts: “I bought them.” (Louis on the birds/mice the “resurrected” cat caught and brought to his doorstep); “Well, I got my boy back.” “They had no right to take my boy.” (King 2011: 302)

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## АМЕРИЧКА ХОРОР ПРИЧА: ЖИВОТ, СМРТ И НЕКРЕТНИНЕ

### Резиме

Испитујући савремене трендове у америчкој погребној индустрији и просторно-политичке праксе које су утицале на развој америчког предграђа, рад настоји да преиспита однос ове културе према смрти. Потом се анализа окреће тропу индијанског гробља, високо продуктивном знаку унутар дискурса америчке популарне културе током седамдесетих и осамдесетих година двадесетог века, с тим да је посебна пажња посвећена хорор роману Стивена Кинга *Гробље кућних љубимаца*. Овакав приступ теми омогућио је подробније испитивање како потенцијалне везе између страха од смрти и постиндустријског капитализма, тако и специфичности америчког колективног идентитета.

*Кључне речи:* савремена америчка култура и литература, предграђа, смрт, индијанска гробља, симулакруми

Марија В. Лојаница