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Death and the Cultural Institution

In August of 2015, a new museum opened its doors in London. Right away, its façade was attacked with rocks and eggs. Feminist groups like “The Fourth Wave and the Women's Death Brigade, a faction of Class War, a British anti-austerity anarchist group”¹ started protesting the museum’s existence, saying it was glorifying violence against women. The Jack the Ripper Museum was initially proposed to be a museum where life (and death) would be told through the victims’ eyes, but as soon as its sign was put up, it was clear it was not going to be the case. Behind its black Victorian store façade, a visitor can explore the history behind the killer who claimed the life of five women in 1888. However, not everyone seems to hate the museum. It currently has four out of five stars on travel websites like Trip Advisor² and Google Reviews³ and seems to be an ever-growing popular attraction among tourists. The Jack the Ripper Museum is only one example of an ever-existing trend of people exploring morbid themes by visiting museums, exploring exhibitions, attending classes, and doing research on archives and libraries. This conscious search for the gruesome raises the following questions: Should cultural and educational institutions explore the sensitive themes around death and violence? What are the ethics that govern such decisions? My term paper will explore these questions using as examples the Death Museum, the Jack the Ripper Museum, the Body Worlds exhibition, and academic courses around serial killers and death.

In some level or another, human beings are fascinated with the forbidden, the strange, and the morbid. According to a study conducted for English Heritage⁴, 91% of the 864 British citizens surveyed, ages eighteen and older, believed human remains should be displayed in museums and 87% agreed that displaying human burials and bones can educate the public on how people lived in the past, despite museums being increasingly resistant to do so. Furthermore, the survey also showed most individuals were “unconcerned about the date of the skeletal remains used in displays (79%) or for research purposes (81%) as long as the bones were at least 1,000 years old.”⁵ When putting dead bodies on display, museums encounter:

¹ Kale and Wilson, “No Selfies With Dead Women! A Jack the Ripper Protest on Halloween.”

² “Jack the Ripper Museum (London, England).”

³ “Jack the Ripper Museum - Google Search.”

⁴ Mills and Tranter, “Research Into Issues Surrounding Human Remains in Museums.”

⁵ Fletcher, Antoine, and Hill, “Regarding the Dead: Human Remains in the British Museum.”

[A] number of moral and ethical questions, which must be addressed by researchers and museum staff in their everyday encounter with the dead. These questions concern the moral duties of archaeologists, the way in which the dead are 'wronged', and how museums should store, handle and display human remains.⁶

In many ways, the display of human remains is a unique attraction and many people have grown used to having it at museums. Among the most common displays, one can find Egyptian mummies, "bog bodies' such as *Tollund Man* displayed at the Silkeborg Museum in Denmark, or *Lindow Man* on display at the British Museum, and other skeletal material often displayed in many archaeological museums."⁷ Bog bodies, bodies found buried in the wetlands of Northern Europe dating back from the Iron Age with "discernible facial features, fingerprints, hair, nails and other identifying traits,"⁸ are an interesting case.



Figure 1 Bog body.

Although most visitors do not see any issues when it comes to the display of "old bodies," what most people do not realize is that 'bog bodies' burials, for example, are "likely harboring homicide victims both honored and disgraced: emissaries to the supernatural realm, human payments to the gods, and diseased or offensive citizens, including adulterous wives,"⁹ a fact that could change how these displays are seen.

⁶ Calugay, "Bodies in Museums: The Moral Standing and Displaying of the Dead."

⁷ Gazi, "Exhibition Ethics - An Overview of Major Issues."

⁸ Staff, "What Are the Bog Bodies?"

⁹ French, "The Curious Case of the Bog Bodies."

The exhibit “The Mysterious Bog People, “the first-ever international touring exhibit to explore 10,000 years of rituals and sacrifice in northwestern Europe,”¹⁰ allows the visitors to play crime scene investigators. Museum goers are encouraged to examine fake bones, skull, and teeth “to determine the gender and likely age, the manner of death, the era in which the person lived (...) even if the victim was a hunter-gatherer or farmer through examination of the stomach contents.”¹¹ Attracting more than 316,000 visitors in Ottawa¹², Canada alone, the exhibition also used merchandize to attract the public. Depicting the famous Yde bog body, a girl who was around 16 years old when she was murdered strangled by a rope, various items, including a special coffee blend entitled “Mysterious Bog Coffee,” were sold in museums gift shops, a fact that did not impress some:

[Yde’s] shrunken head has been printed on a flag, coffee mugs, paper stands, shopping bags, pens, pencils, and T-shirts. The people who drink from those mugs place their lips on the bog body’s head. In Calgary, you may come across someone sporting a representation of a bog body on their chest and carrying an Yde “body bag” stuffed with bags of crisps and cans of beer. This imagery has [depersonalized] the Yde girl, stripped her of her human identity and reduced her to an object.¹³



Figure 2 "Mysterious Bog Coffee"

¹⁰ “The Mysterious Bog People Opens.”

¹¹ Nephin, “See the Mysterious ‘Bog People.’”

¹² van der Sanden, “Archaeology Magazine - Mummies, Mugs, and Museum Shops - Archaeology Magazine Archive.”

¹³ Ibid.



Figure 3 Yde girl.

At any case, one needs to answer how does one respect the dead. The Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) lists the following ethical principles, which can assist an institution when dealing with such matter:

1. Non-maleficence – doing no harm. Non-maleficence would require [one] to avoid doing harm wherever possible. This could include avoiding harm to an individual, a community or the general public.
2. Respect for diversity of belief – respect for diverse religious, spiritual and cultural beliefs and attitudes to remains; Respect for diversity of belief demonstrates humility and modesty regarding one's own opinions, and shows respect for individuals, cultures, groups and communities. The principle requires decision-makers to give consideration to the cultural and historical backgrounds, beliefs and values relevant to all parties concerned. For example, it would require a museum to recognize and respect that a community may place a particular cultural value on human remains that is not shared by others.
3. Respect for the value of science – respect for the scientific value of human remains and for the benefits that scientific inquiry may produce for humanity. This principle holds that individuals and communities (past, present and future) benefit both personally and indirectly, through the benefit to their loved ones, descendants and communities, from the fruits of science.
4. Solidarity – furthering humanity through co-operation and consensus in relation to human remains. The principle of solidarity recognizes that we all have a shared humanity and an interest in furthering common goals and

tolerating differences that respect fundamental human rights. Mutual respect, understanding and co-operation promote solidarity by fostering goodwill and a recognition of our shared humanity. This principle emphasizes the importance of rising above our differences to find common ground, co-operation and consensus. It would be reflected, for example, by seeking to find a consensus in relation to competing claims over human remains that all parties can accept.

5. Beneficence – doing good, providing benefits to individuals, communities or the public in general. Beneficence would dictate that your actions have good outcomes wherever possible. This could include advancing knowledge that is of benefit to humanity (for example, by using human remains for scientific research) or respecting the wishes of an individual (for example, by returning the remains of their relative for burial).¹⁴

However, the question still remains. Is it ethical to show human remains at a cultural institution? According to Giesen,¹⁵ there are three fundamental worldviews that can impact the collection care regarding human remains: animism, dualism, and materialism. Animism is a view related to men's first attempt to make sense of his environment, "a world containing other human beings, animals, and plants, as well as physical forces emanating from fire, wind, water, and earth itself."¹⁶ At some point, humans developed the belief in "a soul or spirit that gave life to bodies and also accounted for human consciousness, thought, desires, and behavior."¹⁷ Consequently, the body and the soul are so integrated they both survive death, a belief found in many Australian Aborigines, Native American, New Zealand Maori, and other modern pagan religions.¹⁸

On the other hand, when it comes to dualism:

French philosopher Rene Descartes explicate that human beings have two separate substances, Mind and Body (...) a view that came to be the philosophical foundation of Enlightenment knowledge and of the practice of 'Science' from the seventeenth century onwards', guiding the disciplines of archaeology and museology.¹⁹

In this worldview, the mind survives death and carries on, a belief seen in religions like Christianity. On the other hand, materialism "states that everything in the universe is matter, without any true spiritual or intellectual existence."²⁰

In fact:

There are no incorporeal souls or spirits, no spiritual principalities or powers, no angels or devils, no demiurges and no gods (if these are

¹⁴ "Guidance for the Care of Human Remains in Museums."

¹⁵ Giesen, *Curating Human Remains: Caring for the Dead in the United Kingdom*.

¹⁶ "Philosophical Perspectives on Behavior: From Animism to Materialism."

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Giesen, *Curating Human Remains: Caring for the Dead in the United Kingdom*.

¹⁹ "Bodies in Museums."

²⁰ "Materialism."

conceived as immaterial entities). Hence, nothing that happens can be attributed to the action of such beings.²¹

Since most museums handle inanimate objects, they tend to adhere to dualistic and materialistic views, but those where human remains are housed are experiencing a shift in these beliefs, mostly due to religion and the involvement of indigenous communities in preservation endeavors.²² However, not every institution that handles human remains is involved with communities from where the bodies originated.

Body Worlds, a traveling exposition of preserved human bodies and parts, has not been a stranger to controversy. With its beginning starting in 1978, when medically trained German anatomist Gunther von Hagens patented the process of “plastination,” where decomposition is halted and “individual tissues and organs that have been removed from the body of the deceased as well as the entire body itself [are preserved,]”²³ the exhibit currently has shows in the United States, Europe, and Asia. Exhibiting “black lungs, clogged arteries, and cancer-laden livers,” Body Worlds’ mission is to educate the public and “democratize” anatomy, allowing everyone, not just medics, to learn about their bodies by studying the dead.²⁴



Figure 4 Body Worlds exhibit.

²¹ “Philosophical Perspectives on Behavior: From Animism to Materialism.”

²² Ibid.

²³ “Plastination.”

²⁴ Walter, “Plastination for Display: A New Way to Dispose of the Dead.”

However, the bodies are not merely displayed as a scientific specimen, but as works of art with intrinsic poses, making some observers suggest “Gunther von Hagens is basically a sculptor working in the medium of desiccated human flesh.”²⁵

With that in mind, many critics consider the exhibition a violation of human dignity. They claim the public display of human parts is “intrinsically voyeuristic [and] oblivious to the underlying humanity and individuality of the subjects (...) hence [it is] disrespectful of postmortem human dignity.”²⁶ It is a fact that some objectification happens to the plastinated bodies in Body Worlds, since they are displayed anonymously and devoid of identifying characteristics. Furthermore, the bodies assume the nature of an artifact, not necessarily of human remains, leading some critics to believe information on each body’s identity should be supplied to ease that effect. Though some prospective donors have shown interest in having their bodies identified, von Hagens opposes such endeavor, citing it can be distracting to the exhibit.

The biggest controversy however, is related to how the bodies were originally acquired. According to von Hagens, “every whole body exhibited in North America comes from fully informed European and American donors, who gave permission, in writing, for their bodies to be displayed.”²⁷ Nevertheless, obscure paper trail and past events make some believe this is not completely true. In 2001, custom officers apprehended 56 bodies and various tissue samples “sent from the Novosibirsk Medical Academy to von Hagens’ lab in Heidelberg, Germany [by] a Russian medical examiner who was convicted [in the previous] year of illegally selling the bodies of homeless people, prisoners and indigent hospital patients.”²⁸ Von Hagens has not been charged and insists the bodies were obtained ethically through the proper channels. However, none of the paperwork has been made public and as for now, the provenance of the bodies remains a mystery.

Despite these grave-robbing accusations, of the 40 million people who have viewed the exhibition worldwide, more than 4,500 have signed up to donate their bodies to be plastinated and displayed.²⁹

BODIES...The Exhibition, Body Worlds’ main competitor, on the other hand, does not have willing donors. According to Roy Glover, spokesman for BODIES... The Exhibition, all the bodies come from the “unclaimed” in China, fact that causes many venues to not display the exhibition.³⁰ In fact, in 2008, a settlement was reached between the New York attorney general, Andrew M. Cuomo, and Premier Exhibitions, the promoters of the show. From then on, the exhibition was required to “obtain documentation demonstrating the cause of death and origins of the cadavers and body parts it displays as well as proof that the decedent consented to the use of his or her remains in such a manner.”³¹ In addition to previous visitors of

²⁵ Cantor, *After We Die*.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ulaby, “Origins of Exhibited Cadavers Questioned.”

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Herscovitch, “Rest in Plastic.”

³⁰ Ulaby, “Origins of Exhibited Cadavers Questioned.”

³¹ Chan, “‘Bodies’ Show Must Put Up Warnings.”

the New York exhibit being able to ask for refunds of the price of their tickets, Premier Exhibits had to include warnings next to the bodies and body parts of unknown origins. The warnings are as follows:

This exhibit displays human remains of Chinese citizens or residents which were originally received by the Chinese Bureau of Police. The Chinese Bureau of Police may receive bodies from Chinese prisons. Premier cannot independently verify that the human remains you are viewing are not those of persons who were incarcerated in Chinese prisons.

This exhibit displays full body cadavers as well as human body parts, organs, fetuses and embryos that come from cadavers of Chinese citizens or residents. With respect to the human parts, organs, fetuses and embryos you are viewing, Premier relies solely in the representations of its Chinese partners and cannot independently verify that they do not belong to persons executed while incarcerated in Chinese prisons.³²

Objects can also be controversial. In the case of the Museum of Death (with a location in Hollywood and another one in New Orleans), a visitor can see morbid items, such as:

- A piece of Nicole Brown Simpson's hair and her dog's bowl from the crime scene.
- Dozens of extremely rare jailhouse letters from Jeffrey Dahmer, who murdered and dismembered 17 men and boys.
- A license plate from Spahn Ranch, where criminal Charles Manson and his family lived.
- Jack Kevorkian's suicide machine, the doctor who helped dozens of terminally ill people end their lives.
- A business card belonging to Jack Ruby, who killed JFK's alleged assassin, Lee Harvey Oswald.³³

³² Chan, "Bodies' Show Must Put Up Warnings."

³³ "Museum of Death."



Figure 5 Museum of Death in Hollywood.

In fact, certain exhibitions are so graphic (crime scenes and actual footage of people dying), some of the visitors faint. The owner, J.D Healy, jokes they “like to call the people who faint [there] falling down ovations. [They] get about two every month and if [one faints] in the museum of death [they] give [them] a free t-shirt.”³⁴

At the Hollywood location, the museum is divided into 12 sections, which are named descriptively as Suicide Hall, Antique Mortician Apparatuses, Cannibalism Niche, Serial Killer Archives, Carnage Corridor, Room of Skulls, and others. Visitors explore corridors filled with serial killer memorabilia, images of gore, animal skulls, and even recreation of murderous scenes, such as a scene from Heaven’s Gate, a mass suicide that occurred in San Diego in 1997 including actual bunk beds and uniforms from the group.³⁵

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Rode, “Museum of Death Provides Morbid Thrills.”



Figure 6 Heaven's Gate reenactment scene.

Currently, the museum has a far too extensive collection to display it all at once and it keeps growing. According to Healy, they receive phone calls and emails every day from people trying to sell or donate items.³⁶

This fascination with death and serial killers is nothing new. Gail Saltz, an associate professor of psychiatry at The New York Presbyterian Hospital Weill-Cornell School of Medicine, believes it is in human nature to be a “little sadomasochistic.”³⁷ By looking at images of death, perhaps the natural event humans are most afraid of, a person is trying to prepare for the inevitable, a supreme fear driving a person to “want to know more and to understand the experience and feel like [they] have some kind of window in.”³⁸

Furthermore, according to Scott Bonn, a professor of criminology and sociology at Drew University, people are obsessed with disasters because they allow them to “get close to the edge of the abyss and look in without falling in.”³⁹ Bonn, whose new book is perfectly titled *Why We Love Serial Killers: The Curious Appeal of the World's Most Savage Murderers*, goes on to explain that people are attracted to serial killers out of intense curiosity:

[They] are rare in the business of murder with perhaps twenty-five or so operating at any given time in the U.S. They and their crimes are exotic and tantalizing to people much like traffic accidents and natural disasters (...) They generally kill randomly, choosing victims based on

³⁶ “Final Destination.”

³⁷ Sottile, “When Death Is a Fascination.”

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

personal attraction or random opportunities presented to them. This factor makes anyone a potential victim, even if the odds of ever encountering one are about the same as being attacked by a great white shark. (...) Serial killers are prolific and insatiable, meaning that they kill many people over a period of years rather than killing one person in a single impulsive act, which is the typical pattern of murder in the U.S.⁴⁰

In other words, serial killers are to adults what fictional monsters are to children, providing a euphoric adrenaline rush and a conduit for the public's "most primal feelings such as fears, lust, and anger."⁴¹

Many believe that is the allure of the Jack the Ripper Museum. The museum, which focuses on the crimes committed in 1888 by the unknown assailant, decided in 2015 to carry out special events during Halloween season, a move which infuriated feminists groups even more. According to its owner and ex-head of diversity at Google, Mark Palmer-Edgecumbe, the weekend events were meant to be educational as well as scary⁴² and invited the visitors to take "selfies" with an effigy of Catherine Eddowes, a believed victim of the Victorian killer. The press release for the event read:

Dare you have a selfie with him in his sitting room where he planned his horrific murders? Or how about a picture with Jack in Mitre Square together with the body of Catherine Eddowes? (...) Experience his crimes through the eyes of the women who were his victims.⁴³

Becky Warnock, who started a petition against the museum, urged people to join the protest alleging if a woman were killed, mutilated, and eviscerated today, no one would consider posing with her body. In addition, she claims Eddowes is being treated as a prop or fictional character, not a real person. However Palmer-Edgecumbe, who the museum's spokesperson is quick to remind the public, was awarded an honor from the Amy Winehouse Foundation at the Foundation's Gala Dinner for his charity work, assures the public the museum exists to educate:

We do not believe that our Halloween events are disgusting, crass or shameful, on the contrary we are creating an educational, exciting and historically accurate depiction of actual events that took place in London in 1888.

Aside from museums and exhibits, some people choose to explore such topics in a classroom environment. Dr. Norma Bowe, a tenured Professor in the College of Education at Kean University in Union New Jersey, currently teaches a class with a three-year long waitlist. Entitled "Death in Perspective," the class aims to explore

⁴⁰ "Here's Why We Love Serial Killers."

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² "The Jack the Ripper Museum Is Offering the Chance to Pose with Victims' Bodies - and People Are Disgusted."

⁴³ MailOnline, "Jack The Ripper Museum Sparks Fury on Twitter with Halloween Event."

“the past, present, and future individual and societal concepts of dying, death and bereavement, death education, and (...) related ethical issues.”⁴⁴



Figure 7 Dr. Norma Bowe.

In the class, students are taken to maximum-security prisons to talk to convicted murderers about the death penalty, see dead bodies in a morgue and observe an autopsy, interact with dying hospice patients, write down a bucket list, a living will, a goodbye letter to someone, and even their own eulogy. Though it may seem morbid to some, Dr. Bowe’s students guarantee the class is more about learning to live than dying. By facing death straight on, the students feel they conquer their fears and are able to live their lives more fully.⁴⁵

In contrast, many colleges offer classes on serial killers and mass murders and their objective is solely to educate students on the subject, feeding the previously mentioned need for the forbidden. From Anne Arundel Community College’s History of Murder to New York University’s Psychopaths classes, more and more educational institutions seem to be exploring what makes people kill and students are flocking over the seats. Georgia State University’s Serial Killers class taught by Mark Reed, for instance, aims to answer the question of “what led to the making of the serial killer” by asking the students to “explore dispositional aspects, including genetic and biochemical factors that, when coupled with exposure to environmental trauma or stressors, can create the context and plant the seeds from which serial killing may develop.”⁴⁶ The students of such classes are similar to people who enjoy graphic and terrifying stories:

A 1995 study on why adolescents watch horror films found that “gore watchers,” who professed to enjoy the blood and guts, tended to have low levels of empathy and a strong need for adventure-seeking. “Thrill watchers,” who watched the movies to get the adrenaline rush of being scared, had high levels of adventure-seeking, but also high levels of empathy. Gore watchers tended to identify with the killer and not the victim, while thrill watchers tended not to identify with either

⁴⁴ “Teacher - Norma Bowe.”

⁴⁵ NJ.com, “‘Death Class’ at Kean U. Subject of New Book.”

⁴⁶ “Mark Reed’s Classes Are Murder.”

killers or victims—they were captivated mainly by the excitement and the mystery.⁴⁷

Furthermore, the students never feel they are in real danger, since nowadays “the fear of being randomly attacked is provoked less acutely by serial killers than by terrorists.”⁴⁸ David Schmid, professor at the Buffalo University, goes even further by saying serial killers have become examples of Americana, since they seem to be slipping farther and farther into the past and “people are able to look at them through a more detached, historical lens.”⁴⁹

The urge to explore themes such as death and violence has always been a part of the human existence. Whether it is by visiting museums with bog bodies and mummies in their collections or taking a class on death, more and more people are willing to explore their anxieties surrounding the end and the unknown. The Body Worlds and the Bodies...The Exhibition, for example, allow visitors to see the human body in a way which was not possible before, but critics are keen to point out these bodies lose their human dignity since they are handled as artifacts. Many also criticize both exhibits for the lack of ethics and transparency when acquiring the human remains. When it comes to the Museum of Death, however, the bizarre aspect of its collections take center stage and visitors are invited to explore rooms full of serial killer memorabilia and graphic videos of people meeting their fate. Not surprisingly, such themes can also be found in classrooms in colleges and universities around the world, sometimes with length waitlists of students eager to learn about death and killers. Regardless of the cultural institution, one can be certain such themes will never go away, no matter how many critics are against it. Human curiosity will always find a way to explore the unknown.

⁴⁷ Beck, “The Grisly, All-American Appeal of Serial Killers.”

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

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