

A Top-Hat, a Mad Murderess, a Vampire King Practices, Imaginations, and the Materiality of Haunted Highgate

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If you like ghosts and love vampires, you should perhaps try Highgate Cemetery in London. Especially around midnight on a full moon – but sometimes even during the daytime – the chances of seeing a spirit there are not too bad; at least that's what some people believe. Highgate Cemetery gained a significant level of notoriety, especially during the 1950s to the 1980s, as one of Britain's most haunted places: a ghoul with flaming eyes, a ghost-cyclist, a tall figure in a black coat and a top-hat, an elderly mad murderess, the so called Spring-Heeled Jack, a vampire, and a shrouded dark figure are but a few of the supernatural beings connected with this cemetery.¹ During this time the cemetery was abandoned, a potentially significant factor in fuelling such stories, as I will argue. A particular peak in sightings occurred in the late 1960s fanned-by popular media and the influence of horror-films.

In this study I will analyse the connection between the graveyard as a material place, the imagination of ghosts and the «mediatization» of such imaginations in mass media and popular culture. On the basis of this analysis I will argue that the idea of ghost visions is based on socio-cultural expectations towards a specific material space and that these imaginations are formed by, and in turn form, socio-cultural practices.

My methodological approach is a cultural-historical one. I focus on the connection between practice, imaginations and materiality. These three dimensions must be seen as different aspects of a sociocultural network that produces meaning.² In the following study «practice» is understood as the concrete actions people perform in specific contexts and in specific places. However, actions can't be separated from thinking and imagining, and such actions may form part of individual as well as collective imagina-

1 See Farrant 2014.

2 The interrelation between imagination, practice and materiality/media is elaborated on a theoretical level by Hall 1997.

tions.³ On the one hand such practices form imaginations of how the world has to be and on the other hand practices themselves arise from such imaginations. I understand *«imagination»* as the collective expectations that people have with regard to living in a community and to specific topics that are important for sociocultural cohesion.⁴ So both practices and imaginations form the sociocultural collective, the expectations and ideas of a culture, with individual actions and individual ideas. Practices and imaginations also link ideas and expectations with material objects; material objects are connected with specific imaginations. How they work and what meanings they transfer are a result of their connection with sociocultural imaginations. *«Materiality»* is understood as the disposition of a body, or in the case of objects of a solid substance their location in a concrete time and place. Material objects are always objects in a sociocultural setting; they are produced and used in practices and are also part of specific imaginations.

In this study I will analyse the interrelation between *«imagination»* relating to spirits connected with the *«material place»* of Highgate and the *«practices»* that arise from this connection informed by the expectations towards a haunted place in the 20th century. But before looking at the creepy side of Highgate, some general thoughts about the relation of spirits and cemeteries are fleshed out.

1. *Why Should Spirits Haunt Cemeteries?*

Today in Europe we link cemeteries with creepy places. Some of us are scared to visit such a burial place alone at midnight whilst others may love the blood-curdling horror of such an adventure. At first sight it seems surprising to connect cemeteries with ghost – or ghosts with cemeteries, because most people don't die in burial places, but in hospitals. But today, cemeteries seem to be more haunted than hospitals in people's imagination. Why is that the case?

I will focus on Christian popular piety since the Middle Ages in view of the predominantly Christian context of Highgate Cemetery, nevertheless similar ideas undoubtedly exist in other religious traditions and many of these ideas pre-date Christianity. Five aspects of the interrelation between spirit imaginations and burial places will be considered. These five aspects

3 Gramsci 2012, 1457.

4 For a discussion of the imaginary and imagination see Pezzoli-Olgiati 2015.

are not exhaustive, but they do foreground some significant factors in explaining the interrelation between spirit imaginations and the material place of a cemetery.

The *first* point I want to stress is the imagination that the body and the soul are connected after death.⁵ Different Christian denominations believed that the soul is tied to the material body. According to this imagination the soul follows the material mortal remains to the cemeteries.⁶ The soul is therefore in an afterworld and at the same time at the cemetery because it is linked to the bones.

Secondly, connected to this tight body-soul-relation, the idea exists that the dead might return to the world of the living and may resurrect bodily even before the so-called Last Judgement, at least for a short time.⁷ We have here the construction of *living dead*. Thereby these *living dead* are ambivalent figures: they can act against living people, especially when the living are disturbing the burial places in an inappropriate way. But the *living dead* can also help the *normal living*. One narrative that shows that the dead can be very helpful exists in different parts of Roman-Catholic Central Europe (especially Switzerland and Austria) at least since the 15th century; it is called the story of the grateful dead (fig. 1).⁸ It is said that in the cemetery a knight regularly prays for the poor souls in purgatory. The knight, as the story goes, was once attacked by bandits. He escaped, but the robbers chased him. The knight fled into the cemetery. There the skeletons of the poor souls rose from their graves and drove the bandits back. Finally, the knight was saved by the grateful dead.

In this story for a short time the deceased are *alive* bodily in the cemetery to save the knight. In this case the cemetery is not a creepy but a holy place and the dead are grateful and decent. They give people what they deserve.

This story shows that imaginations of *living dead* in cemeteries was widespread in popular piety since medieval times in Europe whereby the burial places and the status of the *living dead* were ambivalent: the cemeteries are thought of as liminal places between life and death. They are seen as a dwelling for the dead as well as a place where the spaces of the living and the dead can mingle.⁹ The dead there may act in favour of the living, or they can punish them. The story of the grateful dead imagines

5 See Odermatt-Bürgi 2016; Hauser 1994.

6 Odermatt-Bürgi 2016, 70–77.

7 See the medieval ghost-stories in Schmitt 1995.

8 See Höpflinger/Müller 2017, 210.

9 See Sörries 2012.

the resurrected as skeletons and cadavers, not in the sense in which we imagine ghosts today.



Fig. 1: *The grateful dead helping a praying knight against bandits. Wall-painting on the ossuary of Baar (CH), 16th century, painted over 1933 (Image: Yves Müller 2017).*

Thirdly, in medieval times there were different concepts of representations of ghosts, as the French medievalist Jean-Claude Schmitt argues, namely different imaginations of the ‘living dead’. Schmitt distinguishes six types of representations of the dead:¹⁰

- The Lazarus-type, staging the dead soul as a resurrected person, often in linen bandages.
- The type that represents the dead as a (normal) living person.
- The soul-type that shows the dead as a small naked human figure.
- The ghost-type representing the dead as a white translucent figure (fig. 2).
- The type of the macabre: the dead is imagined as a skeleton or cadaver (as above in fig. 1).

10 Schmitt 1995, 224–225.

- The invisible type where the dead is not visible, but the illustration explains its presence through the context.

In medieval times the Lazarus-Type and the type of the macabre seem to be those most commonly connected to cemeteries (fig. 1), while the other types are more often interrelated with the dead appearing in other contexts, such as in dreams, visions, in houses, in wild regions, and in the role of messengers (fig. 2).¹¹ Consequently, we can find ghosts of individual persons, but also the dead as a collective (as in the story of the grateful dead) or in normative motifs (e.g. *memento mori* motifs) where the depiction of the dead is used as a reminder to live a good (in the sense of a religiously adequate) life.¹²



Fig. 2: A messenger ghost represented as a translucent figure brings a father news of the death of his son. Painting from around 1275 in: *Cantigas de Santa Maria LXXII*, Escorial, Ms T I, 1, fol. 80.

11 See Schmitt 1995.

12 See Schmitt 1995, 117–127.

The *fourth* thread of ghost imagination stems from the 19th century where representations of the living dead in the style of a «ghost-type» became popularized. The new religious movement called «spiritualism» was particularly significant in changing popular imagination of the dead.¹³ Modern spiritualism began as a movement in the 1840s in the US and became one of the most prominent new religious movements of the 19th and early 20th centuries. From an emic point of view, the inception of the modern spiritualist movement can be traced to the year 1848, when a paranormal event in Hydesville (New York, USA) took place.¹⁴ Two sisters Kate and Margaret Fox lived in an old house where they claimed they could contact a spirit through knocking. This spirit, they reported, was the ghost of a murdered peddler. Later it came to light, that the young women made the knocking-sounds of the ghost themselves.

The imagination of the old house as a haunted place, the spirit as a restless soul of a murdered person, and the innocent female medium (medium used here in the sense of a spiritualist medium) became very famous and decisively influenced later conceptions of spirits. Spiritualism adopted former ideas about the interrelation of the body and something not-bodily, and intensified the focus on the individual. The medium – understood as the religious specialist of the spiritualist movement – speaks (from an emic perspective) with individual spirits in contrast to a collective of the unnamed dead or a symbolic representation of the dead like a *memento mori*. The connection with the individual spirit of a deceased person is one of the core elements of the spiritualist practice. Also through spiritualist imaginations and imaginary, for example in spirit photographs, the representation of the dead as a translucent figure became popularized. The other types of the dead categorized by Schmitt can also still be found today (we may think here of corpses, zombies, and contemporary *memento-mori* figures). Nonetheless, it is especially the ghost as a translucent figure which continues to boom through the influence of spiritualism. The connection between spirits and cemeteries was also newly intensified in the 19th century because bourgeois mourning culture had its climax at the same time.¹⁵ Thereby, the cemetery became a focal point of sociocultural public mourning practices. The cemetery was the place where mourners, especially widows, could act publicly, meet each other and remember the dead in a so-

13 For an initial overview see: Byrne 2010; Chéroux et al. 2005; Conan Doyle 2009 (from an emic view); Jolly 2006; Willin 2009.

14 See Natale 2016, 42–43.

15 For more information see Taylor 1983; Hoefler 2010.

cio-religious appropriate way. The concurrency of the imagination of spirits and the popularity of cemeteries also influenced the narratives connected with Highgate cemetery.

In the spiritualist imagination, the spirits were normally not evil or demonic (nevertheless such ideas did also exist), but most often simply deceased common people with the same kinds of problems as those who sought to communicate with them had to deal with in life and sometimes they were even wise ghosts who could give advice. So *fifthly*, we have to ask, why the idea of the evil ghost and of the creepy cemetery is so prevalent today. I argue that popular media have done a great deal to diffuse this interrelation. Evil-creepy spirits existed earlier in <folkloristic> culture in which the ghosts of condemned criminals in particular could be understood as dangerous. But these spirits were usually not connected with the cemetery, because cemeteries were (depending on the Christian denomination) consecrated or at least peaceful places, where the dead chose to rest. The connection of cemeteries with creepy places and evil spirits was increased by popular media in the 19th and 20th century. Gothic novels and subsequently horror films played a significant role in intensifying the relation between the scary and the cemetery.¹⁶ This point will be fleshed out in the conclusion of the current chapter with reference to Highgate cemetery.

To conclude these brief thoughts, whilst there may be other arguments to connect cemeteries with ghosts, I think the five aspects discussed above are of particular significance: the imagination of a connection between something bodily and something non-bodily (the soul), stressing the individuality of the deceased person, the idea of the cemetery as a liminal place between death and life and the imagination of the cemetery as a creepy place are all crucial aspects that help to explain the 20th and 21st century imaginations regarding the interrelation between ghosts and burial places. With this in mind, some of the most famous ghosts of Highgate Cemetery will now be discussed.

2. Highgate as a Place for Spirits

Already before the opening of the Victorian cemetery of St James at Highgate ghost-stories were linked to the village of Highgate, and these stories increased once the cemetery was built. As already mentioned in Victorian times the Spiritualist movement and mourning culture had reached their

16 On the literary tradition see also Niels Penke's contribution in this volume.

climax. Historicism was also very important in Victorian art and architecture: Ancient Greek and Roman styles as well as Pharaonic Egypt were in fashion. The cemetery therefore mirrored the aesthetics and imaginations of different times in different styles: the neo-Gothic columbarium and the neo-Egyptian Crypts in the older west section use, for example, very different historicizing styles.¹⁷ This architectural setting and the formation of the hilly landscape are important in our search for the haunted side of Highgate, because the space forms imaginations of ghosts. The architecture of a cemetery creates creepy shadows; and also many different animals, making scary noises in the dark, live there. The snaky paths in the west part are romantic and allow one to play hide-and-seek. Furthermore, the historicizing buildings may inspire the imagination of earlier historic times and of many lives lived before.

But even more important for the imagination of ghosts is the decay of this cemetery. Highgate was damaged in World War II due to German bombing. By the 1960s Highgate Cemetery was in a desolate state. The American author Richard D. Altick describes the Cemetery as follows: It «represents what would result if the accumulated monuments of Westminster Abbey were transferred, in their full marmoreal extravagance, to the Amazonian rain forest. [...] Trees, saplings, wild shrubs, weeds, all the rank vegetation that a weeping English climate can bring forth, swallow up every tombstone that does not front directly on a path. [...] A machete is not ordinarily part of one's traveling equipment in England, but it would come in handy here.»¹⁸

This decay of the cemetery happened at the same time as British society experienced a significant change: the 1960s were a time of transformation – sexual freedom, youth culture, drugs, pop music changed the normative base of society, and Highgate's local newspaper reported stories of youth gang violence.¹⁹ The state of the cemetery offered a place for «rebellious» young people where they were not controlled in their social (and sexual) behaviour and could experience new feelings and adventures that were not possible at daytime in an everyday world, as Bill Ellis explains: «By the 1970s(?), the gates around the cemetery itself had deteriorated to the point that groups of adolescents were freely using the space after dark for their own purposes.»²⁰

17 On this confrontation of styles see the contribution by Alberto Saviello in this volume.

18 Altick 1969, 194–195.

19 See Ellis 1993, 19.

20 Ellis 1993, 20.

The social change in society was connected to a religious one: the Christian churches were increasingly criticised, and new religious movements emerged. Wiccan traditions and other forms of paganism and esotericism became popular and formed the so called New Age that connected inter alia more traditional ‹folk-religious› ghost-stories with occultism from the beginning of the 20th century.²¹ Stories about Satanism emerged from different parts of Britain in the 1960s and 70s.²² The overgrowing, wild and ‹romantic› cemetery became an ideal matrix to experience and expect/stage New Age-ideas – and with them also spirit-imaginations – on the level of practices. So it is not surprising that most of the spirit sightings at Highgate have been reported in the 1970s.²³ Both sides of the cemetery, the east and the west part, have their own ghost stories. And even Swains Lane, the road separating both parts, is known as a haunted place.

In the following sections I will introduce three ghost stories, one on Swains Lane, one in the east and one in the west part of Highgate cemetery, to elaborate the interrelation between ghosts, imagination, materiality and practice.

3.1 *A Top-Hat in Swains Lane*

Today Swains' Lane divides the east and the west part of the cemetery. In the 15th century it was mainly a path leading to the grounds of a farm house; later on it was one of four roads to Highgate. The older name was Swines Lane, maybe stemming from the ‹swine› that were herded on the road.²⁴ On Swains Lane a number of paranormal phenomena are reported to have been observed, for example strange misty forms that were caught only by a camera,²⁵ the ghost of a body snatcher that was seen during daytime in the year 2012,²⁶ and a trickster with the name Spring-Heeled-Jack, a figure that played pranks and was used to scare children.²⁷ Even animal

21 For the British occultism of this time see Ellis 1993, 14–19. By the term ‹folk-religious› I mean ideas about ghosts that were already in the common imagination of the local people and interrelated with religious concepts, but not officially accepted by organized religious groups, especially the Church of England.

22 See Ellis 1993, 14–19.

23 See Farrant 2014.

24 See Lovell/Marcham 1936, 39.

25 Farrant 2014, 25–26.

26 Farrant 2014, 26–29.

27 Farrant 2014, 12.

ghosts are connected with Swains Lane, especially an invisible horse with phantom hoof noise.²⁸

The most prominent ghost of Swains Lane, however, is a dark figure with a top-hat. According to Della Farrant, the first account of this ghost is a letter to the newspaper *Hampstead & Highgate Express* in February 1970 written by a Mr. R. Docherty: «Of when and whom he originated I do not know. Many tales are told, however, about a tall man in a hat who walks across Swains Lane and just disappears through a wall into the cemetery. Local superstition also has it that the bells in the old disused chapel inside the cemetery toll mysteriously whenever he walks.»²⁹

Della Farrant quotes another reported sighting in the year 1991. Declan Walsh is said to have seen a tall man «dressed in black, Victorian style clothing including a cape and a top hat. He walked directly towards the gates. The gates were locked shut but he walked straight through them without altering his stride, nor did he make any sounds».³⁰ Della Farrant collects other sightings of the same figure – again the elegant black Victorian clothing and especially the top hat is its «trademark» – and argues that it could be the ghost of a suicide victim from the year 1865.³¹

The sightings collected by Farrant are characterized by some common imaginations: darkness plays a significant role. The figure is described as obscure; it is mostly seen during night or twilight, it looks humanoid with a human body and human clothes, and disappears suddenly in a ghostlike manner. He looks like a figure from a former time, especially because of the described clothing. And finally the people seeing it are emotionally affected, mostly in a negative manner. The top-hatted-ghost doesn't make them happy, but they are frightened or even scared.

3.2 East Cemetery Turns Ghosts Mad

Similar to Swains Lane, the east part also has some specific ghosts connected with this place. One is a lonely figure disappearing as soon as someone can see it, another one (or perhaps the same) is a white shrouded spectre.³² But the most famous spirit connected solely to Highgate East Cemetery is that of an old «mad» woman that has murdered her children and now she

28 Farrant 2014, 101–102.

29 Quoted after Farrant 2014, 15.

30 Farrant 2014, 13.

31 Farrant 2014, 20–22.

32 Farrant 2014, 54–56.

restlessly roams over the cemetery where these children are buried. The figure is imagined to have thin hair and to float between the graves very fast.³³

Della Farrant explains the beginning of this tale by various strange findings of child corpses on the grounds of today's east cemetery or in its proximity.³⁴ One find is reported on 8 January 1845 in the newspaper *Morning Chronicle* where a story of some boys is told: they climbed on trees in the part that later (in 1860) became the Highgate East Cemetery. «One of the boys got into the tree's trunk, at the bottom of which he discovered a black bundle, which on being opened was found to contain the body of a child. The body was somewhat decomposed, but it is stated that the head is much bruised, and that there are other marks of violence on its person».³⁵

Another finding reported by Farrant took place in August 1865, when «a tailor by the name of Robert M. Pringle was making his way home when he stumbled upon a parcel carefully tied up with string, which he took home and opened in the presence of his family. To the horror of all present, as Pringle opened the parcel an infant's head rolled out on the table».³⁶

Both crimes couldn't be solved, but Farrant concludes that these cases «may have become conflated over time. The presumed «murderess» becomes the killer of two innocent children despite the twenty-year gap between the killings, and becomes the local «bogeywoman». [...] And so perhaps a legend is born.»³⁷

In this specific case the idea of the haunted is depicted in different ways: firstly it is based on the imagination of restless spirits. Spirits, as we have seen, can be grateful or evil, but they also can be sad and feel guilty. The «mad» murderess is this third type. Having murdered her children in her madness, she – as this idea goes – now has to haunt a place that was of significance when she lived. The ghost story combines the materiality of a graveyard with a certain imagined morality: people that acted morally correct rest peaceful in their graves; but if someone acted morally wrong and for example killed his/her children, she/he will not find peace after death. The story of the murderess comes with a warning impetus to live a good life.

33 Farrant 2014, 56–57.

34 Farrant 2014, 57.

35 Quoted after Farrant 2014, 57.

36 Farrant 2014, 57.

37 Farrant 2014, 58.

This spirit-idea is combined with some sort of gruesome-story like finding the mortal remains of children. This very specific historization of the spirit imagination occurs in a «gory» way. The imagination of real murder is much more agitating than the idea that someone invented the ghost story because his/her imagination was caught by some moving branches between the graves. The example shows how the imagination interrelates with normative ideas of a morally correct life (in this case of a mother), but also with the search for historical events as crime scenes that may explain such imaginations.

3.3 *West Vampire Hunt*

The most famous ghosts in Highgate live in the west part. This older part of the cemetery dates back to 1839. One of these spirits is a hooded figure looking like a monk that was seen in the 1960s.³⁸ But even more popular than this monk is a vampire; a famous hunt for it took place in the late 1960s and 1970s.

The Highgate vampire-hunt began on the 21st December 1969.³⁹ David Farrant, by then a 24 year old Wiccan priest, spent the night on a Wiccan vigil in west Highgate Cemetery because he had heard of some spirit sightings. During this night he was convinced he had seen a ghost. The young man wrote an open letter to the local newspaper (called the *Hampstead and Highgate Express*), published on 6th February 1970 with the title «Ghostly walks in Highgate» and stirred a broad interest in the spirits of Highgate. In this letter Farrant asked for reports of other spirit sightings. Different people answered and reported diverse spiritualist accounts, with some of these replies published in the local newspaper. These answers provide important insights into spirit imaginations of the 1960s and are significant accounts used in spiritual literature as «proof» of paranormal phenomena until today.⁴⁰ The diversity of these imaginations is conspicuous, as Bill Ellis remarks: «[...] the most impressive detail is the sheer amorphousness of the Highgate traditions; apart from the ghostly cyclist, hardly two informants gave the same story».⁴¹

38 Farrant 2014, 34.

39 My description of these events follows the historical reconstruction of the Highgate vampire-mania by Ellis 1993.

40 See Farrant 2014.

41 Ellis 1993, 22.

Because of dead foxes found in Highgate, on February 27th of the same year, the then 25 year old photographer Sean Manchester, who was himself highly interested in spiritual accounts, explained in an interview published on the front page of the same newspaper with the title «Does a wampyr walk in Highgate?», that a vampire is living in Highgate West Cemetery. In this article Sean Manchester's idea is explained as follows: «His theory is that the King Vampire of the Undead, originally a nobleman who dabbled in black magic in medieval Wallachia, «somewhere near Turkey,» walks again. «His followers eventually brought him to England in a coffin at the beginning of the 18th century and bought a house for him in the West End,» said Mr. Manchester. «His unholy resting place became Highgate Cemetery.»⁴² Sean Manchester explained that it was necessary to find the grave of this Vampire king and to behead the corpse. Black magicians and Satanists use Highgate for weird rituals and to serve the vampire, he further stated.

The whole vampire panic got out of control on a Friday 13th in March 1970. Manchester planned an official vampire hunt at the beginning of the night. ITV-News, the news-platform of the most popular private British Television Channel ITV, covered the topic, interviewed Farrant and Manchester and broadcasted these interviews on Friday 13th at 6pm. The transmission shows the influence of mass media on these vampire-imaginings. The effect was that two hours later a mob of vampire-hunters gathered in front of Highgate West Cemetery and finally broke into the cemetery.⁴³ The police was on the spot, but could not do anything against this vampire-mob. Manchester – according to his own report – entered the graveyard. He searched a specific catacomb and entered it through the broken roof. There he found empty coffins in which he laid garlic.

On 1st of August 1970 the police found the headless remains of a female corpse (that was originally buried in the cemetery) outside of a broken vault. The police intensified their patrols at Highgate and arrested Farrant. Later Manchester accomplished some exorcistic rituals where the headless corpse was found and he explained that he had found the vampire and killed it.⁴⁴

For several years the story went on and had some other climaxes, for example a magical duel between Farrant and Manchester who were rivals then and both claimed to be the president of the British Occult Society (it

42 Hampstead & Highgate Express, 27.2.1970, front page.

43 Ellis 1993, 24–25.

44 Ellis 1993, 27.

was a duel that never took place because Farrant did not show up at the meeting point). Also a scandal occurred because Farrant, his girlfriend and some other friends carried on to make some rituals at Highgate in which the women were nude (and Farrant took photos of it). Finally, in 1974 Farrant was arrested because of vandalism.

Since the 1970s the Highgate vampire plays an important role in the ghost stories of this region. It shows a quite complex interrelation between 1970s New Age and occultism-ideas, Bram Stockers book *Dracula*, folkloristic elements and especially (horror-)films, as Bill Ellis states: «Much of what he [= Manchester] later did and said was not actually based on the folk tradition of vampires; rather it derived from the international popular culture descended from Bram Stoker's *Dracula* and the many low-budget movies the novel inspired».45

It is indeed conspicuous that shortly before (and during) the vampire-hunt in Highgate a series of films with a very similar topic were released. Notably the Hammer Film Production-movies *Dracula Has Risen from the Grave* (Freddie Francis, GB 1968) and *Taste the Blood of Dracula* (Peter Sasdy, GB 1970) influenced the imaginations about a vampire at Highgate.46 The later one even includes scenes shot at Highgate West Cemetery (fig. 3). That the cemetery has been abandoned and is in bad shape at that time, is another important aspect to explain the vampire-mania at Highgate. The (film inspired) imagination that spirits and vampire need or even love creepy places, becomes apparent. The abandoned state of the Cemetery made it possible not only to imagine all sorts of strange creatures living there, but also to enter the cemetery during the night time. To improve the bad reputation of the cemetery it was important to clean it up, as Bill Ellis states «after Farrant's trial gave added attention to the state of the cemetery, an organization was founded to put the site in better shape. The Friends of Highgate Cemetery, after fifteen years of fund-raising and restoration work, were able in 1990 to reopen the Victorian monuments to the public».47

45 Ellis 1993, 24.

46 See Poole 2015, 141.

47 Ellis 1993, 34.



Fig. 3: *Alice Hargood (played by Linda Hayden) leads Lucy Paxton (played by Isla Blair) into Highgate Cemetery (Film still: Taste the Blood of Dracula, 00:46:26).*

I therefore argue that in this case we find an interrelation between the materiality of a cemetery (in this example the abandoned state of the place) and specific imaginations. These imaginations are initiated by the materiality and resulted in sociocultural practices (like vampire-hunts). These practices are linked to religious ideas of how to fight against (imagined) evil forces. So, again, we find a close interrelation between the materiality of a place, specific imaginations, and (socio-religious) practices.

4. Haunted Reflections

In the 1980s the «Friends of Highgate Cemetery Trust» (founded 1975) restored the cemetery and reopened it in 1990. The restoration did not end the sightings of ghosts and other paranormal phenomena,⁴⁸ but they began to recede. This hints again at an interrelation between imaginations of the supernatural, socio-religious practices around them, and the setting in the materiality of a cemetery. As a conclusion I want to consider this relation.

48 For newer spirit sightings see Farrant 2014.

As I have already mentioned, popular media influences spirit ideas especially in the 19th and the 20th centuries:⁴⁹ new sorts of media, such as gothic novels, photography, radio and film became part of and effected ghost-concepts. As constructed in famous gothic novels and later in horror films, the haunted place was connected to a specific sort of materiality, especially run-down and shabby locations like old houses, overgrown forests or winding alleys. It is quite surprising that hospitals where people die are not perceived as creepy unless they are abandoned or the lights are shut down. Obviously there is an imagination of a specific place where ghosts «live» and appear to people. This idea is not based on reasonable assumptions, but far more influenced by media representations. We know from novels and from films what a haunted place should look like and how a ghost should behave. These media representations show how to act in case of a meeting with such a ghost which is also the case at Highgate Cemetery as the following three observations will show.

Firstly, on the level of socio-religious practices, we find religious New Age-practices at Highgate such as vampire-hunts, invitations to black masses with demon-invocations, or the performing of spiritual rituals. These practices are highly influenced by media representations. Sean Manchester knew that a vampire had to be stabbed with a wooden stake. Not because he ever did this before, but because films and literature tell us that this is the only way to kill vampires. Also the public and tourist interest in such paranormal phenomena at Highgate and other cemeteries is influenced by media representations. Tourists are looking for haunted places and want to experience sensations similar to the ones induced by a good horror film.

Secondly, both types of practices are influenced by imaginations of an afterlife existence that are based on traditions. Ghosts-ideas are usually not something innovative, but they reproduce traditional ideas of an afterlife existence and the relation between the body and something else. Spirits are often connected with imaginations of trespassing the norms of society (or religion). A nice and friendly 101 year old happy grandmother that dies in peace, does not become a haunting spirit. Ghost-stories need some drama and shudder. In the case of our examples, they are linked to an abnormal death: the top-hatted figure is explained as a suicide victim; the «mad» old woman as a murderer, and the vampire as a living-dead. So ghost stories

49 On the other hand, the spiritualist movement had a significant influence on popular media culture, as Simone Natale argues. Spirit evocations and séances were staged as shows and also had a function to entertain. See Natale 2016.

can also be seen as coping-strategies with something beyond the socially accepted idea of a good death.⁵⁰

Thirdly, the practices around paranormal phenomena at Highgate are also connected to expectations towards a cemetery, and specifically its materiality. Ghosts are often thought of as being tied to specific materials (such as tombstones), and rituals are embedded in specific material contexts. The darker and shabbier a place is, the higher the probability that some spirits are thought/supposed to live there. Ghosts do not seem to like clean areas. The link between ghosts and cemeteries is based on religious imaginations on an afterlife. These imaginations are connected with the practice of collecting the mortal remains at a specific place of the dead. These places of the dead are, as we have seen, liminal places between life in this world and life in an afterworld.⁵¹ In abandoned cemeteries this liminality is accumulated: the places are then not only places between life and death, but also between culture and nature.

When Highgate was abandoned and Swains lane was trapped between the two parts of the cemetery the cemetery offered a dark and mysterious liminal place. Thus, it is not surprising that different types of practices (the New Age-religion as well as the public attention towards paranormal activities at Highgate) have been in decline since the cleaning-up of the cemetery in the 1980s. So, if you want to see ghosts today, you have to intensify this liminality: visit at midnight (the liminal time between two days), perhaps when it rains or it is misty (so your sight is impeded), and search for the more overgrown parts (the ones between culture and nature) of the cemetery. And you should necessarily read a gothic novel or watch a horror film before your trip.

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50 For cultural imaginations regarding the ‘good’ and the ‘bad’ death see Feldmann 2004, 179–202.

51 For the theory regarding liminality, esp. Victor Turner, see the introduction to this volume.

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