

**EMBALMING AND THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF  
THE CORPSE IN CONTEMPORARY ENGLAND**

A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

by

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## **Abstract**

This research study analyses the construction of meaning surrounding the embalmed corpse in contemporary England. It documents a process of social change in which Legal, Medical and Religious discourses concerning the dead, once dominant and unchallenged, now co-exist, if somewhat uneasily, with modern constructions of death and the possibility of an after life.

The meaning of the embalmed corpse is considered to be constructed by different elements which are presented historically. Initially religious discourses governed the meaning of the body, which was preserved for religious reasons. 17<sup>th</sup> century surgeon-embalmers requisitioned the corpse for reasons of status assertion, presenting their arguments in medical terms. Contemporary hygiene issues, in tandem with legal issues, today have a powerful impact on the corpse, which is usually experienced by mourners in the context of contemporary consumer culture, after the process of embalming has occurred. The decline of religious practices also mean that the contemporary corpse has assumed a far greater significance than in the past.

From the perspective of the sociology of the body, based on the seminal work of Turner, this thesis discusses how changing experiences of live bodies are inextricably linked with changing experience of dead bodies in contemporary societies. This is accomplished through an interpretation of the different meaning attributed to embalmed corpses, together with an appreciation of the work of Hertz and Van Gennep, both of whom identified, in pre-literate societies, the centrality and embeddedness of the treatment of the corpse to funeral rituals.

The thesis reports some empirical investigations of embalming-related issues which provide an analysis of contemporary meanings of the corpse and cast light upon the contemporary structure of the English funeral world. Embalmers expect to produce a culturally acceptable 'death disguise' for the benefit of mourners whose encounters with the corpse are surprisingly numerous in contemporary death-denying society. Culturally acceptable death images appear to focus upon the dead being in a condition of 'liminal repose', where the illusion of rest is constructed. Embalmers and funeral directors comprise occupations that are quite distinct, although working with the dead in different parts of the same process.

Highlighting the significance of corpse appearance, whereby it is rendered 'normal', has also highlighted the socio-cultural process whereby this transformation occurs. As the dead are carefully re-presented, this has hidden the 'true' condition of the dead and therefore also hidden the covert technicians, embalmers, who accomplish this transformation. Embalming therefore appears a hidden aspect of the social construction of the dead, as death is now estranged from the popular context.

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## Chapter one Introduction

This thesis is centrally concerned with the role of the corpse in funeral rites and how that role has changed over time. Its origins lie in my occupational experiences concerning the way bereaved people cope with death, particularly concerning the practice of viewing the body. Because of my work, I could also observe the various mortuary personnel who were responsible for presenting death experiences within the funeral firm. It became apparent to me that how the corpse really looked and how mourners expected the corpse to look were two very different things. 'Real' death is rarely 'nice' and can often be grotesque, so for mourners the corpse is often smartened up. In addition, medical and clerical people also regarded the corpse differently to mourners. I will outline this later but it struck me that the habits of regarding the dead were based upon very different assumptions. Consequently the germ of this thesis was propagated.

I was also keenly aware that in the later 1980s, interest in death was a new area of sociology and some academics seemed to lack basic occupational knowledge in this area. Consequently I felt some of their work was essentially limited. In addition the focus of other funeral industry researchers such as Howarth (1992), Smale (1985) and Parsons (1997), the latter also being a qualified embalmer, explored funeral directing elements of deathwork and Naylor (1989), while more involved with embalmers, dealt with broad aspects of funerals. Consequently I felt that the role of embalming in the presentation, and hence the social construction, of the corpse in contemporary society and the impact of embalmers and embalming had been overlooked by researchers. It seemed therefore appropriate to analyse the role of embalming which is involved in the re-presentation of the corpse to match deeply held cultural expectations. Part of the reason for this lack of attention from researchers concerns the position of embalmers themselves, who are very successfully camouflaged both within and without the funeral occupation, due to their inherently sensitive location.

Beliefs, actions and rituals communicate the cultural constructions accommodating death. Adams (cited in Clark 1993) asserted that many of the rituals associated with laying out can be seen as 'a physical and social necessity' but imbued with spiritual overtones, but Bradbury (cited in Dickenson & Johnson 1993) summarises the embalmers task quite simply as being to deny 'bad death'. Further study also involved me in analysis of the competing influences involved in

the process of mourners through what Howarth (1992) described as the 'death system'. This has led to a lack of awareness of what embalmers do and more importantly why they do it. However it could be said that embalmers as individuals appear more prominent now than in the past as the embalmer of Royalty (Mr Des Henley) was mentioned in the Queens New Year honours list in 1998 and television programmes such as 'Six feet under' and 'Don't drop the coffin!' in 2004 served to raise embalmers' profiles. However mystery still surrounds them. Analysing the function of embalmers not only highlights the cultural context of the embalming occupation, but also illustrates how contemporary society makes sense of death and thereby represents it.

However, it is first necessary to consider the nature of social constructions of the body and corpse because it is the corpse which is central to the embalming process. It is also necessary as Hertz (1907) has indicated, to look, not only at funeral rites, but at the culture from which these rites arose. Such cultural beliefs concern not just the body or corpse, but the relationship between the body and the persona and, ultimately, the relationship between the living and the dead. Changing notions in Western society concerning the soul suggest that the status of the corpse will be influenced. The growing secularization and 'psychologisation' (Rose 1999) of English society in relation to funeral rites is thus reflected in the practice of embalming as the physical body becomes more significant as the soul diminishes. Embalming is thus embedded within these socio-cultural processes, which change over time. In order to deal clearly with the various aspects, the thesis is divided into a number of distinct, but interlinking chapters that are prefaced with this introductory chapter.

It quickly became clear that the works of several theorists would hold key positions within my work. The writings of Durkheim, Van Gennep and Hertz were found to be of great value in attempting a theoretical construction of mortuary rituals in England. Van Gennep (1960) commented that it is the transitional or liminal which dominates mortuary ritual. The volume of recent literature devoted to mortuary practice is therefore hardly surprising as the extension of funeral timescales has made a much longer period of being 'betwixt and between' from death to the eventual funeral.

I was, however, concerned to address the charge that there could be no serious sociological point to examining the facts of death. Death is, after all, obvious and

is a 'natural', given entity, although the meaning of 'natural' is problematic within this thesis. Similarly 'realists' (for example Collins and Cox 1976) would suggest that death cannot be constructed because it is one of the basic elements of life. It is real in the true sense of the word – it does not rely on any cultural interpretation to be real because when you are dead it should be pretty evident. This however is a flawed and trite perspective. Edwards et al (1995) would argue contrarily, that the world is like text, it all has to be represented and interpreted and even 'bottom line' instances of brute reality are constructed social accomplishments. Death itself may be self evident, but the social meanings attached to death and the representation of the corpse in death are not 'given' issues but are the result of negotiation. Accordingly it can be argued that death and the responses to death are mediated and interpreted by cultural constructions and habits. The use of embalming to literally re-present the corpse suggests that this thesis will have a useful role to play in highlighting cultural coping mechanisms. The growth of alternative constructions such as the natural death movement (Bradfield 1994) and the Dead citizens charter (1998) within English culture and the diversity of cross-cultural interpretations concerning death also back up the contention that death is a constructed phenomenon and therefore worthy of study. It will become clear early on that the contribution of this thesis will be to highlight a hitherto neglected area (apart from Akesson (1996) in Sweden) regarding the social construction of the corpse. However this 'reality' will be regarded as a problematic phenomenon – it is subject to the powerful interpretations of major discursive elements. It will be shown that the corpse does not represent any set of 'given' assumptions, but is subject to the manipulating of various powerful discursive groups.

A number of issues need discussing to explore fully the nature of mortuary habits in contemporary England and some of these include the nature of contemporary death and the value and persistence of rites, such as taking a last look at the dead, an act often referred to by funeral directors as 'viewing'. Several themes emerge within this framework, one of which concerns the enduring habit of mourners regarding the dead as if they were in a form of deep sleep. Another issue concerns the physical changes which occur at death (and thus the significance of the actions of embalmers) and the effects of media images that are aired regarding death. It would therefore seem appropriate to briefly discuss what

embalmers actually do quite early on in the thesis. I therefore do this in section 1.7 of this chapter.

## **1.1 Structure of thesis**

The themes outlined above form the focus of this introductory chapter. Chapter 2 explores the history of embalming. This emphasises the changing relationship between the soul and the dead, the corpse and the funeral and also the dead and the living. Exploring the historical use of embalming techniques will illustrate that, far from being practiced merely to preserve the corpse, the techniques were used to support powerful definitions of the corpse or of those manipulating the corpse. Differing interpretations of the corpse as, for example, an (Egyptian) 'body temple' awaiting the return of the spirit or an (Eighteenth century) 'body machine' to be unwrapped or as the contemporary physical symbol of the person illustrate the changing definitions of what a corpse is thought to comprise. Embalming techniques illustrate these issues of control and occupational definitions which will also be regarded later in the thesis. Consequently the corpse as a locus of pollution and social anarchy in need of regulation will emerge when, from the perspective of twentieth century social medicine, an alternative to disguising the body is to hide it. Secondary sources for this chapter are used widely, but primary oral history reports and documentary sources are used where possible.

Chapter 3 is concerned with outlining the relevance of the recently developed specialism of the sociology of the body for the practice of embalming. This chapter will explore theoretical stances regarding the corpse which have only been developed over the last decade or so. Contemporary theorists' interest (e.g. Foucault 1977, Baudrillard 1993) in the regimented alive body can also be applied to the dead body. Due to lengthening timescales between death and the funeral, the significance of the threshold period is explored. It is shown in this chapter that the work of recent body theorists translate very well to the social situation of the marginal corpse, since it is a highly controlled time. This is shown to be accomplished through powerful meta-narratives or discourses which regulate the body in general. I regard mortuary practice as an example of a Foucauldian sanitary control system. This is well illustrated by the mechanisms of state regulation. The rise of rationality can also be shown to have a confusing impact upon the conceptions of the body. Here, the chapter reviews the ideas of

Giddens (1991) who has suggested that a rise of 'post-modernity' (where traditional forms of authority have been undermined) has confused the old and new definitions of the corpse.

Chapter 4 discusses the methodological issues surrounding the investigations displayed within the thesis. These shed some light upon the somewhat vague and shadowy world of confrontation with the dead and allows us to explore what mourners appear to expect and their previous experiences of death. Some occupational issues are explored, which bring into sharper focus the actions of embalmers and the composition of the industry, producing results which vary widely from those of other researchers who may have been inadvertently influenced by "funeral industry writers" such as Albin-Dyer (2002). A significant contribution of the research here is to illustrate what is actually going on in the industry according to embalmers. The various elements of the research used different techniques, including interviews, questionnaires, the analysis of documentary sources and included a considerable period of occupational field work. The results of these investigations are presented in chapter 5 and conclusions to the thesis follow in chapter 6.

It is now appropriate to explore the origins of this thesis that prompted the exploration of the mortuary world. I looked at sociological issues as well as the outlooks of mourners to locate the significant areas that needed exploring and highlighted the opposing issues and perspectives that consequently arose.

## **1.2 Origins.**

Adams (1991) correctly pointed out that accounts of the care of the body prior to its arrival in the coffin are rare, although Porter (1968) was an early writer to recognise the sociological significance of the technique of arterial embalming. Foltyn (1996) suggests that corpse decoration 'displays a group's common social and aesthetic values and traditions' (1993:9) and she asserts that making the dead beautiful is nothing unusual - especially in an increasingly appearance oriented world. The implicit adoption of a materialist standpoint (reality grounded in matter) thus focusses attention on human individuals as physical beings, having a continuity of physical-ness through time and space. While physical death is seen as the end of the person, the preservation of the physical remains appears to retain for a while the dead in the world of the living.

If you speak with mourners it is clear that for many of them, after death, the body continues a form of existence. The need for the body to be set apart and being 'socially defined as requiring special religious treatment' (Timasheff 1976:112) underlines its separation from the profane – which is the crucial distinction that Durkheim (1912) makes. This produces an explanation for the elaborate ritual surrounding the body in most societies and the powerful cultural prescriptions for behaviour concerning mourners and the corpse. However it is crucial to remember that the sacred-profane distinction applies most strongly in cultural, as opposed to rational, constructions. Overlapping areas produce tensions. The discursive constructions of the state such as law and medicine do not see the body as sacred at all – but as a profane carrier of disease or the locus of physical evidence. Even in religious discourse the unclean profane body holds prisoner the potentially clean spirit within. It is necessary to bear in mind Wilson's (1991) comment that the choice for individuals between traditional (cultural) concepts and scientific (rational) ideas is as common in advanced western societies as in simple cultures. This movement between cultural and rational modes will be explored here, since this influences the cultural construction of death and hence the body. An obvious distinction that is quickly found concerns the sacred/profane dichotomy that Durkheim (1912) outlined. Action and ritual performed on and around the body emphasize its sacredness in death ritual, but cultural constructions of the body or person are not static. The changing conceptions of ghosts through the centuries from medieval times, illustrates the diversity of the cultural beliefs concerning the body and soul (Finucane 1982). The contradiction between the love of the dead and the loathing of the corpse, or the attraction for the personality thought to be lingering about the dead and the fear of the gruesome thing that has been left behind (Feifel 1965, Quigley 1996) also illustrate this dichotomy. Feelings of profound contradictoriness abound. Concern with death through funerary art in the post-reformation period suggests a distinction between the natural and social body (Llewellyn 1991). Embalming could be seen as a cultural manoeuvre regarding the dead (natural body), as well as being regarded as a token of esteem or care for the dead (social body). This also expresses the cultural disconnection of the body from the community (Clark 1982) for both social and symbolic (contagion) reasons. The underlying Western conceptions of death are thrown into relief by the actual practice of post-death

procedure, often referred to as 'care' and imbued with notions of concern and respect for the body. It appears to be necessary to care for the dead because the dead do not, for mourners, appear completely dead all at once.

True death occurs gradually as a process which reveals a key element of the cultural construction of death and the key role of embalming in enabling this construction to be attained by mourners. Mourners (still) regard their dead as people, but funeral viewing, until the 1960s, however, confirmed these individuals as being truly dead (Hinton 1967). Gorer's work (1976) on the influence of religious decline illustrates the modern void which had been created - aspects of death and decay, he suggested, were too horrible to contemplate (which also explains the growth of embalming practice) and the dead were avoided. Littlewood (cited in Clark 1993) pointed out that Gorer noted the decline in realistic death image and the growth of a voyeuristic preoccupation. This revealed the void that had arisen by the 1960s in death awareness. Religious erosion and decline in death ritual led to an unprepared-ness with death in the later 'sixties, which has contributed to the loss of cultural familiarity with death (Hinton 1967). Post-modern death is sanitised and hygienic, both physically and emotionally. Quigley (1996) suggests that the apparently incorruptible body is 'on the road to saintliness' (1996:60) – a religious belief linking the state of the persona to the condition of the body. But we shall see that cues read on the corpse are still used by mourners to indicate the condition of the person. Embalming has therefore apparently allowed the public to behave 'as if' the dead were not truly dead because real death is camouflaged (Aries 1974). But to beautify death is to acknowledge it (Foltyn 1996), which suggests that viewing and embalming are closely related issues, as the next section explores.

### **1.3 The 'last look'**

The social construction of death implies a visual confrontation by mourners with the body, but conceptions of the value of viewing the dead have altered. Viewing has been regarded by some as of great use, (Williams 1956, Marris 1958, Crichton 1976, Fulton 1976, Bowlby 1980, Walvin 1984, Quigley 1996) by others of little use (Mitford 1963, Feifel 1965, Richardson 1985, Phipps 1987, Davies 1993) and in post-modern conceptions, of whatever use the individual wishes to make of it

(for example Parkes 1972). Parkes (1972) states that grief is a 'process of realisation' (1972:156) - when the practice of viewing can be of some benefit (if it is "presented well" according to Parkes). Viewing appears to reflect cultural constructions concerning appropriate death behaviour. Pre-funeral viewing was common in ancient times when all factions needed to be assured that no illegal deed had been performed, a composed looking corpse assuring survivors that no violent end had befallen the body (Puckle 1926). So a peaceful corpse suggested a peaceful death. The working class traditions of watching or waking (Stevens 1976) and accompanying the corpse appear now to have been dislocated due to the geographical and social distancing of death as Jupp (1990) found. Similarly Adams (1991) found that many of her respondents had put aside special clothes to be laid out in, which suggests that culturally generated after-death needs are still appreciated.

However the lack of 'sociodrama' (removing the front parlour rituals by the 1960s that held particular symbolic significance) has resulted in a lack of familiarity with the practice of viewing the dead. This has served to further distance the dead (Jupp 1990). Acceptance of the ritual of viewing was considered 'non-deviant' by oral sources (Gore 1993) until the post-war period. It was a "taken for granted" aspect of funerary ritual.

Academic reactions to the process of viewing are now mixed. Clark (1982) suggests that the ritual of viewing is now diminished due to the distance to the funeral firm chapel compared to the old front parlour (in Staithes). Pine (1975) boldly asserted that the English do not view the dead (probably thinking of 'public', as opposed to 'private' viewings) and adds that any visits to the dead take place at the home - which is now patently dated information. Pine's view is perhaps influenced by Kephart (1950) who suggested that display for its own sake was possibly a dwindling after-death phenomenon. Dumont and Foss (1972) similarly reported that the display of the corpse is stigmatized by most Britons as being reprehensible, a comment reported by Naylor as being 'without reliable foundation' (1989:13). Mitford's (1963) poor assessment of the significance of viewing in British funerals is also emphasised by other researchers such as Smale (1985). The confusion perhaps reflects different habits of display - the American dead are publically viewed, the English dead privately so. An excellent example concerns



Diana, Princess of Wales, whose closed coffin was seen by a huge international TV audience in 1997, but (as American sources write) whose body was only viewed privately by the family. Contrast this with Mother Theresa's funeral the following week, when her body was on public display during the world-wide televised funeral, as was that of Pope John Paul in March 2005. Another example is noted by Lane (1981) who commented that in socialist (ex-USSR) funerals, viewing was a private, not public, affair whereas in America, the opposite applies. Howarth (1992) similarly thought viewing rare - apart from the east end of London, where her research focussed. Charmaz (1980) is critical of the restoration of the corpse by embalming as she asserts this produces an artificial image and Phipps (1987) also disapproved of viewing although he had underestimated the impact of secularism in relation to the metaphysical materialism inherent in viewing. This suggests in the light of declining religious belief that its significance may be greater than he anticipated.

Conversely Chrichton (1976) asserted that viewing is widely practiced; embalming, he states, 'ensures that the body has a natural, peaceful appearance' (1976:106). Similarly Naylor (1989) recorded the emphasis placed by funeral directors on viewing. She suggested that the therapeutic role played by funeral firms in the viewing ritual was often given little consideration by others in the system (ie clergy). Naylor concluded that viewing appeared to help her sample with post-funeral adjustment. However Hinton (1967) suggests that the formal visits to the house of mourning and respectful viewing have declined. He suggests that the British don't pay elaborate attention to the body (which possibly in the mid 'sixties was a reasonably accurate statement) and he was critical of (American) embalming practices. Phipps (1987), although critical, also acknowledges the importance of the value of viewing, but he encourages the simpler and 'natural variety' (and not the 'restored' dead common to American practice) such as at home or hospital immediately after death - apparently a common English practice, according to my field work in chapter five. Those who favour viewing have a similar theme (Quigley 1996, Dumont & Foss 1972, Fulton 1965) that instead of seeing 'raw death', mourners are able to see the dead in the most favourable form possible. This is thought to be 'therapeutic'. Finally Gorer's work (1965) concluded (to his evident surprise) that 93% of his sample having seen a dead person meant that exposure to death was more general than he anticipated. Metcalf &

Huntington (1991) commented that conventional conditions feelings (about death), so this social prescription of rites, can explain the variability (within certain limits) of attitudes to and practices with the dead. These can thus be seen as reflectors of pre-existing social opinion which suggests that the ritual of viewing the dead is part of the social construction of the dead.

Certainly the possession of the body is itself an important phase of funerary ritual. At mass-disaster scenes, belief that someone could possibly survive would be fostered unless confrontation with the correct victim was enabled, thus underlining reality. At a disaster team training day for embalmers and others, (Kenyon Emergency Services training day, Sudbury, February 1994) considerable emphasis was placed on recovery, preservation and identification of the dead, involving complex procedures from interlocking teams of pathologists, forensic odontologists (dentists), finger print experts and others skilled in reconstruction and identification (for example DNA technicians). The importance of mourners' confrontation with the dead was, for the team and the bereaved, a crucial feature of disaster recovery. A major focus of the day was on the importance of correctly translating clues and sporadic information so as not to 'mis-identify' the mannikin 'victims'. In this way after accurate identification the eventual funeral, in the event of a real disaster, could proceed with meaningful relevance with the correct body, which underlines its importance during the obsequies. Similarly in February 1998 when I was 'out in the field' at an air crash in the Philippines, extreme care was taken to identify correctly each individual by a process of painstaking techniques. In this way the identity of each individual was confirmed, which enabled the families to perform their own religious and cultural obsequies with their own dead relations, underlying the crucial centrality of the (correct) body at funeral rites.

So it would be fair to say that the value and significance of the 'last look' varies across cultures and over time, and religious inclination (Catholic-Protestant) can exhibit radically different approaches to this custom. But precisely how and why this varies has not, to date, been systematically researched. Part of the remit of this thesis, therefore, is to bring more up-to-date information to this whole issue and examine how late 20<sup>th</sup> century Britons manage death.

## 1.4 Death as sleep

The Nineteenth century clash of rational discourses of medical dissection with cultural discourses regarding Victorian pauper funerals is illustrated by Richardson (1985). In more recent years the distancing of modern death from the home has been crucially assisted by the introduction of the funeral chapel and refrigeration (Jupp 1990). Consequently the corpse has become 'unnatural' and it is this 'unnatural-ness' that the embalmer disguises by the process of embalming. This suggests a more recent loss of familiarity with the dead which data in chapter five backs up. This is an obvious explanation for the sense-distorting operations that form the technical focus of this thesis (distorting the dead via embalming to resemble the living). Nevertheless the practice of restoring the dead with restorative art (an American concept) serves to make death (like beauty) a transitory state, which in contemporary appearance oriented society, is valued by some mourners (Foltyn 1993). Foltyn links the Egyptian idea of the connectedness of the state of body and soul with this more modern tendency, which reflects the natural/social body dichotomy. This does serve to remind one of the ongoing link between body and personality, even in the late Twentieth century rational England. Adams' (1991) work reflects this assumption that the soul/person has not finally "left the body", which thus means that the body is reacted to in a way different to truly inanimate objects.

However a very powerful image that has not, as yet, been analysed in the academic literature concerns the culturally approved death image, which regards the dead 'as if' they were in a dormant state. Death as sleep appears to reflect a deeply held "cultural truth" concerning the death process. Parkes (1972) suggests that this practice of making the dead appear 'life-like' or asleep (which he asserts is seen by critics as suggesting funeral directors are 'tricksters') may have value to the living because psychologically, physical and social death do not appear to take place simultaneously. This supports both the link between body & person and also the growing secular emphasis upon materialism. Death here is regarded as a process of cultural transition, which interlinks with Van Gennep's (1962) concept of the movement between life and true death. This concept can be used to explain the rationale underlying a great deal of world-wide mortuary ritual. Barley (1987) emphasises the constructed system funeral directors use to communicate the image of a peacefully sleeping person – in decor, furnishing and setting. This is all

part of the cultural coping mechanism employed to deal with death. Parkes' suggestion that funeral directors 'learn to treat the dead as if they were asleep' (1972:51) can be regarded as conforming to cultural attitudes which are obviously different to other discourse constructions. (This is not only a phenomenon limited to English culture: Firth (cited in Clark 1993) suggests that the sign of a good death for Hindu people is a peaceful expression). Although death as sleep could be interpreted as a sign of denial it is more properly regarded as an indicator of acceptance, by using terminology to render the concept more acceptable (Dumont & Foss 1972). Evidence supporting death as culturally derived sentiency is widespread, as the following paragraph explores.

Greenhill (1705), a rational surgeon, commented that the duty of the nearest relative was to close the eyes and mouth - the reasons he gave were those of common decency (a cultural construct), as the sight of a staring corpse was unpleasant. However Finucane (1982) mentioned the common Roman prayer (abbreviated to STTL) during the early centuries after Christ which indicated that the corpse was thought to be sleeping in the grave until the resurrection. (Frazer 1933 was an earlier academic who noted the religious origin of regarding death as sleep). Similarly the Greek for cemetery (Koimeterion) is translated as 'dormitory' and emphasises the concept of eventual resurrection which could be regarded as a form of 'sleep' – similar to the ancient Egyptians. Kastenbaum and Kastenbaum (1989) noted that from the thirteenth century onwards it was customary in many western cultures to dress the dead to resemble the sleeping figure. Similarly the Pazyryk of southern Siberia embalmed their dead, whom they considered to be asleep, several thousand years ago.

Quigley (1996) records that from the end of the middle ages artists closed the eyes to compare death to sleep suggesting that the use of padded coffins is again a reflection of the idea of the sleeping dead who therefore require appropriate comforts. Similarly Puckle (1926) records the use of candles to scare away evil spirits from the helpless sleeping corpse and the habits of talking softly in the presence of the dead as if they slept. From the perspective of sleep, the concept of a rowdy 'wake' which used to be prior to the funeral itself can be seen to reflect this idea of sleep – why else try to [a]wake[n] the dead? The religious background to sleeping death is also recalled in high church Christianity (Bocock

1974) on All Souls Day, Nov 2<sup>nd</sup> when the dead are remembered and God is asked to give them rest.

There are reasons for this ongoing sleeping death habit, an example above being the public image of Pope John Paul, who died late in March 2005. Palgi and Abramotvitch (1984) suggest that “sleeping death” allows mourners to initially avoid the brute



facts of death, although Wahl (cited in Feifel 1965) is critical of this ‘sleeping concept’, labeling this as ‘thanatophobia’ (fear of death). Lynch (1997), an American funeral director certainly supports this contention with his essays. Similarly Howarth (1992) reasons that death as sleep demonstrates contemporary command over death, because secular society regards the body as the site of self. This is strikingly similar to Hertz’s (1907) ideas of the similarity of soul/body states in less developed societies.

Raether (1989), an American funeral director, maintains that funeral directors believe that the dead must appear different compared to the dying who may be connected to machines which survey vital signs with a series of beeping and blinking monitors. Funeral directors feel (he asserts) that seeing the dead ‘restored’ and presenting a scenario in which the deceased appear to be at peace is apparently ‘a central thrust’ (1989:10) of funeral directors’ work. This itself reveals the implicit “camouflage” thesis of western coping mechanisms. Although Raether discusses American concepts, there is a suggestion (Parkes 1972, Adams 1991) that this is reflected in English practice. Although there is a fundamental public/private difference with reference to American and English viewing customs, there appears an underlying theme common to both, that of confrontation with the death. To assume that the British expect a hideous shock, or are indifferent to the state of the corpse, has as yet not been fully examined by other researchers.

## 1.5 Media images and physical changes at death

The disguising of the reality of death is by no means a modern phenomenon, being recorded by Scudamore (1944), an embalmer who wrote:

"Every attempt is made to restore the features to a more life-like conception, in order that the best possible impression can be created upon the bereaved relative".

(BIE news 1944:5)

This lack of contact appears to have been present for at least sixty years, which undermines the idea of a "recent" loss of contact that is suggested by writers such as Aries (1974), Jackson (1977) or Howarth (1992). Naylor (1989) similarly found that her sample expected embalming to enhance the appearance of the dead.

Here consideration of the sociology of the mass media (Gurevitch et al 1982) becomes useful as mass media shape opinions. Gerbner (1980) has suggested that controlling or concealing reality is an implicit function of the media and in addition, Walter (1991) has suggested that the whole aspect of death is problematic for many individuals in the media, which tends therefore to distort their representation of it. Quigley mentions that

We no longer witness the deaths of our loved ones in their beds, but watch the contrived deaths of actors from our own beds via network or cable television.

(1996:41)

TV death is not the same as real death, but the cultural construction that has now superceded reality suggests that it is. This can make viewing a badly fitting part of the social construction of death due to the physical changes in the corpse which media images fail to present. Thus knowledge of 'real' death is apparently comparatively rare compared to the 'front parlour' practice of old. An argument for embalming thus lies in hiding the obvious physical appearance changes that occur at death so that the dead appear more like their media images. It is necessary to outline these issues because the disguising actions of embalmers prevent these natural, physical changes from being detected, which is a major point of interest in the thesis.

So how do the dead look? Although an extreme case, Richardson (1985) produces a vivid word-picture about cholera victims. This disease was a swift killer after 'violent purgings and vomiting had caused rapid dehydration and loss of body salts, (entailing) visible physical shrinkage and rigid muscular cramps'

(1985:399). In many cases the body 'was stiff, blue and cold as marble'. This dramatic description explains the drastic difference between media images and real pictures of death which are (largely) culturally unacceptable. Naylor's (1989) description of the great efforts taken by embalmers to present the dead in an acceptable manner begins to be understandable. It is ironic that a book about the art of death (Jones 1967) should contain the best description and explanation of the lack of vascular circulation and the impact of this (and gravity) altering recognisable contours in the dead when lying in the prone position. Medical aspects such as 'facies hippocratica' (the look of death) which is discussed by some text books (e.g. Frederick & Strubb 1966) as being the facial condition that precedes death, are regarded as changing the appearance. It is here that the lack of cultural discourse contact with death is most obvious. "Natural" death appears to be as "pornographic" as Gorer (1965) suggested and a "softer" death (Naylor 1989) is actively sought out. This again reveals part of the socially constructed death image. Since the changes are so intimately bound up with viewing of the symbolic body-icon this should be described in full. Embalmers know that features (especially those supported by bone, for example the nose) gain more prominence as tissues surrounding them start to sag after death. Further physical changes in the body itself (shrinkage of skin, dehydration and evaporation) can materially alter the once-familiar features of the face. The issue that begs attention is why the appearance should then be altered, as familiar images are in fact unnatural and awful reality is in fact 'real'. This is a central question of the thesis.

If the physical changes at death are disguised, the opposite end of this spectrum, concerning media death images, is also problematic. The nature of the constructed images produces the problem that mourners have to overcome when actually confronted with 'authentically' dead relatives. Lewis (1961) commented that all reality is iconoclastic, (and the dead can be legitimately described as a form of mortuary icon, since they represent what is hoped to be the 'good' death of a 'sacred' person) but recognition of the dead appears to be a major problem with some of those who have been bereaved. Lewis found that mental images of the deceased become blurred (so do people therefore view to remind themselves of appearance?) but he described the corpse as a horror or a mockery. Parkes (1972) would have called this blurring of mental images a form of retrospective distortion (an idealised picture of the dead person, common after bereavement).

Changing the appearance of the dead is a cross-cultural practice. Pine (1969) relates how Malinowski, Firth, Mead and others mention how survivors tend to transform the appearance of the dead body. Pine, himself an American funeral director, suggests that this is likely to stem from the 'unhuman appearance of most bodies immediately after death' (1969:51). Techniques exist, he asserts, to ease the process of 'viewing the dead in some culturally proper condition' (1969:51). Most individuals ignorant of death can only rely upon the media for information about death appearances which inevitably produces a distorted image of death (and violence) according to Gerbner (1980). Waugh (1948) referred to this whilst engaged in satire, that the body in death often looks smaller due to its being 'stripped of the thick pelt of mobility and intelligence' (1948:61).

### **1.6 The procedure.**

Why is embalming necessary, one could ask. Adams suggested that laying-out was a 'final expression of [nursing] care for the patient' (1991:2) - this notion of care has also permeated embalming practice; embalmers now 'take care of' the body. Funeral personnel reasons for embalming, besides preservation, encompass the transformatory aspect of embalming technique. This is not necessarily a product of modern death-denying society, although Aries (1974) suggests that the definitive difference between living and dead is blurred by embalming. Embalmers stress (Naylor (1989) asserts) that they are not involved in the denial of death, but protection from unnecessary shock, illustrating the constructed nature of the body after death. It is unfortunate that the only description available for the techniques of *contemporary* preservative practice is the problematic phrase 'embalming'. This global term encompasses 'natural' drying techniques, the ancient techniques of mummification, whether natural or artificial, including the artificial medieval processes of evisceration and 'pickling', as well as contemporary preservation practices based upon arterial chemical application. The phrase 'embalming' has also been wrongly used to describe cryogenic (freezing for eventual re-awakening) practices.

Greenhill suggested that embalming would prevent the otherwise 'offensive smell of the dead' (1702:25). Drury (1994) documents the use of aromatic herbs and strongly scented flowers to hide the odour of decay in times well past. Chamberlain and Richardson (1983) on the basis of their aged respondents



suggest that laying-out done properly would prevent any seepage from the decomposing body in transit to the grave. They assert that laying out was crucially important for the correct observance of other funeral customs - embalming has overtaken this task. Although evidence is scarce and Howarth (1992) suggests that both sides of the laying-out debate have a vested interest in retaining some control, the thoughts of at least one nursing lecturer (conversation of 20-3-95) at the Nightingale Institute (St Thomas' and Guys' Hospital) were that the laying-out process was not taught in all nursing institutes, possibly due to heightened concern for blood-borne diseases. The concerns of the funeral industry assess the need to 'sanitise' the dead (Chrichton 1976, Howarth 1992). Young and Healing (1995) comment that failure to embalm known infectious cases constitutes discrimination – which produces a problematic situation for embalmers.

What is not discussed in embalming journals is the actual techniques involved, purely, one must hypothesise, due to the taken-for-grantedness of embalming. After all, everyone involved in funerals must surely know something about embalming! Embalming could be described as a cross between a blood transfusion (which one presumes is relatively easy to visualise) and the procedure known as 'liposuction', illustrated below.

This illustration, taken from a women's magazine, while showing this fat-reducing technique, bears striking resemblance to part of the embalming procedure. The 'beautifying' aspect of the procedure could also well apply in that a socially approved body contour is the goal of both procedures. There is inevitably a bureaucratic delay between death and



embalming. The registrar's certificate is needed before treatment can commence. Unfortunately for those opting disposal by cremation (75% of all English funerals) a further double set of cremation forms signed by the attending physician and a second senior doctor are required.

Embalming is essentially a 'hands on' technique. It is not a process that can be learnt by bookwork alone, but it is a labour intensive, arduous and specialised process, which Howarth describes as an 'operation executed with skill and

precision' (1992:318). Bocock (1974) recounts that the dead in most, if not all, human societies are impure, polluting objects. People who handle the actual corpse, he says, usually have less prestige than those who perform rites around them. Smale (1985) thus sees funeral directors using embalmers as a distancing technique for the otherwise 'profane and frightening aspects of funeral work' (1985:445), a sentiment that is also corroborated by Naylor (1989).

### **1.7 The embalming room.**

Around the country embalmers work every day, in a similar manner. Where I have observed, within the embalmers' areas are seven people, but only four of them are alive. The embalmers are dressed in washable two piece outfits and work in a plain and clean but brightly lit room. Today Jenny, Donna and Kevin are busy and I am a spectator. Although only 25, Jenny is the senior qualified embalmer and confidently oversees the manipulation of instruments and fluids. The room is furnished with the minimum of equipment so that thorough cleaning of the work environment is easier. Apart from equipment trolleys and gurneys (wheeled tables that the dead lie on) the only other equipment comprises stainless steel sinks, sluices, hoists and a clinical waste bin.

One does not rush at embalming, it is necessary to appraise the subject prior to engaging in the procedure. Is there any evidence of poor circulation? (swollenness, gangrene, discolouration etc), are any other physical problems apparent? (oedema [watery accumulations also known as 'dropsy'], tissue gas, jaundice, deformities etc). One must also take into account the time of year and the timescale to the funeral. Hot and humid periods in July and cool days in February demand very different approaches. Miscalculating the fundamentals risks a bungled procedure.

Contemporary embalming text-books explain the process of arterial embalming as revolving around the use of the arterial system to convey a disinfecting preservative solution, coupled with the use of the venous system to assist in the draining of venous blood and other fluids in tandem with the injection phase. Prior to commencing injection, the operator must select his fluid and its strength accordingly. One fluid is known as an arterial fluid, it is used in diluted form and is a pinkish colour when diluted, it is injected into the arteries and eventually (via

capillary action) it is diffused into the tissue bed of the subject where the aldehyde constituent reacts with the tissues to form insoluble substances which retard decomposition for a variable period. Circumstance may dictate at what strength the fluid is used. Too weak a solution runs the risk of embalming failure and thus putrefaction. Too strong a solution tempts over dehydration and excessive rigidity. The middle path, appropriate to the disease in question, is the wisest to choose.

The operator now has to select and locate the most appropriate vessel. There are several anatomically distinct areas where major vessels are superficial (pass near the surface) and this knowledge enables the raising of the vessel without undue effort ... given that one is aware of the location and experienced enough to find the vessel within it. Thus the femoral (leg) artery passes through an area known as 'Scarpa's triangle', close to the surface at the upper, inner aspect of the thigh. Similarly the brachial (arm) artery lies in a distinct groove between the biceps and triceps muscles on the inner aspect of the upper arm; the axillary (arm pit) artery runs through the mid area of the axillary space. The carotid (neck) artery is similarly superficial in places and again with the appropriate anatomical knowledge of local landmarks, is not difficult to find and raise.

Having raised the artery and vein the operator is then required to prepare his subject to conform to cultural images of death. The operator will close the eyes and mouth, break up rigor mortis (death stiffening) for two reasons - to reduce the acidic condition of the subject (embalming fluids are aldehydes and work best in situations favourable to their pH) and also to manoeuvre the subject into a more (culturally prescribed) 'natural' and 'comfortable' position.

Under normal circumstances the injection phase can occupy anything from twenty to forty minutes or more. During this period, the operator is engaged in detecting the passage of preservative fluid - subtle changes in colour and contour, mottling and breaking up of areas of congested purple coloured stagnant blood and rehydrating of superficial areas that have been dehydrated by the cooling action of refrigeration.

Towards the end of the injection phase (if no problems occur) the operator has to consider the aspect of drainage of congested blood (welling up in the venous system) from a vein. In this manner a complete circulation from arteries, through capillaries and circulating back through the venous system (and drained away) can enable the operator to saturate all the tissues of the body (again if no problems

occur). The exact time of drainage depends on the subject at hand: the operator's judgement is necessary. Too early in the injection phase and the operator will experience little return; too late in the procedure and the risk of swelling and reflushing (a staining in the tissues) may occur. Constant monitoring by the operator is necessary - embalming is necessarily a labour intensive procedure involving a one-to-one relationship of operator and subject. The concluding phase of the embalming operation entails the use of a hollow needle (connected to a vacuum pump to create negative pressure or suction) to tap and explore internal organs and thus remove as much extraneous fluid as possible. Once this has been accomplished then injection of stronger cavity fluid will kill any micro-organisms in the bowels. The operator must finish by suturing up any incision, shave if necessary and make sure that the final presentation is as it should be.

However after autopsy the procedure for embalming is radically different and the embalmer will literally reconstruct the body. As the autopsy entails the removal either in part or full of thoracic, abdominal and cranial organs, the circulating system is obviously interrupted. It is necessary to locate and inject from the severed iliac, axillary and carotid branches located within the abdomino-thoracic cavity at the point of excision during autopsy. The frequency of autopsies reveals the growing extent of state investigation into the deaths of its constituent members and the concept of the body as a machine to be examined in the event of its failure.

### **1.8 Coping with embalming.**

How does one deal with the institutional problems of being the embalmer and representing the correct social construction of the dead? Parry's discussion (cited in Bloch & Parry 1982) of the Hindu Aghori ascetic who occupies a strongly liminal aspect of Hindu life (awed and venerated but feared and loathed) has a faint echo in the location of the embalmer in the death system. Saunders (1991) highlights the issue of stigma and embalming 'death workers', he discusses the system of occupational ideologies of the embalming occupation. He sees the ideology as being the system of beliefs, values and stereotypes which function to interpret the work in such a manner that its importance will be enhanced in the eyes of its members and a significant group of the public. Saunders suggests that these

ideologies can be parochial (limited to the occupation) and contain myths and rationales for the disquieting circumstances in which members of the occupation find themselves. They function to protect insiders regarding justification & discipline and contribute to the self-respect of the incumbents. Embalmers have much to deal with. Chamberlain & Richardson (1993) (and Morley 1971) reported that Nineteenth century layers-out women were gradually demeaned due to their contact with the unclean corpse. Similarly Lloyd Warner (cited in Fulton 1965) noted that the embalmer was ritually unclean. Gorer's (1965) insulation from death thesis arises within this idea of the contaminating aspects of death - funeral directors thus arose to service a basic need (but they have subcontracted the unclean parts to embalmers). Porter (1968) commented upon funeral directors' use of their premises as a tool for greater control. So as the embalmer works within the other's premises, he is subjugated by this control.

Charmaz (1980) asserts that death work is managed by minimising, hiding, flaunting or acknowledging death; deathworkers handle their situation by routinising their work so as to separate it from themselves and so 'manage' (and distance) the kinds of issues that death might raise at work. A well-used technique is the use of sophisticated occupational argot to focus on the procedures and equipment and the biological (not culturally mediated) body which also mimics the other powerful group who manipulate the physical body - the medical profession. Charmaz is critical of the interpretation of Aries (1974) that embalming is equated with death denial. She argues that the clean-looking and smelling death is more appealing - something that Naylor (1989) found in her examination of northern embalmers - which is reflected by the responses of mourners to viewing. But however well embalmed dead people are, they are nevertheless still very dead and profane. Within the funeral company Charmaz (1980) found that routinising death (separation of physical setting and of workers who commonly handle the dead from other workers, removal of the dead from ordinary settings) made it more comfortable to handle. She calls these 'self protection strategies' to control interaction. Similarly Howarth (cited in Clark 1994) saw the distancing and dehumanising aspects (regarding the dead as a commodity, relegation to the back regions and use of argot) as the means whereby one coped with the dead and negated the distressing aspects of death work, thereby demarcating the profane from the sacred.

Embalmers' training typically covers two or three years. Anspach (1987) asserts that knowledge based on scientific rationality is valued higher than that based on practical experience and personal knowledge, a statement which backs up the emphasis on complicated theory and practical training, originally initiated after the 1902 Midwives Act a century ago. The emphasis on educational and technical qualification, even at the present levels, can be seen as a method of dealing with stigma by (and in) the funeral industry - stigma that is probably related to the proximity of embalmers to death but also of embalmers to manual work. Paradoxically this is echoed in surgical history. Richardson (1985) reports that in 1834 Sir Henry Hallard, President of the Royal College of Physicians thought that to associate physicians with manual operations like surgery and midwifery 'would rather disparage the highest grade of the profession' (1985:77). A reason why funeral directors tend to avoid this aspect of the occupation may well be that they wish to avoid the profane associations concerning close contact with the dead.

This provides a rationale for embalmers and embalming as they deal with the profane dead instead of funeral directors and enable mourners ways to cope with the reality of death in culturally appropriate ways.

## **1.9 Overview**

The roots of this thesis concern the differing pictures of death that are prevalent within contemporary mainstream English culture. An impetus to proceed concerned the efforts of other academics involved with death who present a blurred 'snap-shot' of the occupation and (I thought) thereby presented a flawed picture of deathworkers. The significance of embalming, I thought, had been overlooked in the constructed social situation that enables contemporary mourners to cope with the fact of death. One method that I explore examines the habit of regarding death as a form of sleep.

Writers about grief, such as Hinton (1967) regard death as a process and the progression of the peaceful corpse through this process involves several rituals such as 'the last look' and other 'front parlour' rituals which have now been transferred (Jupp 1990) to the funeral chapel of rest. Confrontation with the dead appears an age-old ritual.

Unfortunately media images of death and the natural physical changes associated with death exert polar-opposite influence upon mourners. This is where the crucial importance of the embalming process becomes significant, enabling 'real' death to approximate media images of death.

The process whereby this situation has arisen is explored in the following chapter, which traces a pattern through history regarding the embalming process and ultimately explores the growth of the process through the Twentieth century.

## Chapter 2 HISTORY OF EMBALMING

Embalming is a technique of major interest to the sociology of the body because it represents what is accomplished by different cultures in coping with the reality of death. Embalming can be regarded as rendering the body socio-culturally acceptable. These socio-cultural meanings have varied over time. The history of embalming has been affected by the dominant social discourses of the day which have evolved around religious and latterly medical foci. Nevertheless the historical relationship between preserved and present bodies and funeral rituals, as Van Gennep (1907) has commented, can be seen in the use of embalming and the social construction of the corpse. Consequently the chapter is in several parts, which deal with historical embalming practice where evidence for it is found. These major examples of embalming will be explored as they illustrate the changing relationships between the body and the soul as the different meanings of embalming reflect the changing meanings of the body.

The first part looks at religious discourses associated with the practice of embalming in historical cultures, focussing upon Egypt and also in early England.

The second part looks at evidence concerning religious discourses being overtaken by medical discourses associated with the embalming process in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth centuries, which suggests that embalming was appropriated by the nascent medical profession.

Part three concerns the advent of contemporary embalming techniques (ie arterial embalming) and the impact of battlefield embalmers such as Holmes or Burr on the American public in the American civil war. These and other embalmers treated prominent dead Union officers and President Lincoln, in the conflict documented from 1861-5, whose bodies were transported back to their Northern American home towns.

Part four concerns modern embalming and the sanitation of living bodies, as the initial impetus for embalming became associated with the hygienist approach to health in general. This focus upon hygienism is as relevant to contemporary debates as it was in 1930, indeed evidence to support such an approach only became



available in the 1960s and onwards. Continuing this concern with hygiene, this chapter explores the corporate body which governs the social construction of the contemporary corpse: the British Institute of Embalmers (BIE).

The decline in public discourse concerning death identified by Aries (1981), Giddens (1991), Gorer (1965) etc, starting in the nineteen-thirties, it will be argued, has led to the hiding of the rationale for embalming procedures from the public view. Additionally embalmers have become, by their actions, 'self camouflaging' as they conceal their presence by their craft. Consequently when embalming is considered at all it is considered within the dominant discourses concerning consumerism and the presentation of youthful body images.

A number of sources were consulted to produce the information in this chapter. Primary sources from the private collection of the Hunterian Institute, Royal College of Surgeons of England, the house journal of the BIE and internal membership lists produced much fine, first hand information. Similarly personal copies of Greenhill (1703) and late nineteenth century American embalming textbooks contributed some of the raw information also referred to here. A number of references appear concerning Gore 1993, which was a local oral history study of elderly funeral directors who worked between the period 1925 – 1993. Their primary experiences and customs and their comments upon social conditions they experienced formed the focus of a separate research study.

## **2.1. Religious discourses and embalming.**

The practice of transforming the dead is documented by many sources such as Pine (1969) and Grainger (1988), possibly originating with evisceratory (organ removing) techniques in ancient Ethiopia (Dobson (1953)). Greenhill (1705) lists the anointing practices of the Babylonians, who then immersed their dead in honey; the Persians used a similar process but substituted wax for honey. Greenhill (1705:270-90) recorded some of the constituents of these preservatives: saït, nitre, asphalt, bitumen, cedar, balsam, gypsum, lime, petrole, naphtha, turpentine etcetera. The critic, Phipps (1987), also notes that in biblical times (in obviously hot, arid countries)

simple corpse treatment with wrapping or shrouding and anointing or application of aromatic spices followed by rapid burial was the norm. A common theme to all these sources is the relationship between the preserved body present at the funeral, the funeral rituals performed around it and the employment of embalming as producing the statement of continuity between the dead ruler and the new ruler, so producing an unbroken transmission of the kingly state.

The significance of embalming and the royal corpse was obvious. The combining of state and other discourses (e.g. religion) was a potent and common feature of virtually all cultures' methods of social control. So embalming enabled a state of continuity to be maintained via the embalmed body. Arguably the best example of state backed 'religious embalming' concerns Egypt, although many ancient cultures used bodily preservation in religious practices (such as the Assyrians, the Scythians, the Pazyryk in the Altai mountains of southern Siberia 2,500 years ago and according to Douglas (1997), the Chinchorro people of ancient Chile as early as 5000 BC). The connection between this world and the next, and the legitimation of the current ruler, was maintained by the religious system using at death, the symbolically whole royal corpse. Adam (1990) describes this State influence as a preoccupation with eternity; royal tombs were temples for the worship of the deceased pharaoh, because the concept of permanence dominated the architecture of ancient Egypt. The state/religious belief in the unity of the pharaoh and his nation meant that future state prosperity depended upon the pharaoh's continued existence in the after-life, which itself depended on having an intact and recognisable body for future use. The body therefore was highly significant and its appearance was highly ritualised in the old Kingdom - the inner sarcophagus was painted in stylised pictograms depicting the pharaoh as Osiris, king of the underworld and the dead (Manniche 1987), a habit dictated by religious practice. Embalming was an obvious religious requirement (but intertwined with state needs) to assist individuals in the afterlife, but it also had an eminently practical basis - it was necessary to Egyptian mythological belief to have an intact body (known as the *Xa*, plus the *Xu*-intelligence and *Ba*-soul) for the *Ka* (spirit) to recognize (Ewada 2004). Kastenbaum and Kastenbaum (1989) suggest that the mummy served as a kind of 'bait' for the

psychic parts of the person (Ka, Ba and Xu). The condition of the corpse was therefore critical and this was reflected in highly organised mortuary practices.

Techniques for preserving the dead were practised by Egyptian priests, with a division of labour into Parichistes (those who apparently performed the physical part of the procedure) and embalmer-priests (Taricheutes) who recited the necessary magical incantations during the procedures. Due to the centuries embraced by Egyptian mortuary practices, a general overview, ignoring the changes from period to period will be produced. The (older) reports [all contained in Mayer 1990] of Herodotus (484 BC) and Diodorus Siculus (45 BC) are generally regarded as more trustworthy than the later writings of Plutarch (approx AD 50-100) or Perphry (approx AD 230-300), as they appear to reflect a more scholarly, contemporary and accurate record. Anubis, the overseeing Egyptian jackal-headed god of cemeteries and embalming was intimately involved with the important process of preservation of the body (Xa) to allow the survival of the Ka which was located in the heart. With other key elements of personhood (Ba and Akh or Xu) this enabled the socially constructed dead person to exist in the afterworld (El Mahdy 1991). In Egyptian times the one who made the incision with an aethiopic stone, the Parichistor, thus ritually harming the dead, was ritually chased away and pursued by those casting stones at him, according to Greenhill, (1705:243) 'cursing him, thereby turning all the execrations which they imagine due to his office, upon him'. Egyptian embalming procedures, which were complicated, costly and thorough, account for the extreme durability of the preserved end result and were intimately concerned with the social construction of the corpse. A brief resume of the practice follows:

- 1) **drying** in Natron (a natural [solid, not fluid] mixture of sodium carbonate and bicarbonate),
- 2) **evisceration** (soft organ removal and treatment),
- 3) **treatment** of the cavities,
- 4) **bandaging** and resin application.

Putnam [1993] observes that Natron absorbs water, dissolves body fats and is a mild antiseptic, killing destructive bacteria. Near hermetic sealing within various sarcophagi concluded the process.

However cheaper and less effective variations 'could be substituted, we are informed by Herodotus (484 BC, a much later Greek writer). The bodies of the poor were subjected to less careful or thorough methods and are less likely to have survived. (This is in addition to the Victorian penchant for mummy unwrapping (for example Davidson's lecture at the Royal Institution in 1833) and the Victorian practice of burning mummies for fuel). The religious-based rationale for body treatment can be clearly detected here and is also common to the treatment of the royal corpse in Early modern England, since in both cases the Royal corpse was a necessary element, although the underlying religious conceptions produced major differences in practice. So let us turn now to early English embalming.

Kastenbaum and Kastenbaum (1989) suggest that there were occasional applications of Egyptian-based techniques to the great dead of Europe such as Charlemagne (814) and William the Conqueror (1087), since the more preserved the corpse was, the more holy or acceptable he or she was. Litten (1988) suggested that Egyptian techniques may have been spread with the Twelfth Century crusades, whereas Huntington and Metcalfe (1979) suggested a process of information 'diffusion' publicised these techniques. But from its heyday in Egypt the techniques of embalming (by dehydration and evisceration) went into decline until the American revival (Wilkins 1992), due to the different emphasis of Christianity in relation to the body, which meant Egyptian rationales for bodily preservation would decline. Finucane (1982) emphasised the metaphorical link of body and soul, which illustrated the religious discourse still underpinning bodily preservation rationales during this period. An excellent example of natural preservations concerns Bede's account (Marsden 1989) of the exhumation of St. Cuthbert in 698 AD (in good condition) probably due to good hermetic sealing within the stone sarcophagus. Bede noted Cuthbert's uncorrupted body as evidence of his saintliness and this can be regarded as evidence of religious concern regarding the body, which was not, however necessarily expressed through preservation practices. Embalming itself had been overlain, but the condition of the body was still of significance.

After a void in evidence of four hundred years, which itself suggests a declining significance of the body, Gittings (1984) produces some medieval and early English

embalming accounts which were as effective but expensive. Evidence suggests it was possible to preserve reasonably well, but the commonly used technique was either that of 'pickling' (Litten 1991) in preserving solution encased in a leaden shell or that of evisceration (Gittings 1984). Dismemberment of the body to remove bones and soak the remainder in wines or aromatics can be regarded as an 'emergency' treatment confined to battlefield casualties and distant deaths which enabled transport home of vital parts (Litten 1988). This had a faintly religious reason to it – burial in England of significant parts of the mortal body, confirms the significance of the body to funeral rites of the time. Surviving examples are invariably the bodies of royalty and nobility, the results of which were not always successful. Dobson (1953) records the five hundred year perfect preservation of King Edward I (d 1307), although Litten (1991) records the dismal failure of the attempt on Henry I (d 1135). Litten (1991) mentions the trauma that the body had to undergo during medieval embalming:

**The Medieval embalming process.**

- 1) **spurging** (washing)
- 2) **cleansing** (emptying of the bowels and plugging the rectum)
- 3) **bowelling** (removal of the intestines)
- 4) **searing** (cauterising of the torn cavity blood vessels),
- 5) **dressings** (the application of a resin mixture in volatile oils),
- 6) **furnishing** (wrapping the corpse in cerecloth).

The lack of apparent pattern between success and failure suggests that any embalming techniques were more of a hit-and-miss experimental method, probably instituted by apothecaries and similar pseudo-medics. (Henceforth all doctors, surgeons, apothecaries and others of similar occupations will be described as medics). The variability of result suggests that the underlying rationale was not uniform – the social construction of embalming was altering. There was still preoccupation concerning the body but this became expressed through simpler techniques. The sole use of honey to immerse was known in the time of Alexander the Great (suggesting that the Egyptian process had been forgotten on a wide scale) and the use of 'pickling brine' with no additional treatment for Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester in 1447 (Litten 1991) are good examples of these simple techniques.

This sort of evidence suggests that the role of the corpse had dwindled in funeral ritual by the later medieval period. The religious-based rationale for body preservation was being overtaken by a political, State-based need, as explained below. These changes introduced other reasons for embalming the corpse.

For the nobility, by medieval times, an external representation of the body on the tomb became an important and more durable reminder of the body and the noble lineage it represented (Llewellyn 1991). Evidence from historians such as Gittings (1984), however, suggests that this was a social change and not a religious change. It is clear that religious rationales for bodily treatment had receded. The natural body was elaborately prepared (compared to the poor) but was not evidently expected to be forever completely intact, unlike Egyptian practice. There was, however, an additional underlying secular reason for embalming attempts. Gittings (1984) argued that the early modern period (circa sixteenth century) with the dawning of the age of reason was characterised by an increasing anxiety over *personal*, individual death. The dwindling by modern standards of gruesome death illustrations and growing unease at the prospect of decomposition led to coffining & 'encouraged the craft of the embalmer' (1984:13), which reflects an altogether more modern and familiar theme. The concern with the condition of the dead (taken by individuals about individuals as opposed to concern by state officials only with the Kingly body) marks a distinct change in the values of society in the early middle ages.

The body was still needed for certain state functions (an effigy being a less suitable substitute), but medieval embalming enabled secular obsequies to be accomplished with the body present, which are explained below. This could be regarded as the point at which other discourses start to invade the area once solely the domain of religion. The need for the embalmer was apparent when marshalling all that was needed for a 'suitable' funeral for the nobility and royalty (Litten 1991), a process that was time consuming. Non-religious reasons for embalming gradually assumed more prominence. The presence on the state funeral of the Kingly body (and in a similar way, the noble body on other heraldic funerals) conveyed certain authenticating value to the claim of the new royal or noble pretender, thus adding a social dimension to whatever religious value preservation of the body may well have

had. Then, as now, a 'proper' funeral required the presence of the body to enable it to have its fullest meaning. For the passing-on of state control, the body was a crucial prop in the drama of civil transition, as the symbol of state control and government. The presence of the dead King legitimated the claim of the successor in the intertwining of church and state. This explains the numerous accounts of preservation failures that are recorded by historians such as Gittings. The overwhelming aroma of the corrupting body could not be overlooked and was thus critically noted by contemporaries. There were also secular (state) reasons for the dwindling of post-death practices. White (cited in Litten 1991) suggested that the decline in embalming may reflect 'transitional funerary modes in fifteenth century England' (1991:39) such as the dwindling social value of the heraldic funeral. If religious and secular reasons had declined, it seemed inevitable that the process itself should also decline. Evidence suggests that major discourse control over the body was shifting – so the rationale and practice of preservation altered, reflecting this. Religious reasons had receded which allowed alternative rationales to invade the 'social vacancy' thus created.

By medieval times, religious backing regarding "medical" links with clerical embalming was withdrawn – this construction was no longer valid. Henceforth spiritual men concerned themselves with the soul, secular men with the body. Pope Boniface VIII in 1299 prohibited, on pain of excommunication, any dismemberment of the dead (Wilkins 1992) as this was now contrary to Christian beliefs, (which also explained the eclipse of Egyptian techniques in the first few centuries AD). This also perhaps marks the initial division of the 'priestly apothecaries' into the cleric and medic, since the monk could now no longer legally perform both functions. Concern with the physical body was now left to natural processes or in the hands of the nascent medical profession which thus 'paved the way' for later medical involvement with the body. Powerful religious discourses had abandoned the body, but the nascent medical profession grasped this opportunity as a method of status enhancement. According to Litten (1991), medieval embalming was usually reserved for royalty and the nobility, (although the process was an option for the rich - (Litten 1988) but by the fifteenth century (Gittings 1984) it had become simply

a matter of social prestige and snobbery. It had assumed secular (not religious) motives which again underlines the evolution of a new social construction. As Finucane (1982) recorded, changes in social assumptions affected the way that the living envisaged their dead. Embalming had acquired value in secular terms concerning inferred social status of the dead which enabled odour-free obsequies...if the technique was successful. Evidence of its success suggests that this opened the way for medical claims to both pre-mortem and post-death treatment, as we shall see, which can be interpreted as a method of medical status-enhancement by asserting control over the body.

## **2.2 Medical discourses and embalming.**

Early modern efforts at preservation (Edward I 1307) and later examples (such as the Duke of Gloucester 1447) indicate the presence of early medics at the death, who were involved in basic acts concerning the corpse. Their actions had scant religious significance but heralded the rise of medical involvement with the body which was designed to bolster the early professionalising aspirations of surgeons and physicians. But this does not mean that religious constructions had disappeared. Illich (1976) comments that by the Sixteenth century the corpse had become more of an object and evidence regarding this concerns its growing use as a teaching aid via dissection. This also needs to be viewed within the growing tension regarding individualism – which led to a greater anxiety over death (Gittings 1984). The earlier middle ages saw a dwindling of the use of charnel houses and preference for individual graves predominated. Paradoxically changes at the reformation (Llewellyn 1991) meant that the condition of the body was now one of the few signs left to Protestants concerning how the soul might be judged. But artificially altering the state of the body could not influence theological judgement. For clearer evidence, we need to proceed to the Eighteenth century (since more accounts from there survive) but I shall use earlier evidence as a ‘back drop’ to that period.

By the Eighteenth century, the exploration of the body in medical terms was becoming more prevalent and reflected the increasingly rigorous attempts by secular barber-surgeons to claim the body as the domain of “physic and medicine”. Litten



(1988) commented that Eighteenth century preservation experiments were directed more towards mummification than to hygienic treatment; it is the focus upon the experimental, medical element that reveals the social usage of the body by Barber-Surgeons between 1300 – 1800 in their moves to acquire greater social influence. Explanations of medical technique appeared to be the focal point of surviving later accounts; there appeared to be no religious underpinning of the surgeons' efforts. From here on the medical (state bounded) discourse was to start to have far more influence over the body than religious discourses, due to the intertwining of medicine and state for purposes of growing urban control. For example the office of the (state appointed) coroner had by this time acquired a certain permanence as a means to monitoring violent death (Broderick 1978). Rational examination of the bodies of criminals was an explicit blow against the religious prospect of literal resurrection, so the separation of religious and medical conceptions of the body was by this time quite apparent. The need for a well preserved corpse for obsequies was dwindling, (as the need for elaborate heraldic funerals was, by this time, declining) but its retention for examination by state officials such as the coroner meant that regulation of the body in death was becoming an important goal of state officials. It is clear that the elements mapping social construction had shifted radically. Gittings (1984) suggested the decline of embalming could also be attributed to the distaste of the nobility for the process - not surprising as it was graphically referred to as 'ripping the corpse' (Litten 1991:43), but this distaste also reflected a diminishing social hold of religion over bodily practices concerned with eternal preservation. Eighteenth century embalming had a far more secular rationale than religious belief.

Medical attention paid to the body reflected the growing machinations of a new breed of individuals who were skilled in secular and not religious practices. From being ranked alongside tradesmen during the English civil war in the 1640s, the College of Surgeons had ascended to far greater things. In a remarkable transition, the lowly barber-surgeon (well below the status of physician and apothecary) had risen to a position of increasing prestige. The company of surgeons had separated themselves from their traditional link with barbers in 1745. Saunders (1991) suggests that embalming took off in France circa 1760, when enlightenment-based

comments criticised the unhealthy odours emanating from graves. Concern for the soul but disregard for the body was a charge leveled at the church. Status enhancing justifications for preservation were made by surgeons (which are explored below) to establish a legitimate claim to the body. Greenhill's (1705) published account is an excellent example of the aspirations of the surgeons of the early Eighteenth century, barely fifty years after the primitive era of the civil war surgeons (who also acted as barbers and teeth pullers), but forty years before the official separation from the barbers. Greenhill's text illustrates perfectly the complete separation of medic and cleric, as well as the enthusiastic justifications for the work of the surgeons in preservation. It is powerful evidence of the commitment of the surgeons regarding control of the body, aimed (judging from its list of sponsors) at a select and influential audience of the upper class. As an account of Eighteenth century surgical machinations it is a unique and fertile work which reflects the aspirations of Greenhill and his fellow surgeons.

In an effort to convince competing discourses of the authenticity of their claim, the nascent medics had to demonstrate their competence through claims to improve the 'social good'. The lack of religious arguments indicates the decline of religious concern with the body. These claims are couched in medical language of the day: 'pestilence and disease control, to conquer plague and odour' (Greenhill 1705:120). As a pawn in the strategy of status enhancement, the body had a useful part to play for medics. It was the newly found view of the rational science of anatomy which betrayed a profoundly different social construction of the corpse. Dobson (1953) saw the need to preserve anatomical subjects for dissection as giving impetus to Eighteenth century techniques. It was important to the study of anatomy to be able to study the preserved body as a 'machine'. This growing interest in anatomy illustrated the post-enlightenment interest in rational science, at the expense of religious belief. Greenhill (1705) used this argument of rational utility to support his claim for more embalming, so that anatomists could learn without being 'hindered by any offensive odour or contaminating cruor' (1705:3). Although Greenhill used both religious arguments - the corpse being able 'to raise fresh and clean at the resurrection' (1705:60) (the whole of his first section having dealt with biblical

embalming precedent and justification), and medical arguments - embalming would prevent being buried alive (!!), it is clear that the chief use of this art was to be in anatomical preparation. The technique itself reflected growing anatomical knowledge. The Hunter brothers, working at a similar time, preserved by vascular (blood vessels) injection of turpentine, Dutch physicians used wine-based preservatives (Kastenbaum & Kastenbaum (1989). Religious reasons had been consigned to a secondary, "backing up" position.

Litten (1988) regarded John Hunter as a medical scientist with an interest in the arrest of decomposition; some of his subjects were still in existence one hundred years later, such as Maria Van Butchell who was treated in 1775. The glowing reports of the preservation accounts demonstrate how well the gentlemen surgeons of the early Eighteenth century had consolidated their social position. The passage below gained from manuscripts in the Royal College of Surgeons of London Library (summarized) explains Hunter's technique:

#### **Hunter's embalming method 1775.**

Eighteenth and Nineteenth century techniques illustrate an intermediary phase in embalming that started with arterial injection but concluded with evisceration (organ removal). Thus Hunter and Cruikshanks embalmed Maria Van Butchell by initially 'injecting the arteries and veins with a solution of turpentine and vermilion'. This was not to be a parsimonious process. Injection was only to finish upon 'extravasation to every part of the body till all the flesh swell'. A period of several hours was to elapse before the viscera were removed and 'press'd out into a very little bulk', Hunter recommending [44] that 'the more blood is press'd out the better'. The bladder and rectum were to be emptied, all operations 'being performed with great care'. Hunter admonished his students in his lecture notes to 'instead of being only ten minutes about this process you must be half an hour or an hour about it'. After further washing in spirits of wine and a second injection of the body, the viscera (body organs) were replaced in the cavities with a mixture of camphor, nitre and resin. The subject was then placed in a box half full of plaster of paris, which would absorb body moisture and aid preservation - in much the same way as the ancient Egyptians, centuries before.

Hunter, J 1776

Hunter's notes and those of his contemporaries are carefully consigned within the surgeons' library in London to the historical section - this was clearly a transitory phase.

Hunter's description plainly regards the body as an object to be manipulated, not a symbolic container for the soul. The soul had become divorced from the body in the same manner that medic and cleric had diverged, although Richardson (1985) commented on the ongoing belief in the link of body and soul after death for a period of time in popular belief. Paradoxically Howarth (1992) chose to emphasise the abolition of purgatory, the closure of old churchyards and the 1837 Registration Act to emphasise the growing distance between the living and the dead. So it appears balanced to say that the link between body and soul was weakened (but not completely separated) which widened the social distinction between the living and the dead. What is apparent here is the growing tendency to commodify the body (Laqueur 1983) for example the 1832 Anatomy Act. As funerals became larger public spectacles (for example that of the Duke of Wellington, the largest Nineteenth century funeral) Laqueur noted the growth of the body as an article of commerce, which again illustrated the decline of the religious-based concept of the link of body and soul. It became fashionable to embalm and the body was thus subjected to the best efforts of the surgeons for no particular religious reasons. White, who preserved Miss Hannah Beswick in 1758 (known as the 'Manchester Mummy') probably used a similar technique to Hunter's. Sheldon in 1774 similarly embalmed the body of a Miss Johnson and I reproduce summary:

**Sheldon's technique 1774 upon Miss Johnson.**

Sheldon embalmed by injecting through the carotid arteries 'strong spirits of wine saturated with camphor and mixed with a small quantity of turpentine'. The skin was prepared and tanned with finely powdered alum (a technique used in modern taxidermy) rubbed in by hand [45]. The intestines were taken out and covered with a varnish composed of camphor mixed with resin.

Dorratt (1871)

Originally these procedures would have been carried out by surgeon embalmers such as William and John Hunter, White, Cruikshanks, Howe, Doratt, Baillie, and other (now unknown) members of the medical profession. Bronfen (1992) would gauge much significance from the surviving examples, which all concerned women, which articulate the link between femininity and Eighteenth century anxieties concerning death, which are reflected in masculine manipulation of the feminine dead body.

What can be found to account for this successful commandeering by secular gentlemen surgeons of (amongst other things) embalming? A broad view appears to encompass the imperialism of the era, at a time when British interests around the globe were expanding. As agents of state control, medical dominion over the body was of benefit to the growing scenario of state regulation necessitated by involvement in a growing empire. A fit and healthy populace meant that domination of subject peoples was easier. Knowledge concerning the functions of the body was a vital part of this medicalisation – the growing medico-social construction of the body. The parallel growth of state control and medicine was no accident. Having laid claim to the living body, the Eighteenth century medical profession were justifying their position by extending their control over the dead body, as Greenhill's text and the embalming accounts of other surgeons illustrate. Dobson (1953) suggests Eighteenth century embalming had similarities to modern practice but was expensive - more than the average poor man could then afford. This technique was aimed at the rich, whose bodies could be expensively treated by the socially ascending surgeons. This was snobbery extended into burial rites.

Evidence suggests that late Eighteenth century surgeons themselves abandoned the technique, probably due to the length of the process, described by Baillie in the late 1790's as 'extremely tedious, occupying many hours and is attended with much unnecessary difficulty' (Dobson 1953:439). Similarly Doratt's (1871) account of the embalming of the Earl of Moira in 1793 was very cumbersome: washing in lime water, squeezing the intestines and evisceration, finally adding spices and alum to the cavity. This probably accounts for the sporadic occasional practice in Eighteenth century England that Greenhill complained about. In addition the sphere of funerary influence was being invaded by others. Greenhill (1705) contrasted the esteem of anatomy & embalming, the former practiced in surgery, but the latter chiefly practised by 'ignorant undertakers and those immersed in frauds and subtleties' (1705:2). It is obvious that the use of the body as a "preserving prop" in the struggle for status had waned by the end of the Eighteenth century. Accounts of the technique from surgeon-embalmers appear to "dry up" by the end of the century, suggesting that they were no longer written, because they were no longer performed. Evidence

suggests that every embalmer in Eighteenth century England was a surgeon, but surgeon domination of embalming practice was coming to an end. Greenhill's argument that from Egyptian times to the present embalming was more properly to be performed by surgeons and those 'well acquainted with Galenical and chymical medicines and anatomical preparations and experiments' (1705:188) was to go unheeded - especially by his brother surgeons. By the end of the Eighteenth century concern with the dead body became marginal - it was the living body (and effects of forces upon the living body) that more fully occupied the medical profession during the Nineteenth century. By this time the social construction of the body now included a significant medical feature, although still retaining a religious element in popular culture (Richardson 1985). Regulation of the dead became a marginal feature of medical control. It became clear to Eighteenth century medics that the problem of disease transmission was linked more closely to the living, than dead, body.

The body after death now appeared to have little significance. Nevertheless Quigley (1996) notes that the first embalming injector patent was filed in 1856 but sanitary treatment of the dead had apparently disappeared from the curricula of intending doctors. Thus embalming was carried out on the high class bodies of the rich probably more as a method of status maintenance than as reflecting the typical work of Nineteenth century surgeons.

For example, Sir Everard Home-Bard's method (1833) of embalming royalty was still oriented merely to evisceration and bandaging, in an almost incredible account that appeared to owe more to the classics than to Hunter for inspiration. Sir Everard's subjects were also those of high social status. Richardson (1985) records that Carlisle's speech included reference to the fact that many Royal people were partly dissected for the purposes of embalming. But this was not the technique of arterial infusion, this technique was centuries old and was used to confer social status upon the embalmer by the treatment of royalty. Litten (1991) asserts that embalming practice, rarely accomplished in the Eighteenth century, had almost entirely disappeared during the Nineteenth century. One compelling piece of evidence supporting this concerns the fate of Nelson, the public hero who, after his death at the battle of Trafalgar in 1805, was brought back to England immersed in a barrel of

brandy, (Wilkins 1992) although there was a surgeon aboard his ship, HMS Victory. Robert Boyle in 1659 is credited with discovering the preservative qualities of alcohol by the submerging method (wet preservation) and other preservatives noted by the Royal College of Surgeons of England included rum, whisky, gin and spirits of wine. But these methods were clearly for laboratory usage, intended to study dead specimens, not preserve the corpse for any obsequies. This method's drawbacks included bleaching, shrinkage, hardening and distortion and so were not ideal for funereal usage. These techniques illustrated the medically orientated social construction of the body as an object for experimentation. The art of embalming was in apparent danger of demise because neither religious or medical-backed discourses needed it.

### **2.3. Hygienism and embalming constructions.**

There appears little doubt that the trend towards public health improvement had some influence upon Nineteenth century funeral practice and the changing social construction of the corpse. However nineteenth century mortuary customs were, as we shall see, very simple. Smith (1979) suggested that much had been accomplished by sanitary workers - improved water and sewage disposal, ventilation and better medical services. There was also an immediate "side effect" in funerals. Pinfold (1993) noted that the Cholera epidemics of the Nineteenth century forced changes in churchyard management resulting in the ultimate move to distant cemeteries (Polson et al 1953), thus marking the beginning of the transition to a more sanitary disposal practice as the diseased corpse was kept distant. The bodies of the dead were implicated in transmission of disease to the living, but this did not mean that the social construction of the dead required the use of embalmers – yet. That was a long way off. Campaigners such as Chadwick brought to the attention of parliament the funeral habits of the poor, an example of which Chadwick (1843) recorded from a Mr Wild, Undertaker of Blackfriars Rd, London in 1843:

In cases of rapid decomposition of persons dying in full habit there is much liquid; and the coffin is tapped to let it out. I have known them to keep the corpse after the coffin had been tapped twice, which has, of course, produced a disagreeable effluvium.... If the liquid escaped, maggots, or a sort of animalculae, are seen crawling about.

(1843:38-9)

These arrangements cannot have been pleasant, but this practice does highlight the continuing cultural construction surviving in popular culture about the significance of the corpse as an ongoing vehicle for the soul. Simple body procedures were still commonly adopted, as the folk habits of death ritual reveal, such as Gaskell (1843:11) who simply described that 'they reverently laid out the corpse'. But this of course was not related to hygiene, but to prior religious beliefs (Richardson 1985), the corpse thus rising fresh and clean at the resurrection. The action of the new "social hygiene" movement came from those concerned with disease control. Control of disease and thus control of society were vital objectives of the Nineteenth century state, especially as the growth of urban concentrations encouraged ravaging epidemics and thus lowered industrial efficiency when Britain was the "workshop of the world". But this process was one of gradual advance. Wangensteen et al (1972) asserted that during the early Eighteen-hundreds some idea of the need for cleanliness to prevent post-operative infection (sheets, dressings or hands) was apparent, but until late in the Nineteenth century air (miasma) was considered the chief form of contagion. Koch's (1878) discovery of differences in bacteria, rubber gloves to protect the operator, (not the patient (!)) initiated by Halsted (1891) and Lister's (1878) discovery of antiseptics reflected the growth of medical concern for surgical cleanliness. The impetus of such change suggests that the cleanliness spill-over into adjacent areas was not far behind. By the Nineteenth century, medical

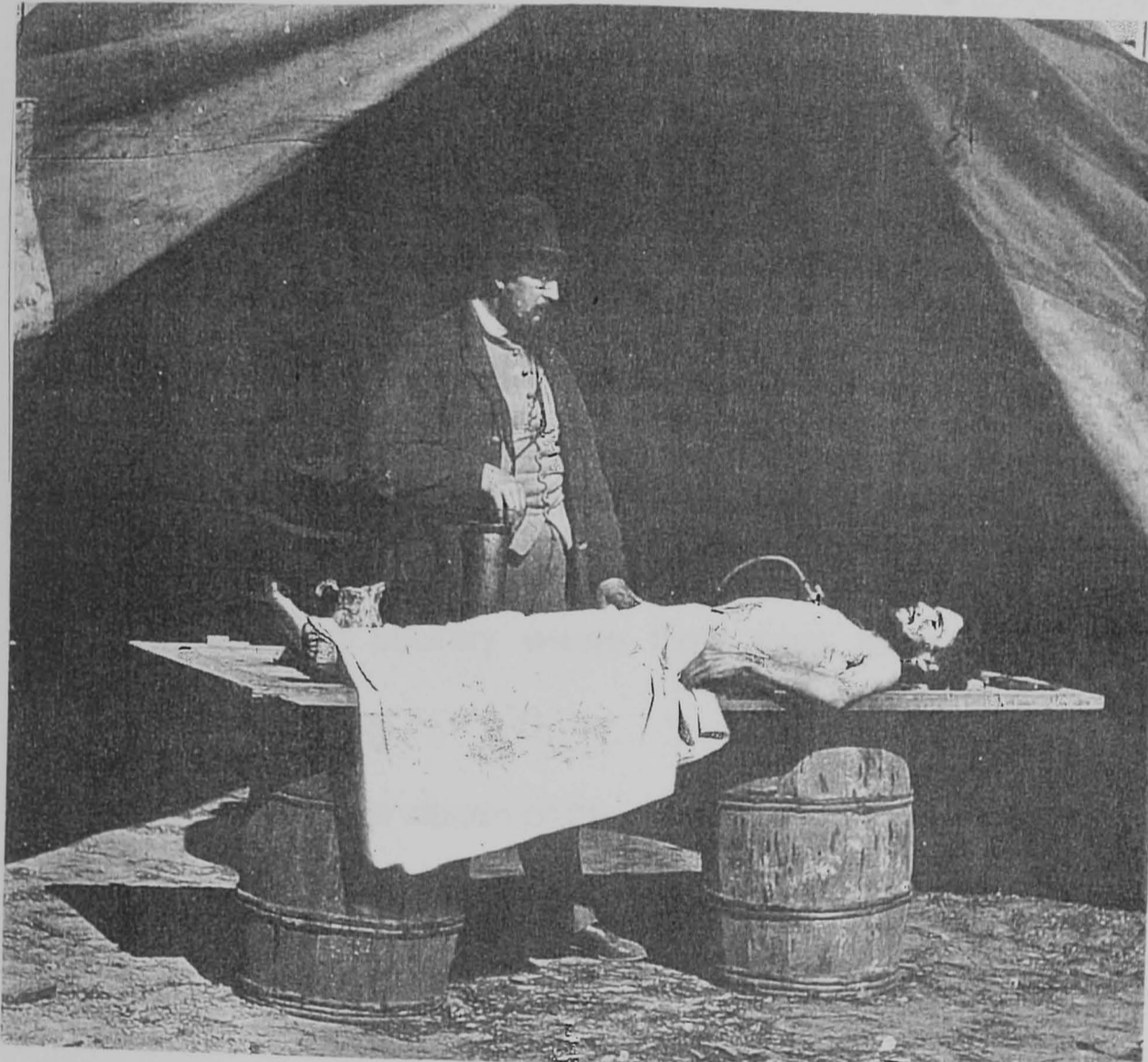


concern with the body extended to its disease producing capacity in life. The corpse was ignored. For example Davidson's lecture at the Royal Institution in 1833 was entitled 'Embalming generally' but featuring only an Egyptian mummy; which suggests that there was no contemporary sanitary practice at the time. (Polson's suggestion (1953) that cremation and embalming encouraged the growth of the Nineteenth century undertaking profession appears to be misplaced). Moreover Nineteenth century hygiene concerns focussed upon removal of the body to mortuaries situated elsewhere; the living, not the dead, were the targets of the hygienists in England. Embalming practice, once adopted by surgeons, had been forgotten by medical people regarding the social construction of the corpse.

How did embalming eventually enter social constructions, if the corpse was constructed neither as a religious icon nor a machine to demonstrate medical abilities? There is little doubt amongst embalming historians that the influence of American practice was decisive. American embalming provided a practical, aesthetic and "hygienist" alternative to cooling the corpse with crushed ice (Mayer 1990). Extant journals record the growth of the practice and the practical impact of climate and 'civil religion' (Huntington & Metcalf 1979) enabled embalming to flourish over there. How did this happen?

Phipps (1987) although antagonistic, acknowledges the crucial (US) impact of Thomas Holmes (and others) and the battlefield embalming practices of these operators during the American civil war (1861-5), the remarkable results being shipped "back home" by rail providing the practical transformation in American mid-west funeral practice. The work of Holmes and others was a dramatic step forward

from the primitive preservation attempts of earlier colonists, who used to wrap the bodies of the dead in alum-soaked sheets to retard putrefaction (Charmaz 1980).



The need to regulate the activities of these entrepreneurial men by a strict form of army licensing to prevent fraud and overcharging (Pine 1975) quickly became apparent.

Dr Richard Burr, whose photo appears here, was charged with burning down the tent of a competing embalmer, Dr William

Bunnell. The displayed peaceful body of the martyred (Metcalf and Huntington 1991) president Lincoln in 1865 also gave a terrific impetus to early embalming publicity. His conveyance by train from Washington across the Northeast and Midwest to Springfield, Illinois (Huntingdon & Metcalf 1979) and the witness by many thousands of mourners 'en route' of his peaceful expression was a potent aesthetic

stimulus regarding American adoption of the embalming technique in the new post-war society that was emerging, as Metcalf and Huntington noted:

A nation still mourning its war dead tried to capture in their funerals something of the peace written upon Lincoln's face. In this way public attitudes were made ready to accept the new techniques of embalming then being perfected.  
(1991:213)

Lincoln's embalmed body was a reuniting symbol of intactness after his death, the symbol of emerging civil religion. The American civil war concerned the potential threat of the south leaving the United States, which thus threatened unity, justice (ie the slavery issue) and consequent religious belief.

The victorious, technologically superior North could use the new homogeneity of funeral practices as a means to promoting unity and religious belief in a newly reunited country where flight from religious persecution was a key element of emigration.

Being a citizen of the newly United States meant having an American style funeral in the face of cultural diversity to proclaim your unifying 'American-ness'. The preserved corpse of American funerals serving to underline the unity of the people can be seen in the swiftness of the first American patent for embalming by injection of a chemical compound, which was granted in 1856 (Charmaz 1980). Jones (1967), writing about the impact of the US civil war commented that 'draining and arterial injection were beginning to replace the long soak' (1967:23); technologies which demonstrated the merit of arterial infusion over the methods used to preserve Nelson - the immersion or 'long soak' method. It is apparent that this new and rapidly growing funeral practice was related to social cohesion, hygienism and

relatively high degrees of religiosity, noted by Metcalf & Huntington (1991) focussing around the centrality of embalming:

The practices of embalming and viewing express these collective representations. The point is to reveal the dead at peace ..... In the funeral parlour, basic values of life are condensed into the peaceful image of the embalmed body.  
(1991:210 & 214)

Another significant point to bear in mind, however, concerns this co-incidence of Presidential and battlefield embalming stimuli with the growing concern for public health in America (which had a similar counterpart in England). Writers such as Smith (1979), Rosen (1958) and Brockington (1965) have mapped out the huge advances made in sanitation and hygiene (described as social medicine) which appears to have been an almost ideal breeding ground for the fledgling funeral sanitarians (in America) whose message shines forth within the embalming text books of the late Nineteenth and early Twentieth century. An excellent illustration is provided by Barnes (1895 & 1901) (an ex-medical Inspector for the state board of health of Illinois, USA) who demonstrates this co-incidence of health theory and embalming action within his text of 1895 (which was reprinted in 1901). A whole section was devoted to 'sanitary science', whose content also included theories of (anachronistic) miasmatic disease and methods of gaseous fumigation of 'death rooms'. Barnes reminded his readers that:

Being brought in contact with some of the most virulent forms of contagion and infection, the funeral director should be able at all times to prevent spreading these diseases.  
(1901:339)

This self-proclaimed sanitizer, who was to assist in the maintenance of health in conjunction with other medical people, would play a valuable role (so the Americans thought) with the problematic corpse, which (as Barnes reminded his readers) was often infected with diphtheria, scarlatina and smallpox. Hygiene was therefore paramount. Instruction regarding the disinfecting of rooms, furniture, people etcetera filled a number of extra pages, but the effective method of preventing this dissemination of disease was obvious:

The body of a person dead of a contagious or infectious disease should be embalmed by an arterial and cavity injection of a proven disinfectant embalming fluid, the entire body washed in this solution, all orifices stopped with absorbent cotton and the body enveloped in a layer of absorbent cotton not less than one inch thick, wrapped in a sheet and bandaged.

(1901:351)

America and England, however, were not the same. Davies (cited in Howarth, G & Jupp, P 1996) has highlighted the unusual American pre-occupation with dirt that became predominant at the turn of the century. This concern with cleanliness was as valid with the bodies of the dead as with the living. Douglas' (1973) description of dirt reminds us of the socially prescribed nature clinging to this substance which reflects the (American) construction of the dead body. This preoccupation can be regarded as evidence of a crucial impetus that operated in favour of the inception of American embalming, but this was not fully reflected in England. The potentiality of cleanliness appeared not to apply to the death chamber. Although English Nineteenth century sanitary reformers focussed upon the 'health of the community' (Rosen 1958), earlier reports produced by individuals such as Chadwick (1843) upon English mortuary habits were submerged within the general hubbub concerning clean water, sanitation and living conditions. Detection of poor health in army recruits for the Boer war (Rosen 1958) stimulated further attention towards general health, evidenced by the 'medical police': the inception in 1874 of health visiting (Rosen 1958) to monitor the populace. But funeral habits survived almost untouched (Gore 1993) for many folk. English social construction apparently perceived the corpse to be a tedious and smelly relic – not a disease producing hazard as in America. Smith asserts that the lessons of strict hygiene learned during the second Anglo-Boer war 'decimated typhoid' (1979:247), an excellent illustration of the spillover into domestic life of the lessons learned from state/military hygiene. Hygienist constructions of the corpse, however, had no place in English mortuary practice at this time.

However evidence from other countries suggests that the American situation was the unusual one, not the English. Reference within the Index medicus illustrates the growth of embalming publications in countries such as France, Italy, Algeria, Mexico and Germany, where no large scale embalming practice subsequently became established. Two other potentialities which could have encouraged embalming were the 1832 Anatomy Act (Laquer 1983) which focussed attention upon the whole-ness

of the body and the technology of the late Nineteenth century (Naylor 1989), which enabled preservation attempts to succeed (records of registered patents for much embalming equipment were lodged in the later Nineteenth century, much of which is strikingly similar to some contemporary equipment). Crucially, however, these potentialities existed without the socially constructed impetus enjoyed by the Americans. In addition, however, to the lack of positive effect from potentially positive benefits was the limiting effect of other factors, which also explain the curious lack of embalming from the Victorian funeral extravaganza of the Nineteenth century (D.H.S.S. 1980).

Naylor mentions (1989) the small scale nature of the funeral trade (almost everyone "did funerals" as a sideline, so would be unwilling to diversify into the complicated sphere of embalming) and the lack of custodial responsibilities, so the condition of the body was simply not the Nineteenth century undertakers' problem. Growing Nineteenth century rationalism also meant that the manipulation of the corpse had lost some of its significance, the reason also for medic abandonment of the body. English embalming was 'imported' when the presence of the body in the community had started to decline, coupled with dwindling religious belief, the early establishment of cremation and the inception of private English grief (Gorer 1965).

Embalming appeared due to the efforts, among others, of Messrs Dottridge Brothers, (Litten 1991) a large and well organised 'super undertaking firm' (1991:54), 'one of the chief firms interested in the embalming trade' (Wilson-Levy 1938:87) who dominated the Nineteenth and early Twentieth century funeral industry in manufacturing, vehicle production and to some extent, embalming. Mr Edwin Dottridge, (*The Embalmer* vol 21 No 4) went to America in 1882 to attempt to persuade an American embalming professor (Renouard) to teach in England for a salary of \$5000 per annum (*Undertakers' Review & Allied Trades Gazette* [hereafter UR&ATG] 31st July 1900). National Association of Funeral Directors (NAFD) history (*London Directory* 1967) also states that the impressions gained abroad by other prominent English individuals in the funeral 'trade', such as Mr. H.A. Sherry of London, later the first President of the British Undertakers Association (BUA) at the turn of the century, also encouraged the practice. The result was a two week course

of educational lectures by the American Professor Renouard and some months later a second fortnight of lectures under Professor Sullivan. Evidence suggests that Dottridge and his associates had found a 'hygiene niche' to invade, but the occupiers of the niche were a tiny fraction of the undertakers of the day, perhaps several dozen 'proto hygienists'. In comparison, the number of undertakers at the turn of the century could have been as many as four to six thousand (Gore 1993). Medical-inspired embalming, had, by this time dwindled, despite the isolated attempt by general practitioners such as Garson (1902) who produced a detailed description in 'The Lancet'. The need for Garson's description suggests that the technique was not well known to doctors in England (otherwise why go to the bother of publishing it).

Evidence also suggests, however that embalming had been forgotten at this time by medical men in America, the home of arterial embalming, because it had been adopted by undertakers (Bell 1906), corpse construction depended upon it. To a country as new as America, unifying rituals had a purpose, as Metcalfe and Huntingdon (1991) noted:

The majority [of migrants] have adopted American deathways just as they have absorbed other aspects of national culture'.

1991:200

It thus appears that the potential produced by Nineteenth century public health measures failed to be translated by English funeral practice into corpse construction opportunities (judging by the small advertising section devoted to embalming in the Undertakers Journal of the late Nineteenth and early Twentieth century). The socially constructed hygienic corpse would become acceptable – but fifty years later. Howarth described the early twentieth century funeral industry as 'in a state of flux' (1992:116) but this reflected commercial and structural issues, not the concept of the corpse. By the end of 1901 400 undertakers had studied under the two professors. In 1901 another significant move occurred:

The newly qualified embalmers realised that the development of the skill depended upon organised meetings for discussion and instruction, so that in their turn they formed their own society, the 'BES' (*the British Embalmers Society*) in 1901.

NAFD (1967:11)

To add to this, a significant social move in 1902 connected with hygiene may have proved useful to embalmers. Almost by coincidence (Chamberlain and Richardson 1983) the 1902 Midwives Act forced many neighbourhood layers-out to choose between assisting at birth or tending the dead. Marginal bodies had suddenly become awkward and problematic, suggesting a changing social construction of the body. Chamberlain and Richardson commented that existing undertakers may have benefited from the Act's disruption of the traditional practice of laying-out, an almost unintended 'side effect' of the regulation of midwifery. However the Act may have appeared too early to have had any major impact because there were too few embalmers. The four hundred newly trained embalmers in 1901 would have had a potential case load of at least 30 subjects per week each, spread over the entire United Kingdom and consequently, unworkable. What the Act does reveal, however, is the strength of institutional feeling concerning the marginal bodies of the dead and living and the desire to hygienically regulate them both. This hygienist message was reflected in the American instructors' lectures. Sullivan's text book (1901), used in England, proclaimed the message:

It is generally understood at the present day, that embalmed bodies, no matter what may have been the condition previously, are non-contagious, the process employed (using the proper chemicals) having completely destroyed all germs of contagion and infection, making it possible to ship bodies to any distance, and to keep them above ground for any desired length of time. Since the advent of the present methods of embalming, epidemics have grown less frequent, and their victims less numerous.

(1901:112)

The certainty of death could be underlined with a corpse that resembled the living insofar as the illusion of peaceful sleep could be maintained. By 1905 Goulborn, Kenyon and Sherry (famous embalming names from the past) had printed a small, green bound "pocket compendium" which propounded the still prevalent sanitation rationale:

Embalming in the modern sense means the scientific application of chemicals to the dead for the purposes of sanitary preservation.

(1905:1)

Producing a text book costing 2/- 6d suggests that embalming and the social construction of the corpse was becoming more prevalent. This also had professionalising advantages, as contemporary embalmers noted. Dodge could see



the calling raised above mere coffin makers (UJ Aug 1910), Scales commented upon status claiming (UJ Oct 1918), Nodes anticipated elevation of status (UJ Nov 1913) and Heath could anticipate the prospect of licensing (UJ Nov 1916). This illustrates the continuing growth of the hygienist discourse - or social medicine as Woods (1978) dubbed it - whose public health improvements apparently lowered mortality. A good example concerns health visiting training, which was formulated in 1919 and in 1924 the Royal Sanitary Institute became the central agency for qualifying (Rosen 1958). This general emphasis upon sanitation and the sanitary message was propounded loud and clear, and to a significant few, its potential regarding embalming appeared obvious. Wilson-Levy (1938) noted that the attempts by the BUA to gain registered status in 1926 and 1936 were still based upon hygiene – the whole industry appeared to be using the same rationale. So what happened to embalming and social corpse construction?

Two separate strands have been identified. The pomp and status of the body were displayed at the funeral and the presence of the body underlined the certainty of death. The crucial significance of the first World war, with the relative frequency of soldiers' deaths but the lack of a body for the funeral undermined the significance of having the body at the funeral (Cannadine 1981). The erection of the cenotaph to unify social grief in the absence of many bodies supports this view and the tremendous growth of spiritualism after world war one is another powerful piece of evidence supporting the contention that the lack of the body created social challenges. Cannadine's work also identifies an existing trend which suggested a diminishing religious significance of the body (growing cremation numbers and declining religious belief) which was accentuated by the carnage witnessed by the masses at the front line. So embalmers emerged when the significance of the corpse on the funeral was dwindling. The first war also disrupted any early organisation of embalmers. Lastly the discourse in death at the time was a very private, family affair, where the dead were exposed to the mourning world in the private front parlour – not (as in America) the public hall of funeral companies. Litten's assertion (1991) that embalming 'soon received the acclamation of the trade' (1991:54) by the nineteen twenties does not correspond with evidence from trade journals or from elderly

embalmers. The majority of these early students who could afford several weeks away in London to see the 'new techniques' were obviously of a similar social strata - the sons of well established bosses - not their employees. This was a limited, elite group activity. Teaching was also rather poor – certificates awarded were for attendance, not proficiency (Parsons 1995). Embalming was therefore hardly represented in the early Twentieth century funeral trade because it was irrelevant and marginal. Frogart (1904:448), a sanitary engineer, perceptively suggested that this was because non embalming undertakers felt that 'knowledge they are not possessed of they feel is not worth the knowing'. Most undertakers were only occasionally employed on funerals. If an embalmer was really needed then they would go and get one – they saw no need to become one. Embalming was not available as few practitioners existed because demand was low. This lack–lustre cycle is reflected in Dottridge's timescale. The American professors from the OK Buckhout chemical company visited the UK *nearly twenty years* after Edwin Dottridge's initial visit in 1882. Embalming was not only ignored by most undertakers (Naylor 1989) but also actively resisted as Nades (BIE 1944) recounted about the early years; a similar tale being recounted to me (personal communication, Graham Hills, April 1980) concerning his experiences as a fledgling embalmer in Folkestone in the 1920s. His colleagues were determined that he should not embalm and they were un-cooperative towards his efforts.

In addition, a very different aim already dominated English public health. Due to the 'Island culture' prevalent in Britain, the concept of quarantine measures featured prominently within English public health. Chadwick's warnings concerning sanitary reform were only listened to following the devastating cholera epidemics of the early Nineteenth century. There were no similar mortuary epidemics in the Twentieth century to alter perceptions about the dead. Governmental concern for mortuaries (to move the dead into a separate 'quarantine' space) were the dominant concerns (for example Wilson-Levy 1938 and Puckle 1926). An excellent example of this 'quarantine method' concerned transportation of the dead by rail (personal communication with Mr J.G. Bartlett, funeral director in the 1950s to the 1980s) – in a locked carriage, thereby creating the "decontaminating space" (reflecting social

medicine emphases) *around* the body; not changing the body itself. Additionally major discourse definitions of embalming were antagonistic. Embalming moves were mistaken for profiteering (Puckle 1926) and 'salesmanship' (Wilson-Levy 1938:87), which suggest an underlying 'consumer demand' for treated corpses was absent. Meanwhile society had moved on. In 1907 the Midwives Act "window of opportunity" was closed when the prohibition on midwives laying out was lifted (Adams 1991). The fledgeling BES was submerged within the British Undertakers Association by 1915. Sanitary definitions - not surprisingly - took a step into the background.

There was also a 'competing rival' with the British Undertaking Association which offered a basic hygiene-based rhetoric. Simple methods (UJ Dec 1910 & National Funeral Director (henceforth NFD) Oct 1941) appeared to be advocated by the British Undertakers Association, instead of the more technical methods of 'proper' embalming. Several oral respondents (Gore 1993) could recount this simple method, an example being published as the 'undertakers guide' in the early part of the twentieth century. Naylor (1989) mentions that towards the end of the nineteen-twenties many NAFD men were instructed in death sanitation and 'temporary preservation', but this was not 'proper' embalming. This was a simple gas-releasing technique with body cavity probing. Why was it utilised? The BUA craved registered status and hygiene was part of their tactics - the underlying hygiene rationale was still being pursued by the funeral trade. But this was not successful. The watered down practice of small scale undertakers was insufficient to convince Parliament.:

Undoubtedly, he [Capt G.S.Elliston, MP] said, there are arguments in favour of securing definite standards of competence among undertakers, but there will certainly be opposition from those who think that the village carpenter can do everything that hygiene and decency requires in the disposal of the dead. You have, he said, to satisfy the House of Commons that you have made out your case.

(Wilson-Levy 1938: 159-60)

The BUA's 'pseudo-hygiene' move was too weak and the BIE hygiene rationale not well enough known. The focus of the state and the medics was upon re-housing the putrefying body, as the Public Health Act of 1936 demonstrated (not preventing putrefaction itself) by merely supplying more public mortuaries which were unpopular, as Puckle (1926) records.

Funereal hygiene aspirations were apparently severely “out of step” with other major discourses. Nevertheless, there was still a powerful drive in the direction of social hygiene apparent in the late Nineteen twenties and early ‘Thirties. The spaces (necessary between living bodies) were also reflected in the spaces the dead were given. Issues of environment (such as re-housing from the slums onto the spacious estates built in the 1930s) were the primary thrust of the social hygiene movement, so the ignoring of embalming appears entirely congruent with this approach. But this vague hygiene/embalming rationale just would not disappear, the BIE (a brand new embalming organization) was formed in 1927. A tremendous surge in embalming courses in U.K. cities was reported in the trade journals at the end of that decade. Embalmers, at least, regarded embalming as being a vital element in the social construction of the body and it is arguable that this interest was related to other social constructions of the body. It is also significant that at this time some custodial provision was being offered by larger funeral companies (Howarth 1992) which prompted improved management of the corpse in a growing number of companies. This in turn strengthened hygiene constructions of the corpse.

#### **2.4. Embalming and the living.**

During the 1930s embalming became quite widespread due to several reasons: better national organisation, better transport, more numerous operators and the growth of inter-continental travel. A surviving certificate log of Geo Acheson of Dingle, Liverpool (BIE archives) noted shipping cases sent abroad. The log started at case number 1201 (the earlier book, being exhausted, was probably discarded), and the log recorded individuals treated sent back to America and Australia. But again the massive social disruption of armed conflict threatened to engulf the fledgling embalming organisation of the BIE (as the first war hostilities engulfed the earlier BES embalmers). Twenty five percent of the membership (one hundred individuals) were called up into the armed services in the second World War. New members, such as Muriel (personal communication 28th Nov 1994) who embalmed in the Clapham and South London area, qualified in 1937, but never returned to the embalming theatre after the war. According to the Dottridge war diary (Wartime

messages 1939-46) the prime movers in the organisation of the first embalming demonstrations, war priorities to focus upon were the seasoning of timber and the construction of coffins, not embalming. Embalming had apparently “dropped off the agenda” because war pressures necessitated rapid burial (Howarth 1992) and there were few resources to do anything else. However there is evidence of a post-war growth of the practice of embalming, arguably intimately related to the growing tendency for funeral firm accommodation and changing social conditions. Oral respondents and journals suggested a need to control the corpse, but refrigeration was not, in the 1950s, a common or practical technique (Gore 1993). This change coincided with the issue of re-housing the dead on funeral premises, growing urban concentrations and an increase in cremation (that extended pre-funeral timescales) which, coupled with the general “post war drive”, was apparently a similar impetus to that enjoyed by American practice both thirty years earlier (after the first war) and also ninety years earlier, in the era of Holmes and the civil war embalmers. Instead of responding to other stimuli, the BIE did the initiating, which again suggests that the “hygienically regarded corpse” was becoming a dominant concern. The BIE, in the closing stages of the war, mooted a 'five point plan' and its measure of success must be attributed to the accurate reflection of the 'social hygiene' moves of post-war reformers such as Beveridge and his plans for a national health service.

The 'BIE News' (Dec 1945) outlined the '5 point plan' (to stimulate the post-war adoption of the embalming process) and the newly constituted research board, (which suggested amongst many things that persons shipped abroad should be embalmed). The five points encompassed the founding of a research board, submission to the Ministry of Health, training of all funeral service personnel, a national standard and concern for the embalmers' prestige. One particular element of the plan concerning the research board was that it should contain 'medical men' as well as BIE members, to put the art and science of embalming on a proper footing. The minutes of the board contain several 'targets', one of which was the adoption of embalming for the international transportation of the dead. This appears to match very closely the post war changes in attitudes to sanitization and the removal of the dead from the home (as well as, much later, a similar removal of

childbirth from the home). According to Scudamore (BIE 1946) the board was created in 1946 and worked for twelve years until 1958. The introductory paragraph stated that:

It started as the result of an address by Leonard Fearnley to the Institute's 1945 conference, in which his theme consisted of five aims and objects, the achievement of which would produce the status and recognition of the Institute and embalming in general, envisaged by the founders of the Institute.  
(1945:2)

Fearnley, a journalist, saw that the post-war change in emphasis regarding health could also be applied to the sanitary treatment of the dead as embalming appeared to echo the general scientific preventative medicine outlined in the Beveridge report. The dovetailing of embalming with sanitation appeared obvious. Its overlap with the obvious rising status and professionalising of American embalming was a sign of progress and therefore something to emulate. Fearnley's piece contained much pro-hygienist information which also throws into relief English attitudes which had to be surmounted. He outlined that in America:

The embalmer over there is regarded by the courts as a public health worker rather than a beautifier of the dead, and that he operates under the jurisdiction of the state board of health....No unembalmed body may be transported by common carrier - rail or boat - or so displayed as to constitute a public health hazard.  
(1945:67)

The BIE aimed to make embalming a public health measure rather than an assumed cosmetic procedure. This did involve a massive logistical operation: the training of enough personnel to accomplish this aim, referred to by Fearnley as 'a gigantic task'. Mobility stimulated demand for embalming in America and, Fearnley hoped, could also do so in England. Rail transportation of the dead at this time in England (1940s/50s) had not changed in organisation and was still far more common over long distances than road travel. This idea appeared to be confirmed in the BIE journals of 1949, when carriage by rail of the dead produced a sufficient volume of offensive situations for reports to be sent to the Ministry of Health. There is an obvious hidden significance to this – undoubtedly this problem had happened in the past (surely the dead did not suddenly putrefy 'en route' during the later 1940s) but people did not object enough to raise a clamour prior to this. Perhaps perceptions of hygiene in post-war England had changed. Embalming appeared to have more potential support from contemporary culture. Fearnley confidently asserted that:

Full scientific embalming treatment completely sterilises the body no matter what the infection may be...anything less than full treatment is valueless from a public health standpoint.

(1945:13-14)

The battle cry of 'public health' was to be heard more and more frequently as the post-war BIE linked itself more closely to health reform. The efforts and investigations of the board were many and varied and included lengthy correspondence with a Dutch association of embalmers (Vakgroep Begrafeniswezen) whose state opposition problems were greater than those of the English. (n.b. This Dutch group had apparently expired well before the 1980s). An interesting section dealt with the notification of airline companies concerning the need for embalming (the BIE initiated this, not merely responded to a problem). Embalming was becoming, for the dead, part of the construction process, as "death hygiene" became necessary as funeral timescales increased due to cremation and urbanisation. Reminiscences of those who had worked so hard to make England 'a land fit for heroes', as recorded in oral accounts (Gore 1993), also reflected this new direction developing after the war. A move away from pre-war practice into the brave new world seemed the right one to make.

Additional factual evidence backs up this post-war change. The Funeral Service Journal (Jan 1996) recorded that in 1945 Lears (the largest London embalming company) had increased embalmments for the fourth successive year, but figures for 1945 had increased by a staggering 76.5 per cent. This change can also be accounted for by the tremendous social impact of the war which opened the eyes of many to the habits of other English people. The BIE news of the war years is crammed with the letters of those who had 'spread the word' to their army mates who took (at the least) the knowledge of what could be done back into civilian life. The presence of American embalmers also did much to encourage a change in attitude in England. However this argument brings one back to the conclusion of Naylor (1989) - that the impetus for change came fundamentally from social and technological changes (mobility and transport) and not from within the occupation.

In post-war civilian life there were too few embalmers and too many war casualties to effect this change. The potential discourse change could not be accomplished.

The 1949 'rail stink' incidents were side stepped by the Ministry of Health – it was not due to the railways' negligence, they concluded. A more damning piece of evidence, however, was enclosed within the BIE journals of the same year, 1949, concerning a short essay by a government bacteriologist. He praised the aesthetic value of embalming, but commented that as Government had ignored the infective effects of vermin and sewage, the prospect of a change regarding the dead would be 'quite a job' (1949:18), as he tactfully mentioned. More importantly, after the war the relationship between the body and the soul had changed. The need for the intact corpse was dwindling still further, demonstrated by the rapid increase of cremation. Embalming in England grew more prevalent at the time when the corpse in the community was declining (for evidence of this again see Gore 1993) and the corpse was more likely to be housed at a distant chapel of rest. Death became an increasingly hidden and private area (Gorer 1965). So the corpse became hidden within this private domain.

However Naylor (1989) mentioned that the 'fifties and 'sixties were seen as an era of big changes by the funeral industry. Funeral firm accommodation, the consequently greater rational organisation of funeral firms and a concentration of the industry meant that embalming was necessary for body management but in the hidden world of the funeral industry. This consigned the embalmers to a separate, subordinate and isolated social position, unable to capitalise upon the potential generated by the Research board. Scudamore's text book (BIE 1966) is a good reflection of the mood of BIE hygienists in the nineteen sixties but also well expresses the problems still encountered:

Research in the U. S. A. and that in Great Britain differs very considerably, as the former concentrates on improvements to an established practice, whereas the latter is obliged to expend considerable efforts upon justifying the adoption of the practice.

(1966:86-7)

Embalming was not well enough known to break into mainstream discourses. Publicity about embalming was usually the exception. A rare example is produced by Putnam (1993) who asserted that 'improved methods of embalming involving paraffin wax had been developed in Argentina' (1993:62), and were used in 1952 to 'preserve beautifully' the body of Eva Peron. This was a very public example of the



potential technology available. Injection of aldehydes (i.e. formaldehyde, glutaraldehyde) was by the nineteen sixties more universal. But crucially this increase in embalming accompanied almost uniform adoption in the nineteen-sixties of mortuary accommodation (Gore 2001). This meant that embalming became part of mortuary hygiene for funeral directors such as West (1988). Hand in hand with increased custody went an increase in responsibility (Naylor 1989) – which had an immediate impact on embalming practice. It would be impossible not to link this upsurge with Gorer's 'denial of death' thesis of the 1960s, by camouflaging the natural body as an uncorrupting, pleasant looking death, as the government bacteriologist had noted in 1949. This can be interpreted as the introduction of the newest discourse to influence funerals – consumerism, but the most powerful catalyst to date to enable embalming to become more closely associated with the social construction of the corpse. A senior embalmer commented to me (personal communication 29-1-94) that in his early days in the Nineteen-fifties embalmers were scarce. This is because they were in great demand. Consequently membership rose as is discussed in Chapter four and five.

However this growth was not at the pace necessary for Fearnley's "post-war embalming promotion". By nineteen-thirteen (UJ Dec 1913) there were said to be one hundred embalmers in England, although there had been four hundred qualified undertakers graduating from the original courses by 1901. By the second World War the Institute had grown to six hundred members from less than twenty, twelve years earlier. The disruption of the war, however, threatened to engulf the entire Institute, with over one hundred members called up from the existing six hundred (BIE Nov 44:1). It comes as no surprise to hear that, reluctantly, American embalmers had to be imported to deal with American service dead, as the numbers were too great for remaining BIE personnel to cope with.

The private nature of English funeral practice suggests that an overall picture of what was actually happening would be difficult to find. For example according to Gorer (1965) embalming was 'an exceptional practice in England' (1965:45), similarly Mitford's study in 1963 (based on only one visit to one funeral establishment) depicted viewing and embalming as unimportant and infrequent (but this has been

criticised as inaccurate by Naylor (1989). Conversely the Funeral Service Journal (Aug 1959) pointed out that embalming was by then common; free-lance and specialist embalmers were in abundance. Crichton (1976), similarly mentioned that for reasons of hygiene embalming was very common. The balance lies somewhere between Gorer and Crichton, but indicated that by the 1960s, embalming and social construction of the corpse had become firmly (but privately) linked over much of the country, as embalming was concealed within the private discourse of funerals. The body, in the form of the corpse, had been relegated to the unseen areas of the funeral firm and this simple step was the crux of the matter. Out of sight was out of mind; death familiarity receded. Hygienist considerations were submerged within the 'medical' discourse - which had "forgotten" the reasons for death sanitation in the first place. The most significant change in funerary habits – cremation – had mixed funereal effects. On the one hand the greatly increased urban cremation timescales forced changes in mortuary management. Cremation did not occur quickly enough to prevent decomposition being detected. The viewing ritual could be compromised by this – something had to counteract this. On the other hand the bureaucracy associated with cremation was awkward and time consuming and did not enable embalming to be easily accomplished Jupp (1990). Paradoxically as "hygiene" faded into the background, due to ignorance of natural decay processes, so the assumption of "smartening up" the hidden dead became more common.

The issue of hidden-ness was significant in England regarding death knowledge because the corpse was 'covertly embalmed'. Lincoln, the saviour of the (US) union, was embalmed and publicly viewed; whereas a century later, Churchill, an equally charismatic leader during the dark years of the war was embalmed but no-one knew (personal communication with Mr Des Henley, the 'royal embalmer' for some 20 years) despite the very public elements of his funeral in 1965 that Litten (1991) has written about so movingly. Lincoln's peaceful body was seen by many Americans on its way to Springfield, Illinois in 1865. Churchill's sealed coffin was the closest that British TV viewers could get to his corpse in 1965. The hidden nature of English death practices has also hidden the embalmer. American embalming as a

'necessary practice' has been so taken for granted that it is significant that the Americans should have only produced an argued defence of the practice by the late nineteen-sixties (after Mitford's scathing assault in the early 1960s). Let us examine this for a while. The Americans commissioned a librarian named Maud Hinson to undertake a comprehensive literature search which avoided any "pro-embalming" literature and asked two basic questions.

The first question concerns the validity of the claim that an infectious organism will invariably die when its host organism dies. [secondly] Can these organisms endanger the public health. Since the second question is somewhat rhetorical, perhaps it can be dealt with most simply. Establishing the reality of contact infection is an integral part of the proof that dead bodies can support living organisms.

(1968:1-2)

The American response to critics of embalming was a 'back to basics' move. By "rediscovering" the basics, Hinson was able to draw the powerful "medical" discourse into (U.S.) embalming defence. Literature confirmed that cadavers were a site of infection. Hinson concluded that 'There was no sound basis for the "germ dies with the host" theory' (1968:3). Hygiene arguments were securely drawn into the defence of American embalming. Burke & Sheffner (1976) similarly ratified the disinfecting potential of embalming in laboratory studies, followed by three further "proper" health area publications in the 'seventies. Demonstrating the bactericidal value of embalming suggested that the work of Barnes, Eckels and other early teachers had been forgotten, which explained why writers such as Mitford and Bowman decried embalming with such venom. By replying to the criticisms in the context of health and hygiene, American sanitarians effectively confirmed (U.S.) social constructions of the dead involving embalming. This has been so successful that Metcalf and Huntington (1991) comment that many Americans appear to readily believe that embalming is a legal necessity. In other words it is a taken-for-granted element in American corpse construction.

So why has the work of Hinson not been utilised by British embalmers in their quest for official recognition of embalming in the representation of the dead? The clue lies in the occupational structure and the differing sanitation discourse in England, compared to America. Due to their crucially weak occupational position (and the consequent lack of 'bargaining power') British embalmers have had to be

tentative about emphasising the pathogenicity of the dead, so hygiene arguments needed to be cautiously stated. There could have been a risk that the dominant discourses of medicine, backed up by the state, might 'retrieve' the corpse if the situation appeared to favour medical intervention. Embalmers might talk themselves out of a job. To proclaim too loudly the dangers of mortuary contact might be counter productive: if the dead were apparently so toxic, then to leave them in the hands of non-medical embalmers would be foolhardy. So in the apparent interests of their own protection, embalmers would have to be prohibited from performing procedures that might threaten their own health. It would be disastrous for the BIE if the core of their activity was removed, as had apparently happened to the Dutch embalmers (Vakgroep Begrafeniswezen) as the letters to the research board in the nineteen-forties indicated. Bacteriological arguments of necessity, had to be moderated in England, or perhaps risk unintended consequences. Confirmation of this is found with the Howie report (HMSO 1978) concerning mortuaries, which, when confronted with the unknown, advised extreme caution regarding contact with the dead. The potential for over-emphasis of medicinal risk (as mentioned previously) and its consequent limitation of embalming access was precisely the conclusion that Howie drew. Howie mentions:

Although relatives may have risked infection from contact with the patient in life, it is reasonable to keep as small as possible any further risk of infection to relatives and to attendants dealing with the body..... Embalming is therefore undesirable except in unusual circumstances.

(1978:60)

Hygienism and the body was an under utilised argument, because it was an argument (I suspect) that embalmers thought could not be successfully fought in England. Similarly corpse hygiene issues have become submerged in bureaucracy (ie Registrar, Coroner, Medical profession - including general practitioners and pathologists). Additionally there may also still be medical resistance to "bodywork" by embalmers. (Doctors in Spain and Tangier have been actively antagonistic to non-medical embalmers (Personal communication with Mr G.G. Taylor MBIE February 1998).

Disease control and the social construction of the corpse had one more step to make. This concerns the recent inception in hospitals of 'universal precautions' procedures. These were introduced to minimise any potential infection transmission, whether any organism was present or not. This made the 'actual' virulent subject very difficult to differentiate from non-contagious corpses. Health and safety concerns and the use of 'body bags' for all is a potent challenge to the social construction of the embalmed corpse. Against this cautious back drop, the impact of the AIDS scenario needs to be assessed. Journals of almost every variety, BIE included, shrieked out the message during the early 1980s and onwards that the AIDS 'epidemic' could produce major problems. Issues of personal infection, contamination of sewage and a form of 'embalming hysteria' suggested that (in England at least) the embalming treatment of the dead could be compromised by the HIV problem. The bodies of the dead had become (albeit temporarily) extraordinarily problematised. Governmental directives such as Acheson's (1988) letter discouraged embalming when infection risks were present. Medical writers such as Turner et al (1989) and Ball et al (1991) reinforced the panic-laden early articles with more evidence, which has culminated in the working of Healing et al's (1995) recommendation not to embalm the infectious or potentially infectious dead. The hygiene rationale could now be considered to be antagonistic to the outward social construction of the body.

Consequently Haler's embalming textbook of 1983 (BIE 1983) provides no rationale for the process, but just assumes that it is necessarily done. If Haler assumed that the justification necessary by Scudamore in the 'sixties was now not needed, there were still areas in the country that could have contradicted him, although by the 1980s the social construction of the corpse by embalming was very widespread. But this social, aesthetic, construction was almost entirely hidden as the ongoing private nature of the funeral industry has still concealed the corpse.

'Quarantine' measures have removed the rationale for hygiene, as distant mortuaries remove the immediate problem. Thus the effects of medical caution have had a potentially limiting effect upon embalming constructions. Nevertheless in contemporary England embalming is a very commonly adopted procedure for the

corpse. This is because of the idea that embalming is a presentation enhancing procedure - the emphasis upon "restoration" or the creation of a youthful or ideal appearance appears to be an implicit assumption of a cross-section of bereaved people (some responses of whom are contained in chapter 5) and also of some academics, which reflects the apparent influence of consumerism. This may be linked in the future to assist those suffering from the trauma of grief. 'Hard' evidence for this was almost non-existent, apart from vague references in Bowlby (1980) and others, but is a part of the empirical work in chapter 5. Prior to this it was based upon the commonsensical awareness of interested parties, except for a clue contained in a 'seventies BIE journal letter from a prominent Anglican bishop complaining of the 'idolatry' that embalming encouraged. There appears little doubt that presentation is a vital reason for continued employment of embalming in the twenty first century. This presentation rationale is, however, built upon the disguise of natural processes which are part of the hygienist debate.

However it is the private and hidden nature of contemporary death ways which has itself retarded any national 'social clamour' for embalming practice (as was evidently the case in Victorian times when the 'laying out' was considered a vital, public, social necessity) and compelled the embalmer to remain submerged within the more dominant funeral directing discourse. Nevertheless the membership of the BIE has grown steadily over the last few decades which suggests that the practice has been more frequently adopted for corpse social construction. This could perhaps be regarded as an unofficial activity that has escaped officialdom, but which could encompass (according to an estimate based upon fluids sold by embalming suppliers) more than 75% of the UK dead per annum. This could now therefore equal approximately 450,000 embalmments per annum, whereas Broderick (1978) reported then that more than 50% of the UK dead were embalmed. Embalming therefore appears well practised but is likely to remain camouflaged for as long as death is kept at a distance. It therefore appears an integral, but hidden, part of the social construction of the corpse, in contemporary appearance orientated society. It seems wise to conclude this chapter on embalming history with a brief synopsis of

the organization that oversees the practice of embalming in Britain, known as the British Institute of Embalmers (BIE).

## **2.5 The British Institute of Embalmers**

On Thursday afternoon, April 7th 1927, the inaugural meeting of the British Institute of Embalmers was held in the Oak room of the Great Central hotel, Marylebone Road, under the Chairmanship of its President, Mr. W.O. Nodes.

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The formal organisation of the BIE reflects the integral nature of embalming to the social construction of the dead body, since its formation is intimately bound up with the ongoing development of the practice of embalming and hence the formation of the British Institute of Embalmers. The exploration of the manner in which the BIE organises both itself and its members (control, socialisation and qualification) will illustrate how part of the social construction of the corpse functions - at least that part that is within the auspices of the BIE. If any researchers have assumed that embalmers form an insignificant part of the social construction of the dead, then this section (which explores the national and international nature of embalming organisations) will set the matter straight. Several sub-issues are also discussed here. A brief discussion of what BIE membership apparently constitutes reflects on how others see BIE membership. Issues of growth problems, oligarchic control and professional aspirations also throw the situation of the English embalmer into clearer relief.

### **2.5.1 Origins.**

The BIE appears originally to have 'grown out' of the BUA (British Undertakers Association) in the nineteen-twenties, but why did the BIE emerge? Evidence for the growing dissonance between culturally held and state held conceptions about death has been discussed earlier. The co-incidence of the two undertaking attempts at Governmental registration (1925 & 1936) based on hygiene (Wilson-Levy 1938) is too compelling not to mention. As examples of the growing trend to social cleanliness seen in the nineteen-thirties, the concern with the condition of the dead seemed to fit well with prevailing public opinion. However both Wilson-Levy (1938)

and Puckle (1926) make it abundantly clear that any state hygiene concerns focussed upon mortuary (or similar building) facility only. Social construction in the 1920s did not involve embalming and there was resistance to the process from academics such as Puckle (1926). So was the formation of the BIE a sort of 'embalming reaction' to the NAFD registration attempt (perhaps as an 'extra element') or a parallel attempt at status improvement from a closely related funeral occupation? Certainly the BIE was a breakaway movement dedicated to higher standards than those apparent in the nineteen-twenties. But embalmers were only a tiny minority of the extensive 'casual undertaking industry' that existed early in the twentieth century, as the membership figures in chapter 5 show.

What prompted the growth of embalming? The expansion of the "custodial duties" that became part of the domain of funeral directors during the late nineteen-fifties (NAFD Manual 1958) must also be seen as contributing to the expansion of the BIE. Use of the front parlour was ubiquitous until this time - so any attempts at combating putrefaction were apparently rare. Additionally the normal timescale of a 'three day funeral' (Smale 1985) became (with the advent of urban cremation) extended to about a week. Recent articles (such as Young and Healing 1995) have started to acknowledge this biological problem, thus created. Rapid burial had made pre-funeral sanitary concerns of only marginal importance. However bureaucratic cremation and increasing awareness of the rather obvious (obvious, that is, to embalmers) decay following death increased the demand for some sort of preservative action (either chemical, with embalming or temperature, with refrigeration). Adverts in the various trade journals for solid carbon dioxide ('dry ice' sold in chunks about the size of a fruit cake) were common in the nineteen-forties, 'fifties and 'sixties according to my respondents in a previous study (Gore 1993). These can be seen as pre-cursors of the trend to refrigerated cabinets. Coupled with higher standards of hygiene (a cultural change), or perhaps a diminishing tolerance of smells (Largey and Watson 1972) and the diminishing practice of layers-out women (another cultural change), due to the removal of death from the sphere of the home to the hospital institution, the growth of the BIE can be seen as one expression



of the professionalising aspirations (Howarth 1992) of a significant but small section of the funeral industry.

The gender issue should be addressed here as the institutional composition of these embalming specialists has gradually altered. The movement of death from the home to the hospital (Aries 1974) has contributed to the exclusion of women from the death chamber. Adams (1991) has explored the exclusion of women from the death process from the early Nineteen-hundreds, with the gradual change from female layers-out in the home to the almost universally male mortician or embalmer working in the public sphere of the funeral establishment. This reflects the exclusively male dominated Nineteenth century medical world that embalming sprang from (which originated in male Egyptian embalmer-priests and later, Eighteenth century male surgeons). Adams' research within the Coventry area appears to reflect practice in many parts of the country, although the timescale could vary widely in rural areas; some women layers-out were still practicing in the nineteen-seventies and after. Among the reasons for the sudden male dominance of the death process, Adams suggests the invasion of masculine scientific rationality has excluded feminine informal care based on handed-down knowledge. Both Adams and Chamberlain and Richardson (1983) point to the 1902 Midwives Act which severely upset the existing patterns of female care of the dead by preventing local untrained women working as both midwives and layers-out.

Chamberlain and Richardson suggest that undertakers benefitted from this disruption and 'augmentation of power over the terrain of funerary observances' (1983:41). The co-incidence of the 1902 Act and the visits of the first American embalming instructors is almost unbelievable (unless it was actually organized to coincide) enabling the nascent profession the opportunity (arguably not fully realised) to dominate a recently-female territory of funerary expertise. Local female layers-out were originally replaced by (in the most part) male embalmers, creating a patriarchally dominated organisation. Muriel's letter, reproduced overleaf, congratulating her embalming success in 1937 was addressed to 'Dear Sir', crossed out and overtyped 'Madam'. Recent female recruitment from the mid -

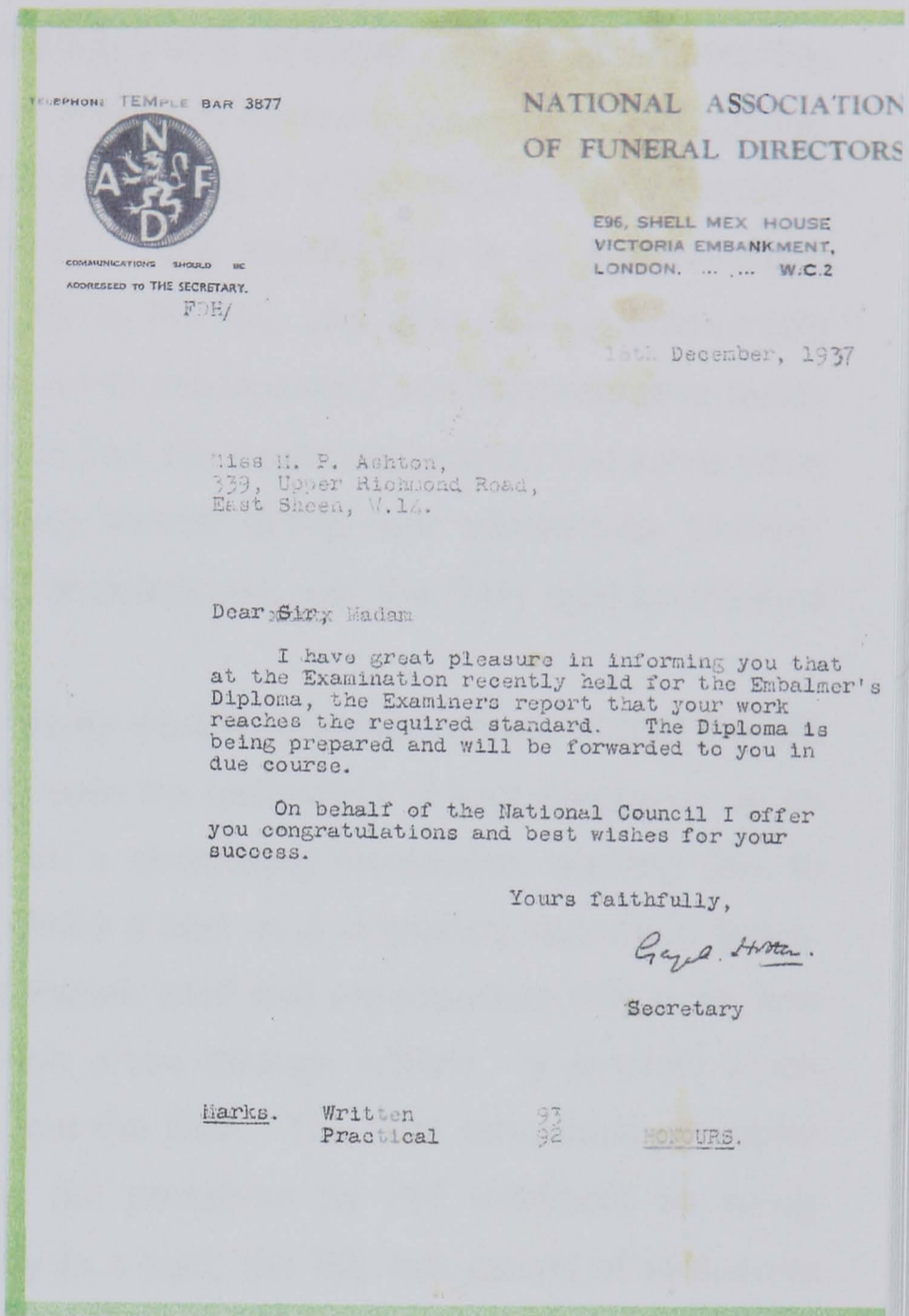
'sixties onwards has done something to redress the balance, as is shown in chapter 4 and 5.

Indeed a significant development of recent years has been the feminization of the embalming occupation, indicating a trend back towards the layers - out women who were ousted by the original male embalmers at the turn of the century. This also reflects the numbers of women entering the medical profession.

(Labour forces survey 1994 Spring quarter: 70% of Doctors are male, 30% female and Nurses 11% male and 89% female). But the problems of female embalmers probably reflect those of female medical students. Muriel (per comm 28-11-94) recounted tales of difficulty with (male) pathologists (Sir Bernard Spillsbury in particular) and male funeral directors who were uncomfortable with a female embalmer.

### 2.5.2 BIE Characteristics.

When considering the issue of social construction and the funeral industry within which it is set, how can one describe the BIE and with what type of analogy? It may be justified to consider the embalmer as part of a 'caste-like' social construction system, with relatively rigid boundaries between each distinct occupation and the concept of pollution demarcating the place of the lower levels from those above. Katz (cited in Etzioni 1969) used this phrase to describe the 'unscaleable wall' between nurses and physicians. But this approach over-emphasises the barriers between the



different aspects of the industry. Quigley (cited in Chatterjee and Sharma 1994) notes this pervasive caste concern with purity and impurity, but caste status is fixed at birth and its focus is on maintaining the 'purity' of certain groups by establishing inviolable boundaries - the influence of lineage is obviously absent from BIE circles. (The first son to follow his father into chairmanship of a BIE division only occurred in 1997, seventy years after its formation). BIE membership is an acknowledged promotion route for members to qualify in the BIE and then (having presumably demonstrated their ability) to progress on to management and administrative tasks. However to emphasize the notion of pollution, the 'caste' explanation has some value in describing the control by an elevated 'sacred' group over subordinate 'profane' groups via exercise of the concept of uncleanness and the fairly rigid boundaries between sub-groups.

Alternatively the sociology of sects holds another possible answer. Could the BIE be regarded as a sect? Wilson (1982) sees the usefulness of sect discussion as an 'ideal type'; an ideal type he sees as a sensitizing instrument, alerting one to distinctive features. Wilson (1982) defines a sect as a religiously separated group. (The BIE maintain a strict boundary between itself and organisations that have less strict membership criteria). Sects often arose through schism - a process which echoes what happened with the BIE and the BUA. The BUA advocated a simpler form of sanitary practice which was not perceived by BIE members as being particularly beneficial. In a similar way to a sect, the BIE has claims of exclusivity (due to the qualifying barrier), it is a lay organisation, (in theory all members are of equal status) it has a membership by initiation or ritual performance (the final theory and practical exams would certainly deter all but those with strong commitment to joining the BIE) and it exercises a concern for standards among its members. Wilson also sees a sect as a protest group. Wilson's definition of exclusivity, a claim of monopoly on truth, being a lay organisation (thus emphasising equality) and intensity of commitment certainly describe the BIE very well. As a 'sensitizing instrument' the concept of a sect alerts one to key features of BIE organisation that reflect its 'real' identity. Again the reasons for joining a sect (opportunities for status, self respect and life-style) appear valid reasons for individuals to aspire to become

embalmers and thus seek BIE membership. This perhaps explains why BIE members generally are concerned that the identity of the BIE should not disappear - it is probably the only place where the skill and ability of the embalming practitioner is acknowledged. Akin to a sect (Wilson 1982), the BIE can be regarded as a small voluntary (and in some ways religious) group whose fervor for the process of embalming is not reflected within the wider funeral industry. Wilson points to the strong distinguishing feature of 'intensity of commitment for the sect' (1982:94) – enthusiasm which is encountered within BIE circles. This commitment is a striking internal feature of the BIE. The process of embalming is not, perhaps, the most appealing of procedures and does not attract particularly generous financial reward. There is an intangible 'fascination' that binds members into the BIE (consideration of this is explored under the 'coping' heading later) and this supports the contention that the process of embalming in the social construction of the dead is now a wide-spread and permanent phenomenon.

Wilson's analysis of the problems that can beset sects bear interesting fruit. An issue that Wilson mentions, that was just too similar to the BIE to ignore, was what he described as the 'second generation problem' (1982:96). Niebuhr described the process whereby radical groups become over time more concerned with training the next generation than with converting outsiders. Thus the second generation become tempered by more sedate and sophisticated attitudes - a problem which, according to at least one old embalmer (Mr Michael Dovell at a Southern dinner 26-10-1985) has seen the diminishment of fervour and consequent lessening of momentum. What was apparently an intensely committed and strongly differentiated group had become mellowed over the years.

### **2.5.3 The BIE as an organisation.**

The aim of the BIE encapsulates the goals of many working embalmers: devoted to furthering the interest, acceptance and practice of embalming throughout the world, as the technicians involved in the socially constructed corpse. The BIE acts as an agency of control and co-ordination, probably more on an unofficial footing than wielding any real authority as there is no system of licencing for embalmers as

in the USA, where Mayer (1990) documents the initial licencing of the American battlefield embalmers as a method of controlling prices, quality and behaviour of embalmers at various civil-war embalming sites. The rapid growth of American state boards of embalmers and exams specific to each state resulted in the Nineteenth century state-registration of American embalmers. Embalming is so well entrenched within the American way of death that many individuals, apparently, readily believe embalming is a legal necessity. The situation is a little different in England. Provided one is competent and has 'broken into' the industry, BIE membership is not necessarily sought, (access is probably the biggest problem for aspiring embalmers on the 'outside'). However the BIE certificate does form a sort of 'quality control' guide for potential employers; if one has qualified, then a certain level of ability should be evident. This ability not only includes practical skill but also some indication of academic aptitude which has significance for future career moves within the industry, which is explored later. The BIE also serves to protect members in (again) an unofficial capacity, for example by enabling discussion between members to take place so that information can be exchanged. Leaman (1995) commented that this form of informal discussion was used by teachers in the passing on of relevant career advice. For embalmers, information about working standards, training or education (as examples from a whole host of subjects) is unofficially publicised as members converse with one another at the regular regional or divisional meetings. These form a sort of vicarious training ground for students and new embalmers in the informal discussion of techniques and working milieu. Those who attend are able to gain information that is not otherwise so accessible, so that at a national educational convention (1992), the spectacle of less-than-satisfactory embalming rooms at one educational session enabled all to see the differing standards from around the country and raised awareness of satisfactory conditions to aim for.

The BIE is subdivided into local meetings held on a 'Divisional' basis. Divisions comprise local officers, members and students who periodically gather to hear about or discuss Institute policy and provide a local forum for any working BIE members. Annual conferences and educational weekends enable long term goals to be

defined, teaching and educational techniques to be discussed and agreed and matters concerning embalming to be debated. Discussion abounds within the BIE, with seasoned members, functioning as a pseudo reference group, holding more sway in matters of policy than younger members. This 'esprit-de-corps' of the BIE appears to be genuine and deep seated for at least one reason. No one without a real interest in the preparation of the dead would otherwise be a member. After the training and rigorous exam initiation system, potential members must still attend at a Divisional meeting (in a half-hearted form of socialisation) to accept their certificate and recite the code of ethics. Impersonal certificate receipt through the post is simply not within the rules. (This is a vague echo, for example, of the requirement for trainee barristers to dine for a specified number of times at the Inns of Court school of law before they are permitted to be called to the bar). This rule provides an opportunity for members to recruit 'active' rather than 'passive' members - but it is not always exploited. Similarly members cannot accept office until more than a year after qualifying - as a simple screening or social vetting procedure.

The BIE has been actively engaged in raising its educational standards. Halliday (cited in Charmaz 1980) argued for increasing education to enable (US) funeral service upgrading. The change in module exam marking was explained to me by the Examination secretary (per comm 28-9-94) as being due to the drive to up-grade the educational system to the standard suggested for University validation.

### **2.5.3 a Growth problems.**

It is possible to explore two aspects of growth problems which suggest that a national organisation devoted to embalming representations needs to deal with the negative and positive elements of growth. On the one hand the physical size of the BIE (while not huge) can mean that members may not feel as if they belong unless they periodically attend at meetings - a problem that needs addressing. BIE (journal) news of December 1945:3 referred to all embalmers as being 'brothers', stressing the egalitarian outlook. The friendly atmosphere, according to early BIE journals, was very apparent, but of course the larger an organisation grows, the more difficult it is to retain that same sense of conviviality. The initially rapid growth of the BIE

from the nineteen-twenties with a gradual plateau at around nine hundred and fifty British members has been tabulated in chapter 4. Another aspect of BIE growth will be discussed presently, but the expansion of the concern with hygiene, forms the other prong of the debate. However the recent movement of Great Britain into Europe, while widening the audience, has considerably diluted the sphere of influence that embalming proponents need to address and this has itself convoluted the path of further advancement.

After many years of careful investment and saving, a national office was purchased in 1988, putting the Institute on a more solid foundation. To have a permanent home, a long awaited culmination of a BIE 'pipe dream', brought with it mixed blessings, while also fulfilling one of Millerson's (1964) criteria of professionalism. A specific problem is now discussed, concerning growth, which focusses on the problems of size.

The Institute had always been run by part-time national officers, with administrative assistance from salaried part-time assistants. A glance at the role of past-Presidents demonstrates that the majority of the leading officers were drawn from the ranks of proprietor-embalmers. Employee embalmers, although present, are certainly outnumbered by those who run their own companies, as these individuals are the ones who can most easily afford to take the time out from their companies to do the job that being President entails. With the inception of a national office, a full-time post needed to be filled, thus exposing the Institute to potential problems such as oligarchic disruption (Michells 1911), whereby the channels of communication and attainment of expertise become possible manipulative tools to buttress the position (in this case) of the administrator. Although Michells originally looked at political organisations, the underlying logic of self interest is similar enough to make the comparison valid. Inevitably a full-time administrator will enter the decision making hierarchy at a high level, additionally able to deal with day to day situations and thereby imposing their own conceptions of the definition of the situation. In one move, the part-time position of national officers had become compromised by a full time administrator, skilled in the art of administrating, but woefully bereft of embalming expertise. After some disquiet and unrest, the first full-

time secretariat was replaced, but the ongoing need to monitor national office functioning can add to, rather than detract from, the amount of work needed to run the Institute. As Michells (1911) mentioned goals could be subverted through the creation of new 'centres of interest'. However to be fair, the addition of expertise in other areas was published as being of benefit (for example in the situation of gaining professional status and the processes by which it is attained). An excellent example concerned the secretariat's knowledge of the Data Protection Act 1984 which prohibited them from sending me a list of members for comparison! Michells (1911) makes a convincing argument for the logic of self-interest behind oligarchic tendencies. His analysis of goal subversion in large organisations could well apply to the BIE, but the criticism of being over determined and restrictive applies to any example of large organisations. His second line of reasoning, leadership by aristocracy, is perhaps better suited to being adapted to the BIE.

In times past the aristocracy, so we are informed, led because they were in the social position to do so, with the concomitant advantages of that position. In a similar way, the leadership of the BIE is vested in the hands of those who can afford to leave their occupations to attend at national office or elsewhere. While employee embalmers have every opportunity to do so, the final decision to attend is in the hands of an employer who might not be inclined to grant the leave of absence. The assumption that the majority of office-holding embalmers would also be directors or principals of firms is borne out by glancing at the voting sheet of candidates for positions at national conference. Although not a democratic problem, the Nepotism of the few leads to 'Bonapartism' (almost 'inherited' rulers) - especially as payment of expenses only, fails to remunerate those employees who might otherwise have entered the higher decision-making ranks.

### **2.5.3 b Professional aspirations.**

It is apparent that the undertakers' former religious style has been replaced by the trend towards embalming and 'scientism', this being described by Howarth as a 'central plank of professionalism' (1992:89). So could the embalmers' technical skills and knowledge pool qualify him or her as a professional? The Open University



programme on embalmers (circa 1974) featured a funeral director (somewhat negatively) describing embalmers as (only) "trained technicians". Dorn and Hopkins' (1985) learned textbook on the chemistry of embalming produces a definition of embalming as a 'craft trade learnt by apprenticeship' (1985:3), which hardly fits into any pseudo medical aspirations. So the embalming occupation lacks the status of the groups they emulate and the insistence upon a period of academic study, while contributing to their professionalising aspirations, does not propel them far enough. A problem reflecting this lack of status concerns the embalmer's knowledge of potentially infectious subjects. In the interests of patient confidentiality, all persons are to be treated as if a potentially lethal disease was contained within, which fits in with the notions of the patients' charter, but means that subjects which are actually hazardous cannot be differentiated from those who are not and thus extra precautions that the embalmer might need to take, impossible to apply. Embalmers have to rely on 'mortuary gossip' (Howarth 1993) which, as the name suggests, is an unofficial source of information, and suggests how poorly embalming fits with the dominant medical discourse.

Discussions suggest that the embalming occupation fits the mould of a semi-profession. In a similar way to the aspirations of funeral directors an article often found on agendas concerns the status of embalmers. In particular the occupational and technical distinction is regarded as meriting the elevation of the occupation. There are however, some obvious problems which need to be explored. Historically embalming has been practised by high status, male groups - Egyptian priests and seventeenth century medical surgeons- but this is not so now. Freidson defines a profession as 'an occupational monopoly with a position of dominance in a division of labour' (1973:24). Embalming does not satisfy this. Similarly Millerson's (1964) six major distinguishing points describe the usual badges of a profession, but again the chronically weak position of embalmers in the division of funeral labour needs to be borne in mind. The debate about professional aspirations can be sub-divided into two separate areas: that of the BIE's quest for governmental recognition and the hidden meaning of the BIE qualification itself. Katz (cited in Etzioni 1969) made the comment that few professionals talk as much about being professionals as those

whose professional status is in doubt. When discussing Illich's (1977) criticism of the disabling professions, though, it would surely be tempting to many individuals to aspire to that level of power, authority and status. Smale (1985) has documented the lengthy search of funeral directors for improved status, reflected in letters and editorials in occupational journals. Howarth (1992) also saw the aspiration for professional status as significant in constructing the funeral directors' modern role. Howarth sees the aspiration for professional status as of key significance in constructing the modern role - but of the funeral director, not the embalmer. Howarth also implicitly assumes that the only skilled job in funeral directing is embalming, which replaced the pseudo religious approach of earlier undertakers. She commented that her American sources found the incomplete use of embalming by English funeral directors puzzling. It is clear that the BIE approximates more fully the notion of a semi-profession, as outlined by Hugman (1991) and an example illustrating this follows later. The criteria include a lack of clearly demarcated scientific knowledge bases, being based upon skills rather than knowledge and having no independent occupational government. The first criteria is probably the easiest to defend, since there is a relatively coherent knowledge base (in comparison to that for funeral directing, for example) and this has been the focus of development for some decades. However it is clear that the ability is skills-based rather than based upon knowledge itself and that the running of the BIE is bound up with the inter-related funeral organisations that together make up the funeral industry. The obvious significance of this situation needs to be addressed by embalmers, who hold, therefore, a contradictory position of clearly superior technical skills but lacking the (relative) power of occupationally related funeral directors. Naylor suggests that the status of the funeral industry is generally rising, but the educational levels are too low. Moreover progress made is very slow. This is the major problem - that there appears to the ordinary member to be virtually no progress from year to year and information is passed in a necessarily covert manner. An example of one such individual might be Archie, a now-resigned ex- member, who was critical of the BIE's stance to infection issues in the nineteen-seventies. He complained of the "moving of the goalposts" in relation to issues of practice; trouble making 'boat rockers' were not

going to be tolerated. Some of the 'ruling hierarchy' then were, apparently, more administrative than 'hands-on' oriented embalmers - issues of practice were not of primary concern then, but are now! Archie mentioned to me the 'wealth of information that over the years has been suppressed', information that might have created 'waves'. Although a highly credible, articulate and able individual, he did not get (or did not want) a fuller answer to the problems of which he was aware. The result: disgruntlement over a twenty year period, a complete withdrawal from BIE activities and the consequent loss of any input and assistance that he might have been able to offer. Judging from journal articles penned by his hand, this could have been beneficial.

Official recognition will improve the status of embalmers - but recognition will entail either a private members bill in parliament (cost approx £50,000 according to Mr. G. Taylor, the 1995 president) or a granting of a Royal Charter. It is generally agreed that neither pathway has any immediate prospect of success. So has any real progress been made in the quest for official recognition? The post-war period journals reflect the determination of members to create 'something better' than the pre-war situation. The major product of this was the drafting of a 'five point programme', discussed before. To the BIE's credit, a virtually unanimous requirement of contemporary airlines is efficient embalming (plus official certificate of treatment) which demonstrates that at least some move has been made to recognise the process. As an indicator of success, the doubling of BIE membership from pre-war to the present day indicates the demand for embalmers - again a tacit recognition of the process. Tacit recognition, however, does not compare to official acknowledgement.

#### **2.5.4 The BIE qualification**

Integral to the processes of corpse social construction by embalmers are the skills they utilise, which are bound up with the process of qualifying. The process of qualifying enables the proficient embalmer to manipulate his or her skills in the construction of mortuary reality. Saunders (per com 25-1-94) has commented that economic and BIE career are usually bound up together - most BIE members have

no other business commitments (although there are obvious exceptions). This may explain why individuals bother about the BIE - it has been mentioned to me in a form of 'mortuary gossip' that the BIE also functions as an unofficial employment agency. This can work as follows. If one can build a 'career' within the BIE by taking progressively higher and more responsible office, this may act as a barometer of ability to potential employers from elsewhere in the industry. If one demonstrates useful qualities on committees then one becomes known within the Institute and this can be of great advantage in such a compact employment field. Training and certification act as motivating forces - to perform in a slapdash manner would mean that the embalmer would experience dissonance (and would find employment difficult) in having what is perceived by many embalmers to be a 'professional' qualification while acting as a 'cowboy'. This, however, produces another issue that many emerging semi-professions experience.

Credentialism (Dore 1976), illustrates the pursuit of BIE qualifications as a step on the ladder of hierarchy, a form of 'diploma disease'. Dore's analysis of the pressure for greater and greater qualification as a pursuit of higher social prestige has been reflected in the BIE and the more general funeral industry for many years. Dore's objection of 'qualificationism' is echoed within the BIE. Just as a graduate profession attains higher social prestige, so qualification escalation is seen as a way of raising the social prestige of embalmers. The charge of 'learning to remember rather than to understand' (1976:81) is made by individuals critical of the theoretical loading of the qualifying process. This can lead to conflict with those who want to downgrade the qualification, in an attempt to make it more available. However this training reflects the position of Simpson (cited in Etzioni 1969) whereby the direct pursuit of the organisational goal (embalming) is practised at lower levels, while 'ascending the ladder' leads one to administrative and overseeing tasks - as is found in the co-operative and SCI (now Dignity funerals) companies. This situation reflects what is described as a semi-profession by Simpson (1969). Hugman (1991) links the managed professions and corporatism, and it seems apparent that here the embalming process could more easily fit, as some researchers seem to regard embalming as a sub-specialism of funeral directing.

BIE membership could be regarded as a badge denoting the professional aspirations of a part of the funeral occupation. Apart from those actively involved solely in the embalming process, membership confers few advantages for office-bound administrators, since embalming and administration can be regarded as mutually exclusive activities. Nevertheless many job applications for branch or other managers carry the legend 'BIE preferred' - perhaps also the qualification itself denotes a certain level of general ability which reflects more than just proficiency in embalming. Professionalism is a sensitive area for any embalmers, as BIE members work hard to obtain the certificate but unqualified persons (for example the individuals in both Smale's (1985) and Howarth's (1992) research) disregard this.

The focus of the debate about professionalising must encompass the key issue for embalmers - that of qualifying as a member. Since the lack of English licencing restrictions mean that any individual could practice as an embalmer, one could ask the question 'why bother with qualifying'. An obvious first answer is that the BIE qualification is a badge of achievement (many student essays answering the question 'why do you want to be an embalmer' mention this). The possession of the initials MBIE, the certificate and atmosphere of the Institute make the BIE a status symbol. BIE membership confers a certain educational prestige, (as a 'learned institute') separating one from unqualified persons and denoting that greater knowledge of death processes (for funeral director-embalmers) has been attained. In addition, BIE membership can be seen as a promotional qualification - to become a manager it is often a part of the job description (according to Philippa at Keele 1994, at least with reference to Huddersfield Co-op), although actual practice in embalming is not necessarily required. The 1964 NAFD manual specifically denotes embalming as an 'ancillary qualification' of a funeral director; being an embalmer makes one a better funeral manager. This is an explicit theme of Franz's (1947) American text book on page 1. This approach was adopted by SCI, the American funeral giant, whose rapid invasion of the UK funeral market might have created a demand for dual-qualified embalmer-managers. But this did not materialise. Additionally being a qualified embalmer enables one to detect and curtail 'soldiering' by practical embalmers. (Soldiering is a process of working at a leisurely pace if

one's supervisor is unsure of the nature of your job). American business-funeral text sources show how the successful funeral director must be a competent embalmer - it is an ancillary skill for funeral directors to acquire (or manipulate) in order to achieve financial success. There are, however subtle extra meanings to the BIE qualification.

In some Co-operative funeral establishments (Keith Williams 1-9-94) the possession of the BIE qualification is seen to denote supervisory ability - if a BIE member is on the premises then non-qualified embalmers are permitted to practice. (Probably because if un-qualified individuals get into trouble they can be 'rescued' by the BIE person - who has not been trained to teach or supervise but nevertheless is expected to). This is very similar to the assessment scenario of trainee embalmers under the government sponsored NVQ (National Vocational Qualification) scheme - any BIE member is able to assess (apparently because he or she is vocationally qualified) and this is an implicit 'property' of being qualified. An unexpected aspect to BIE qualification appears as "young buck management". It appears quite common for young sons of funeral company proprietors to be steered into embalming as a way of diverting potentially disruptive influences away from struggles for control of the firm. By their keeping "young bucks" away from the ageing principal in the office, the process of power negotiation is postponed as the next generation experience the apparent promotion from the workshop to the embalming room. This perception of social promotion might also be the motivation for other workers to aspire to leave the 'shop-floor', although as a method of getting from workshop to office it is not the most obvious route. Of course it may well be that BIE members will desert the Institute, upon asking the questions on the previous pages of "Why bother"? The parallel organisation, the BIFD, with a reasonable overlap of members, admitted (The Journal, Summer 1994:23) the loss of 245 members (10.6% of membership according to the Autumn 94:7 journal) and the consequent need to reduce overheads, such as the magazine, to balance the books. A similar fate would apply to the BIE if the perception of a valuable and necessary qualification started to evaporate. However being a qualified embalmer demarcates one from both the workforce and from the domination of management (since management would rarely wish to leave the comfort of the office and enter the embalming theatre) - but it

appears to endow upon the individual certain 'pariah-like' qualities in the process of constructing the socially acceptable corpse. Nevertheless embalming qualifications appear to be a sought-after commodity which suggests it has a valuable position in contemporary management of the corpse.

## **2.6 Overview.**

This chapter has documented the changing historical relationship between preserved and present bodies. Embalming preserved the relationship between the person who had died, the state and the afterworld by enabling the continuation of status of the dead person. Socioculturally body meanings have varied and this chapter has illustrated the changing relationships between the body and the soul. In all societies the displayed corpse has been the link between mourners and further spiritual existence, (Van Gennep 1907). In early civilisations the preserved royal body acted as a metaphor of society, in early England it acted as a metaphor of medical interests, but was abandoned by surgeons, whose medical constructions of the corpse left the corpse "marooned" when attention shifted to the live body.

In America, the public nature of corpse display at funerals has led to embalming being routinely carried out. This was due to the martyrdom of President Lincoln and the unifying nature of funeral rites after the civil war of 1861-5. Embalming in England in the early Twentieth century was not important because the hidden corpse and the impact of World War 1 undermined the significance of the body at the funeral. The hygiene discourse was not powerful enough because traditionally English management of the corpse involved 'quarantine' or distancing instead of treatment of it. This further encouraged the diminishing significance of the body from late Victorian times (Cannadine 1981). By the mid Twentieth century embalming was being regarded in commercial ways.

In the later Twentieth century, mobility was a strong impetus for embalming, but World War 2 disrupted the organisation of the BIE. The post-war social hygiene move was a potentially helpful discourse, and embalming became more and more acceptable to funeral firms as a method of managing the hidden corpse. Custodial

responsibilities of funeral firms increased embalming constructions (Jupp, cited in Clark 1993) but the increasingly private discourse concerning death (Gorer 1965) has also hindered this.

However the consumer element has grown, although English society is not the same as American. Grief in England is private and no public display of the corpse occurs. Where experts such as Hinson (1968) supported hygiene-based embalming practices in America, in England experts such as Howie (1978) undermined embalming practices. But despite the hidden corpse, presentational, consumer culture discourses are now dominant, which means that embalming is deployed covertly to produce an acceptable appearance. This had led to a significant growth of embalming practitioners in the last fifty years, which indicates that social constructions of the corpse are now firmly established as Howarth (1992) noted. However as death is well hidden in contemporary England, nobody knows about embalmers and the role of embalming in the presentation of the dead, because the body is now not an object of public social significance. Nevertheless the role of embalming in the social construction of the corpse should not be underestimated.

The BIE, the official umbrella organisation that oversees the training and qualifying of embalmers has therefore struggled to become socially prominent, but this has not prevented its attracting members and growing in numbers for over 75 years.



### **Chapter 3 EMBALMING AND THE CORPSE**

Death and embalming clearly act upon a corpse. Consequently theoretical considerations that hitherto have been largely illustrated by reference to living bodies may be equally relevant to an understanding of dead bodies. In this chapter I want to look at the relationship between corpses and the living in general (and the embalmer in particular). I aim to commence with a description of the seminal work of Hertz which explains the importance of the relationship between different aspects of funeral rites. This is essential for an understanding of the decline in importance of the public body identified in chapter 2 and the decline of religious explanations related to the presence of a 'soul'. The impact of scientific rationalism will also be discussed and thus a consideration of different cultural meanings concerning the corpse will be explored.

It is also necessary to look at Van Gennep's (1907) important work on society and death rituals. All these rituals had beginnings, middles and ends, with the themes of liminality and transition dominating funeral rituals. Changes from person to corpse and possibly to ghost or ancestor were achieved within a transitional phase whose main function Van Gennep described as a threshold period. I propose to explore the regulated nature of the corpse prior to its being transported into the liminal period, where dominant medical and legal discourses regulate it. However equally central are two more recent developments namely:

1. The development within sociology of the sociology of the living body which provides clues as to the sociology of the corpse in the contemporary situation. As soul belief has diminished, I will assess the view that this may lead to a greater emphasis being placed on the remaining body, or to its loss of significance as mourners cope with death in other ways. It is worth noting, however, that although the corpse was at one point the body in life, the body is not exactly the same as a corpse. Nevertheless sociological interpretations of the body provide (I argue) a fertile matrix for corpse discussion and I propose to explore the similarity between regulation of the body and the corpse.

2. The 'post-industrial' decline of meta-narratives ie those of religion and medicine, and the increasing social space for other interpretations based upon issues of

personal growth (Bowlby 1980). The possible impact of this upon death rituals and actions associated with the corpse will be explored.

### 3.1 Hertz.

As this thesis is so intimately bound up with the underlying conceptual foundation generated by Hertz (1960), it is salient at this point to introduce his work so as to more clearly illustrate the focus concerning death rites and embalming.

Hertz's study of death representations among the Dayak of Indonesia showed a clearly defined goal to undertake 'an intensive study of a limited and clearly defined cultural region where the facts can be examined in their full context of ideas and practices' (1960:14). The practice of a temporary first burial and a final, secondary burial demonstrated the transitional nature of the rites and reunited the physical remains of the corpse with their ancestors. This was taken to indicate that the condition of the body was an indicator of the state of the soul. This also illustrated the complex mass of beliefs, emotions and activities grafted onto the organic event of death which bound the corpse, the soul and the mourners in the intimate, transitional relationship which Hertz indicated followed physical death.

Hertz's enduring contribution has been based upon the manner in which his theoretical observations can be applied in pre-industrial societies although there are writers (e.g. Williams 1990) who point out that applying these formulations to Western Industrial societies is not so straightforward. I examine some contemporary English evolutions with this triangular schema over the next few pages. As is widely known, Hertz focussed upon the corpse, the soul and the mourners and hence the relationship between these three funeral elements in his tripartite analysis. Hertz was convinced that the loss of an individual also involved the loss of a whole set of relationships involving the person who had died. Adapting to a new set of relationships involved an interval in which the tasks of reconciling these changes could take place. This was the transitional period and Hertz's understanding concerning death and its effect upon the body, the soul and the mourners was that this was

'not completed in one instantaneous act, death was to be regarded not so much as an issue of destruction but of transition'.

1960:48

The issue of changing relationships enables a pattern to be detected regarding contemporary transitional periods. Following Hertz, it can be argued that as contemporary concepts of the soul have also receded, so the religious disposal rituals have also contracted and rational cremation has increased. Diminished soul significance may thus either place greater emphasis on the body, as the only remnant of the person left and therefore of crucial significance for the mourners, or contribute to the commensurate loss of bodily significance at the funeral as, without a soul, the physical body becomes irrelevant and merely requires discarding. The transitional period, however, does not occur within a vacuum, it is itself part of society because it is embedded within a social system, which therefore means that it reflects social processes. Contemporary social processes arguably emphasise cleanliness and body image. Where the corpse was once allowed to decompose freely in the 1940s and 1950s (Gore 1993) it is now the subject of preservative techniques. Hertz suggested that the corpse was an object of fear precisely because of its link with its prior social status, its departure producing a rent in the social fabric. It is because of the need to repair, or overcome, this gaping hole (produced by the demise of the socially significant) that prolonged and elaborate rituals are performed. Thus the concept of death, from Hertz's perspective, was to be regarded more as a process than an event, with meanings negotiated by society, by individual mourners and other interactants.

However the socially insignificant attract far more spartan attention since they 'have not yet entered the visible society' (Hertz 1960:84). Hertz's triangular schema of events is therefore altered due to the lack of mourner involvement, and here the corpse is itself not significant, since there are few mourners at the funeral to mark the transition. This accords entirely with Hertz's ideas, since as the relationship between Body, Soul and Mourners is altered, so the attention paid to the corpse will also alter. The issue of the changing definition of what constitutes a significant body is illustrated by the ongoing debate concerning still-born children and non-viable foetuses. Still-born children are those who are born dead, who therefore die within the womb. Babies born at much earlier stages of gestation, who are considered to be too poorly developed to be viable are termed pre-viable or non-viable. What is intriguing about these very small individuals is the changing significance that these infants have largely

undergone. Pressure from action groups such as SANDS (Still-born and Neo-natal Death Society) has meant that obsequies for these very small people have emerged, when before 1992 all that was considered to have happened was a 'non event'. Shrinking belief in the soul and a growth of individualism can mean that the loss of these infants focuses attention upon the crushing loss of a potential son or daughter with a whole lifetime of experiences negated. Paradoxically for these tiny individuals, the concept of 'personhood' appears to have been extended, granting them a greater significance when religious belief is apparently contracting in England. Pressure to enable an 'authentic' funeral to occur has been applied because the definition of what constitutes an individual has had to evolve, due to effort from the mourning public. Hertz suggests that the corpse is feared because of its potential menace due to a residual amount of "spiritual essence".

'It is afflicted by a special infirmity, is an object of solicitude for the survivors and at the same time an object of fear'. 1960:33

Hertz's concept of corpse pollution can be seen within contemporary funeral practice. The apparently panic-stricken rush to remove the corpse from the domestic sphere e.g. Pine (1975) and the enforced isolation of it (Howarth 1992) and its use as a theatrical prop (Smale 1985) suggests that despite the obvious growth of cremation and the consequently rapid destruction of the body, the contemporary English corpse has not lost all significance.

Hertz's theories can be utilised to explain the presence of the mourners at the funeral, the corpse in the chapel of rest and the vague propitiation of the 'soul' by the proper rites. This religious conclusion to the overwhelming majority of funerals is still very common despite dwindling belief in the soul and suggests that the relationship between these elements is still valid, although altered, in contemporary England. The body/soul link prevalent in mainstream Christian beliefs still appears robust - the corpse is almost always present at the funeral, as the symbolically significant icon, assisting in the plugging of the social void created at death. It is with some irony, however, that diminishing religious belief, leading to 'liturgical bingo' (Naylor 1989) means that religion is employed where belief is tenuous. However the strenuous efforts made by many mourners to have the corpse present at the funeral underlines

its significance to them. Hertz's concept of the transition of the corpse in its metaphorical situation is further elaborated upon by his analysis concerning the threshold situation, where the focus upon transition is marked. It is arguable, of course, that in England the contemporary physical transition itself is now metaphorical, since no aspect of putrefaction is allowed to appear, the opposite of Hertz's (1960:48) observations in pre-literate societies. This situation accords completely with the normless state that the threshold situation encompasses. Arguably the dead are only 'partly' dead and are maintained in this contradictory stasis by the efforts of the embalmer with the corpse and the co-operation of others within the death system. This paradoxical 'unchanging-ness' and creation of different roles for the dead mean that usual parameters are strained, which supports the perception of 'normlessness'.

It is at this point that problems creep into a 'Hertzian' analysis in England. The transition of the corpse does not, now, occur within the transitional phase as the funeral is far more compressed in time than in pre-literate societies. Modern techniques such as refrigeration and embalming maintain the contrary unchanged condition of the corpse. It would now be more correct to regard the physical transition occurring at the climax of the funeral, which usually involves cremation. The diminishing significance of the soul since the 1930s in contemporary England needs also to be explored, since this formed an integral part of Hertz's analysis in the pre-literate societies he explored. Concepts of the soul have been replaced by the self (Berthelot 1986, Bradbury 1999). However religious frameworks of belief in England are clearly still in place (eg Catholic or Protestant theologies) although with arguably reduced significance. Religion is used, however, as the familiar context surrounding body discarding, not as the process whereby the soul is released. Mourners appear to react with the corpse for personal reasons.

The corpse is still used as a metaphor, but I argue that its significance for the mourners may be as a metaphor of personal, not spiritual, significance. If true, this necessitates a re-interpretation of Hertz's theories. While the corpse is clearly now a solitary figure, unconnected to future existence but still tied to past life, it is still regarded (as Hertz suggested) as an object of special attention and this attention is part of the focus of this thesis and will be explored within the data reported in chapters

4 and 5. On this argument, due to diminished soul belief, the corpse has therefore lost its 'indicator' status as a sign of the progression of the soul into ancestor-hood. Instead the corpse has become a reminder of past, not future, significance. Therefore its significance at the funeral is now changed, perhaps being transiently important prior to cremation and thereafter consigned to oblivion when ashes are dispersed. For contemporary, secular citizens, the corpse may be considered irrelevant. However it seems plausible to argue that mourners may now react to the corpse as the reminder of the person, but for other personal reasons. This would not mean, however, that Hertz's work is invalid, but that the contemporary situation needs a refocusing of social significance onto the corpse and its state within the liminal, funeral period. It is, however, the transitional period that is of major importance here and accordingly it is to another theorist that we should now turn to examine the issues surrounding this.

### **3.2 Van Gennep.**

Van Gennep was concerned with the formulation of the issue of 'rites de passage' – which comprised an analysis of the rituals which accompanied individuals' negotiation of life crises and the methods whereby the societies concerned coped with the loss of members and re-allocated roles. A transitional period cushioned the interference to the social fabric occasioned by events such as birth, marriage, initiation and death. Van Gennep was concerned to point out the issue of regeneration implicit within the rituals of societies and also the dichotomy between the sacred and the profane, apparent in less developed societies such as the Yako of Eastern Nigeria (whom Van Gennep actually studied) but nevertheless present in more developed societies. It is clear that one of the major thrusts of Van Gennep's writings concerned the issue of the liminal period in rites of passage, where individuals were in a threshold, intermediate state between two separate conditions. Rituals were used to express this notion and changes in the corpse were regarded as corresponding to this transition, which culminated in the dead becoming ancestors and the corpse being integrated or incorporated into a final resting place. Van Gennep (1906) emphasised the separation from an earlier and fixed position in the social structure (being alive and occupying certain social roles) and a transitional normless period characterised by

ambivalence, followed by a re-incorporation of people into a changed circumstance, (mourners into new roles, the dead into ancestors) with a clearly defined new social status. Van Gennep regarded the three aspects of death rites of passage as pre-liminal, liminal and post-liminal, the focus obviously being on the liminal, threshold period itself and the entrance into, passage along and eventual exit, of people who became involved within it. While in weddings and circumcision rites this pattern seemed quite clear, within funerary ritual the overwhelming issue concerned that of transition. Transition occurred because the communities originally being examined did not see death as instantaneous (arguably similar in our culture to some extent) but all liminal; ritual conditions included deathly, terminal representations, suggesting that 'dying' was the major focus of the liminal period (as opposed to other rites which included a certain 'dying' such as marriage or initiation which involved a change of status that was not terminal). The focus of death rites was not entirely upon the corpse. Van Gennep (1906) saw the liminal period of the living as a counterpart of the liminal period of the deceased, the termination of the first sometimes coinciding with the termination of the second. During the transitional period itself the individual was, according to Van Gennep (1906), isolated from both the sacred and the profane world and marooned in an intermediate, threshold position where the temporary suspension of norms occurs and:

'isolated and maintained in an intermediate position, held between heaven and earth, just as the deceased on his bier or in his temporary coffin is suspended between life and true death'.  
1906: 186.

Turner [V] (1967) suggests that the process of rotting provides the metaphor of a social and moral transition in pre-literate societies (which is now missing from modern Western death rites). This normless interim period reflects completely the contemporary ambivalent condition of the corpse as it appears to straddle the gulf between life and death. (Within this period the contemporary corpse is unreal since it does not exhibit the usual decomposition characterising authentic biological death, but its lack of animation betrays its true condition as being a corpse). It can be suggested that this transition has become modified in English funerary practice so that the moment of death and the final act of committal (at cemetery or crematorium) are not

interrupted by reminders of corruption, but the apparent incorruptibility of the corpse appears 'normal'.

The liminal, transitional period for mourners and the dead, thus, is manifested in differing ways, but the transitional period itself may appear to have a duration and complexity granting it a 'sort of autonomy' (1906:146), and it becomes a threshold (liminal) period between two firmly established states. Again this can be detected within contemporary reactions to the corpse where mourners' actions suggest that the corpse is not completely 'socially dead', but at the same time the corpse cannot be realistically regarded as alive. Contemporary suspension of the corpse between life and true death is explored in some of the projects in chapters 4 and 5.

Turner (1967) also emphasised the concept of transition in initiation since this 'had marked and protracted marginal...phases' (1967:95). This autonomy is a significant part of the transitional period, since it enables the temporary suspension of reality to be accomplished as it is 'self contained'. However Metcalfe and Huntington (1991) record Van Gennep's insight that this transitional phase of liminality "is never separated from the notion of change, process and passage" (1991:33). Gluckman (1962) sees the process of transition in terms of the external imposition of ritual sequence, not in change within the dead. Thus the liminal condition of the corpse signifies a sacred, ambivalent, intermediate condition where, arguably, an individual may not be completely socially dead - suspended as Van Gennep could say between life and true death, in a condition of autonomous or self-contained normlessness. The residual nature of this sacred-ness or holiness (Grainger 1988) explains the continuing pseudo-religious conception of mortuary accommodation. Grainger explains rituals in terms of social relations - the sequences of the rites are used to alter perceptions of social relationships. The corpse is often subject to the ongoing ties of kith and kin and these ties are manipulated within the liminal period and the corpse is ideally relinquished in varying stages by mourners as they approach the conclusion of the funeral. Exactly how mourners relinquish the link with their dead relative is, however, a personal matter.



Contemporary corpses in England are nearly always enclosed, after presentation processes are completed, inside a sort of “spare room” where comfort, decor and pleasant surroundings are deemed important. Thus the corpse may need clothing (although unable to feel the cold), aftershave and deodorant (to produce a familiar aroma to the lifeless frame), or glasses (despite having no sight) or favourite possessions (which mourners ‘know’ cannot be appreciated). This reflects Van Gennep’s comment that the corpse in the coffin was suspended between life and true death, since the corpse was believed to be on the threshold – neither one thing nor the other. Therefore it would appear appropriate to regard this period of transition as being unreal, since the corpse (and to an extent the mourners) do not properly fit into a secure category but exist in an intermediate situation. At the conclusion of the period the mourners are reincorporated in the social fabric and the corpse (in pre-literate societies) was on the path to ancestor-hood. However in contemporary societies the corpse may suffer no similar reintegration and it is here that the tensions between mourner expectations and rationally-led discourses become heightened. Rational discourses contain nothing regarding a soul and hence react to the ‘corpse’ as merely an inanimate object, whereas many mourners have widely differing expectations here and focus upon the corpse as requiring shelter and attention. Writers such as Parkes (1972) and Bowlby (1980) have commented upon these clashes of different expectations within the context of a medical/ rational disposal system. Rational discourses regard the corpse as an object; many mourners regard the corpse as the remainder of the person which needs discarding in a therapeutic fashion to produce a ‘good death’ (Bradbury 1999, Rose 1999).

The negotiation of this different status is marked, within contemporary English society, with the corpse itself. Funeral premises have evolved to accommodate the corpse, products are available concerning the corpse and embalmers expend much effort in treating the corpse. But as the soul has diminished in significance, so has the process of discarding become more complicated, which has prompted various discursive ‘accommodations’. These ‘accommodations’ are the focus of the various social and religious rituals that comprise this period, such as registering the dead

person out of the social fabric, personally accommodating their demise by bureaucratically arranging the funeral with all of its concomitant elements and negotiating the religious 'farewell ceremony' as the dead are moved into the 'afterlife' by the clergy (although beliefs in this future existence are not shared by all mourners). Metcalfe & Huntington (1991) suggest that these transitional issues dominate funeral symbolism and it is these outside forces that reflect Gluckman's (1962:1) externally imposed ritual sequences.

According to Van Gennep the survivors are tainted or polluted by the spectre of death - but the corpse may retain aspects of former personality which reflect the outlook of many mourners' attitudes to the corpse. This is an excellent example of the normless state itself, where 'true' death is a partial state. The hidden aspects of the liminal period, attributed to the Western aversion to decomposition (Hinton 1967, Illich 1976, Bronfen 1992), the denial of death (Aries 1981) and the preference for the wholesome body (Howarth 1992), allow the need for the embalmer to remain hidden, enabling other apparent 'experts' to question the need for this apparently unnecessary process; a process driven, assert the rational critics, (e.g. Puckle (1926), Spottiswoode (1991) only by the capitalist desire for profits. Bradfield (1994) attributes this Western aversion to decomposition to a (Nineteenth century) fear of decay, pollution and contamination which aroused fear in many people. This issue can also be seen in reactions in America and Ireland (Prior 1989) where religious belief is strong, but exposure to the presented corpse is common place. The 'natural' processes have become culturally unacceptable, so embalming may thus be regarded as a hidden discourse within a hidden liminal period where the body is, figuratively if not literally, betwixt life and death.

Van Gennep's theories, however, also need to be re-evaluated in the light of contemporary Western beliefs. As belief in the soul has dwindled in Western thought, so the liminal period for the corpse has shifted from being that associated with the successful manipulation of the soul towards its destination and now ends with the conclusion of the funeral rites themselves. This needs to be considered in relation to Van Gennep's ideas since this alters the longer term areas of the rites he originally

encountered and focuses Western death rites into the funeral period itself. Nevertheless, the significance of the transitional period itself is not altered, but merely abbreviated. Chapters 4 and 5 explore this in more detail.

So, after death and prior to disposal, the corpse enters this liminal period where it is betwixt and between - not alive but endowed with vestigial personality by the bereaved; decaying but prevented from manifesting this change because it is not completely socially dead. Physical distancing of the liminal dead (who are often not wholly regarded as being really dead) has led to social distancing. In common with both Van Gennep and Hertz is the issue concerning dealing with the corpse after death. However the control of the corpse occurs within the matrix of the state. So it is timely to briefly consider the processes of regulation that characterise the contemporary state.

### 3.3 The state

The body is...a point on which a whole array of medical, legal and bureaucratic practices are concatenated. Prior, L 1987:134

The influence of the state needs to be considered regarding the treatment and control of the corpse. It is widely held by theorists such as Foucault (1977) and Baudrillard (1993) that the major issue that the state has with the body concerns control and regulation. This unfortunately competes with personal issues that mourners may have concerning their dead. For the purposes of this chapter, issues of state regulation will focus upon the action of medical, legal and clerical discourses and their role in the regulation of the corpse. Turner (1992) describes these as 'superstructures' - a term usefully depicting the major defining foci of contemporary society.

There are many examples of state control of the corpse, which Prior (1987) explores and dissects with clarity. The coroner, in problematic situations, is reluctant to release the body or grant access, possibly until the opening and adjourning of the inquest. For police personnel the body could be the locus of potential homicide clues. For the registrar the body is represented by the governmental bureaucracy of paperwork and cannot be released from the death system until the appropriate form is

received. Special paperwork is required to release the states' jurisdiction over the body when it is to be moved from England and Wales, out of the country, which illustrates the invisible hold over the dead physical body that the state exerts. Broderick (1978) comments that removal of the body out of England can only be authorised by a coroner. The tear-off portion of the registrar's disposal slip (which indicates regulated disposal once it is sent off by the authority overseeing burial or cremation) thus indicates when the funeral has taken place. The intervention of state officers such as the coroner, vicar-general and home office enable the body to be regulated through the death system. Thus the coroner authorises examination by autopsy, the vicar-general permits the removal of the buried dead from consecrated ground via a Bishop's faculty and the home office similarly regulates exhumation and movement of the corpse under civil law.

Each area overlaps with other areas as the corpse is manipulated by state control. This control extends to overseas "outposts" that regularise, through the various consuls, the passage of British subjects through the international death system. Deficits in bureaucracy that could cause problems have to be specially procured at H.M. Home office, London to enable foreign certificates to be re-shuffled for satisfactory processing in England. The death system is so regimented that there is even a certificate to enable individuals NOT to register where the death occurs outside the U.K. legal system – a form whose lack (in the appropriate circumstances) would render the responsible person liable to prosecution, if the funeral (and thus potentially un-regulated disposal of the body) were to go ahead.

Deaths that are 'difficult' and hence require careful regulating are processed even more thoroughly by the state. Baudrillard sees the state control over death threatened by actions such as suicide, which challenges the 'orthodoxy of value' (1993:176) when the suicide destroys the parcel of capital (in his physical body) which he has at the State's disposal. Baudrillard describes these individual challenges such as suicide as being those that 'strike at the vitals' (1993:176) which explains WHY the three agencies above so meticulously deal with the body - they are re-asserting the control of the state over the body at death.

These state constructions tend to problematise the body, which produces tensions with "rival" constructions. These influences have led to the sequestration (or separation) of death from public space in the post-modern age (Mellor and Schilling 1993) as the state finds death a problem, so the corpse is highly regulated. The body has been closely regulated for a period spanning many centuries, but the manner of regulation has been changed. Foucault (1977) concentrated on the change from action upon the 'physical' means of control on the natural body (and the soul constrained within) such as prison and torture, to more subtle and indirect action designed to 'reshape' the social body. Baudrillard (1993) explored more subtle institutional methods of control (such as fashion or political economy), which 'produces the pacification of life' (1993:173). It is hardly surprising that he described urban life as a 'ghetto of codes' (1993:77) where one 'lives or dies according to a social visa' (1993:174). This coded visa is, I argue, strongly prevalent as the state continues to influence the social construction of the dead. The dead body appears to have been stripped by the state of any rights normally associated with citizenship during anxious regulation. For example the crown (the state) has the power to take possession of a body (usually through the office of the coroner) and according to the public health (control of disease) Act 1984 section 48.1 a justice of the peace 'can order it to be transported elsewhere', or dispose of it.

Regulation is at its most difficult when at the borders of control, since it is at the margins of influence that no single clear definition applies. So in this context the corpse becomes marginal. Douglas sees marginality as any object (or idea) likely to 'confuse or contradict cherished classifications' (1966:36). These cherished classifications are likely to be those propagated by dominant agencies such as the state.

Douglas (1966:160) sees the concept of 'dirt' as matter recognisably 'out of place' and a threat to good order when wrappings (etc) are seen as objectionable. Dirt itself only exists within a system, so the presence of dirt reveals the system itself, the same system which carefully regulates the ordered disposal of the dead. If one can regard the lifeless corpse as a 'wrapping', (the physical body wrapping the persona or soul) Douglas comments that 'their half identity clings to them' (1966:160), which leads to

their marginal perception by the state. As Douglas says (1966:96) danger 'is controlled by ritual'. This ritual can take the form of religious ritual at the disposal service, of hygiene ritual in the separation, seclusion and treatment of the dead. Victor Turner's analysis (1967) of the liminal period is of obvious use here. He regards the period of margin or liminality as an 'interstructural situation' (1967:93), which explains this transition. The interstructural-ness is reflected in the notion of being 'betwixt and between', of being 'neither one thing nor the other', of being familiar but at the same time somehow menacing. Thus it is at these times that the 'complex and bizarre' (1967:96) symbolic aspects are laid bare. The 'unclear are unclean' (1967:97), - transitional beings are particularly polluting since they are neither one thing nor the other.

Contemporary theorists such as Giddens (1991) interpret the state in the context of modernity and in this context the concept of ontological security is also of use here - the "bracketing out of dread" from everyday life. This is a "management technique" for individuals in modern society, but this focus on the need for the creation of a notion of self identity is, according to Giddens the expression of a much more deeply seated concern to actively construct and control the body in modern society. Modernity, according to Giddens, 'reduces the riskiness of certain areas and modes of life' (1991:4) but this is due to the disembedding mechanisms of modernity which impose social control by reducing the potency of traditional features of society. Giddens concludes that 'The signposts established by tradition are now blank' (1991:82). Individuals are now left without the traditional framework of mourning behaviour - they have to negotiate their own way through the process of grief, selecting activities which may assist them on their sorrowful path through bereavement.

The work of individuals such as Baudrillard (1993), Foucault (1977) and Giddens (1991) suggests that state regulation and definitions are actually repressive and brutal. State intervention in problematic deaths such as murder etc are, however, well disguised and individuals who mediate between the state and mourners (as page 97 suggests) can do so with great tact. Individuals are not confronted with this regulatory apparatus unless they wander across the boundaries demarcating state control, for example when becoming physically or mentally ill, becoming 'lawless' or dying

(Douglas 1966). Sudnow (1967) has been used to demonstrate this medical management and concealment of the dead so as to assign the corpse to its proper place. Turner argues for the dominance of the medical over religious regulative forces, which can explain the growth of sanitary pre-occupation with the dead and the decline of religious-based concerns. However the signing of a burial register by the officiant after the burial, still in use at many cemeteries, neatly joins church and state in the regulation of the dead.

Baudrillard (1993) describes the body in terms of the political economy of the sign and its reference, the mannequin - which is the site of 'models of signification' (1993:114). The dead fall easily into this category, as a signifier of 'good death', since in the same manner as a mannequin, the dead can be 'posed' into appropriate and acceptable 'death pictures' which convey the appropriate culturally acceptable death image. The possibility of stepping outside the discourse parameters is limited by the very shaping action of culture. Durkheim saw these publicly standardised ideas (known as collective representations) as constituting social order, the hold being measured in terms of "moral density" (1987:96). This concept of moral density was used by Durkheim to explain the concept of sacredness, these shared classifications being deeply cherished and violently defended. In contemporary England mourners now have a range of therapeutic 'self help' issues to employ in their personal reactions to grief, as the many psychological 'help sources' (Bowlby 1980, Lindemann 1944) suggest

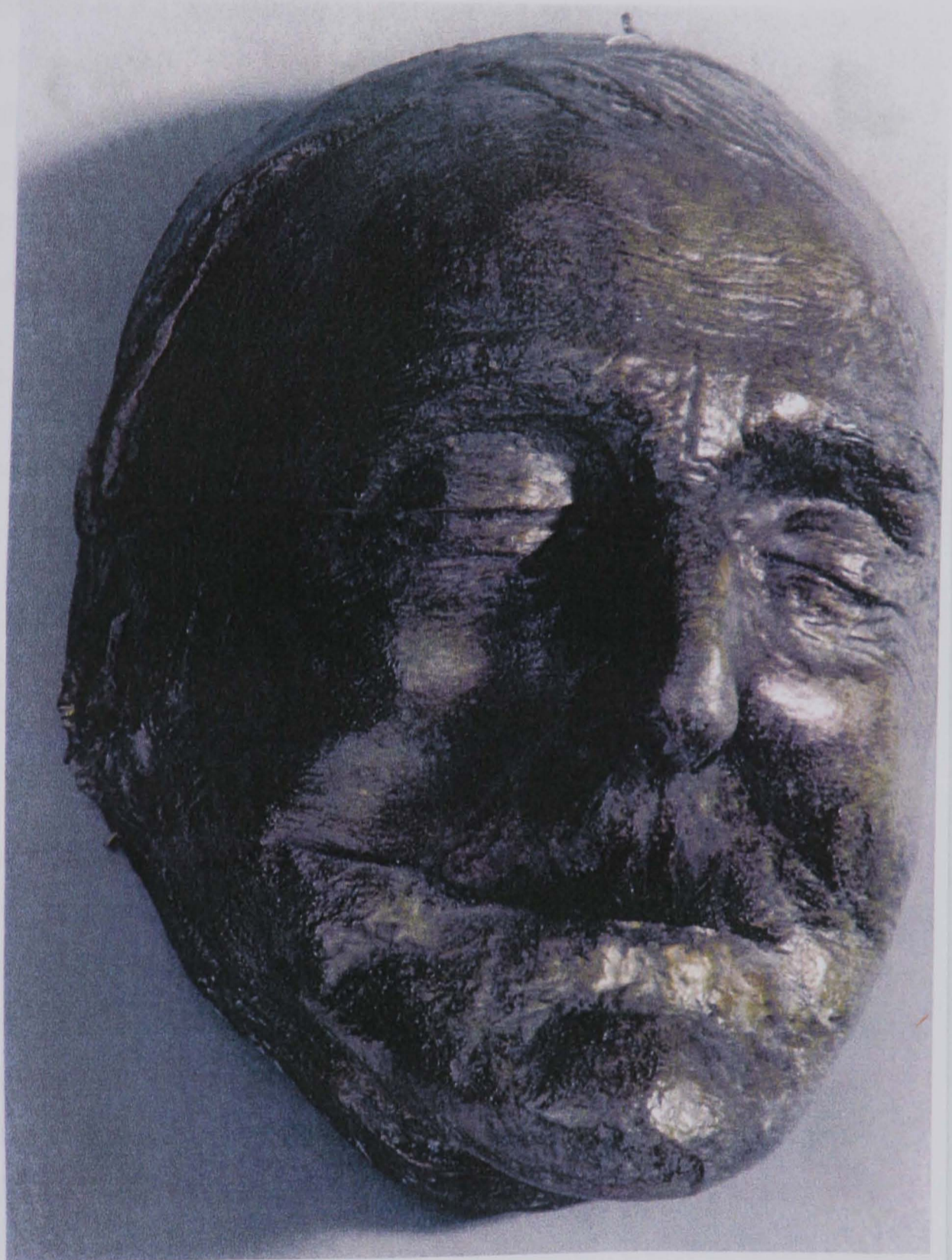
So the embalmer so routinely disguises 'real' death, that he becomes chameleon-like, blending into the background scenery of state-induced assumptions. Having become self-camouflaged, however, he becomes invisible to the state and its processes. 'Real' death is therefore rarely encountered in England. In more religious countries such as America or Ireland, the corpse is more publicly encountered, but in America (and according to personal sources, in Ireland also) this encounter takes place after embalming. Citizens rarely see 'natural' death so how can we gauge how perceptions of this have changed. The clue lies in the past when citizens were exposed to the abrupt reality that death brought. An excellent example concerns Wellington, the national hero of the Nineteenth century, whose face was cast in a

death mask after he died at Walmer castle, Kent in 1852. What a marked contrast to acceptable Twentieth century

death appearance the image below portrays.

The image reveals just how much is now regarded as 'normal' from the perspective of the Twenty First century that was not regarded so by individuals in the Nineteenth.

The sunken, caved-in mouth and sunken eyes with the disfigured nature of the face (partly due, it is true, to the casting process of the mask) is not (from the perspective of a Twenty First century embalmer) a good image of a man regarded in his time as a national hero.



The implicit approach of individuals such as Baudrillard (1993) sees the production of the allegedly modern 'sleeping death' to be a recent phenomenon, but it can be argued that this is not so. It is deeply embedded in popular culture, but only relatively recently marginalised by powerful state discourses. Lear, writing in the nineteen-forties, casually records how he demonstrated to a group of fledgeling embalmers the



peaceful lifelike countenance of embalmed death restored to the (dead) subject (BIE News 1946). This was evidently usual and expected. Earlier still, Gladstone (Talland & Hooper 1986) commented in his Nineteenth century diary how his daughter, Jessie, looked so peaceful 'in the boudoir' (1986:306), Richardson (1987) records how the 'last look' on the peaceful features of the dead was denied work house inmates in the early Nineteenth century as a form of punishment for poverty. An earlier example concerns the image of Edward the Confessor (d 1066), whose peaceful appearance was evidence of the condition of his soul, as the passage below shows.

**Vita Aedwardi Regis Qui Apud Westmonasterium Requiescit**

**The life of King Edward who rests at Westminster.**

**Translated Frank Barlow 1962 pg 80**

*Erat tunc videre in defuncto corpore gloriam migrantis ad deum animae, cum scilicet caro faciei ut rosa ruberet, subiecta barba ut liliū canderet, manus suo ordine directae albescerent, totumque corpus non morti sed fausto sopori traditum signarent.*

Then could be seen in the dead body the glory of a soul departing to God. For the flesh of his face blushed like a rose, the adjacent beard blushed like a lily, his hands, laid out straight, whitened, and were a sign that his whole body was given not to death but to auspicious sleep.

Edward the Confessor died 4<sup>th</sup>/5<sup>th</sup> January 1066

Death is thus naturalised in the stuffed simulacrum of life, according to Baudrillard (1993) because death in its stark form is considered to be shameful and obscene in community culture. It disturbs the pacification to which Turner refers.

The ultimate question to ask, however, concerns the need for disguising death. Baudrillard (1993) suggests that 'life' is natural and normal in modern culture and death is therefore against nature, so death must be naturalised (reified) in 'a stuffed simulacrum of life' (1993:181), where rotting and change are forbidden. Baudrillard contrasts the practices of other cultures where death is obvious and displayed (the best example of display being the Cappuchin convent in Palermo where the community of the dead are gathered to be inspected by tourists) with the 'anxious warding off in the funeral homes' (1993:182) of modern western society. This has led Baudrillard to see urban funeral practice as the dereliction of death.

However many state authorised individuals may well go to extreme lengths to maintain a "culturally friendly" approach to death when with bereaved relatives. For

example vicars are technically unable to perform Church of England funeral rites upon any unbaptised individual, but they do. Solicitors could well insist on proper authority via a will to enable obsequies to proceed – but occasionally to prevent delay they do not. Similarly, due to their crucial bridging of the gap between state agencies and mourners, coroner's officers need to reconcile these two disparate world views, which is usually accomplished with diplomatic skill. The hidden corpse is moved through the system and because it is hidden, it is forgotten and irrelevant. But although possibly insignificant, the corpse is not a problem-free issue and it will become apparent that there are different interpretations concerning what a corpse-body actually is. Therefore it is necessary and appropriate to explore what contemporary theorists mean when they discuss the corpse in contemporary social theory.

### **3.4 The Corpse.**

We need to consider the position of the body itself within sociology, which has emerged only within the last two decades (Shilling 1991). It is necessary to do this since the contemporary theoretical position of "body theorists" has had a significant impact upon studies concerning the corpse. The 'discovery' of the body in sociological literature, (e.g. Turner 1984) has redirected sociological attention to the physicality of the human condition. In this section, theoretical work on the body is linked by me to the corpse, which is itself a body, but one which may be distinguished from a live body by being dead. It nevertheless resembles a body and as many body theorists have focussed on the physical body, as opposed to the 'self', it is legitimate, so I argue, to further extend these theorists' efforts to investigations with the physical body or corpse, once the self has vacated it. The corpse can be highly significant. For example Zbarsky (1997) revealed the fantastic efforts made by Russian technicians to preserve Lenin's corpse after death, his physical body being manipulated to help legitimate later dictators' regimes.

A fundamental question to ask is 'just what, exactly, is a body', alive or dead? Assuming it to be self-evident, sociology is vague concerning what a body actually is. Scott and Morgan (1993) suggest the lack of an embodied sociology is due to sociology traditionally looking at 'society' (and not its components) and also to

differentiate it from other academic areas. The body is explored by the work of Berthelot (1986), who also describes the body as 'taken for granted', a self evident fact. It's self-evidency is thrown into relief more clearly by illustrating the effect of various factors such as fashion (e.g. Sawchuck 1988) or anorexia (e.g. Probyn 1988) upon the 'natural' body. This self evident corpse can also be revealed by examining the process of embalming because Berthelot (1986) suggests the 'organic' body is concealed within the 'social' body which I suggest neatly summarizes the condition of the corpse and its transformation by the embalmer into the acceptable public body. Kroker and Kroker (1988) suggest that the body is disappearing under technology and that it now has a rhetorical existence. This disappearance and rhetoric, I argue, can be applied very successfully to the embalming process, whereby the technology of embalming transforms the appearance of the body which then adopts a rhetorical existence as a metaphor of a 'good' death.

Synott (1993) asserts that we are all embodied and that (significantly) identity of body and self is total. This simple statement underlines the fundamental importance regarding death practices and the corpse. According to Turner (1992) the English language itself does not allow for enough differentiation of the word 'body'. The Chambers twentieth century dictionary (1972) traces the word back to middle English, derived from the Latin *corpus*, 'the body' (hence the probable root of the word corpse). Puckle (1926) suggested that the word corpse at one time described a living person, which suggests a closer connection between corpse and body than otherwise assumed. Today the word corpse is often replaced by the word body.

It is worth emphasising just how recent this emergence of the body from sociological obscurity actually is. The growth in the late nineteen-eighties of work by various writers (e.g. Berthelot 1986, Kroker 1988 and Shilling 1991) has enabled a new examination of the body in particular, as it 'actually' appears, as opposed to a submerged or inferred body that is concealed behind cultural devices such as fashion (eg Sawchuck (1988) or pornography (eg Kroker and Kroker (1988) or (in this instance) death practices. 'Social thought' has linked the body to the ego and social sciences now formulate a complex social reality of the body, irreducible to the biological level. However when the body becomes a corpse, the situation is changed

due to a dwindling belief in the soul. From this perspective funerals become merely a cut off point between the dead and the living, when the irrelevant corpse is discarded. Nevertheless the sociology of the living body can provide many clues as to the sociology of the corpse at death by examining the impact of discourses upon the apparently obvious or 'given' body. Metcalfe and Huntington assert that "attention paid to the symbolic attributes of the dead body provides insights into a culture's understanding of the nature of death" (1991:71). Bronfen (1992) asserts that death transforms the corpse into a sign, which therefore suggests that the corpse becomes a symbol – a symbol conveying powerful cultural expressions about 'good' or 'bad' deaths (Bradbury 1999). Clark (1982:128) also maintains that death involves a 'disconnection from the community through various rites' which illustrates a clear point of transition and involves socially recognised legitimation. (This will be discussed in the sub headings 3.5.1 – 3.5.3). It is clear that for bereaved individuals and culture, the corpse is itself a powerful reminder of death - but also of the (dwindling) metaphorical link to the soul, person or self. However a dwindling belief in the soul leads simply to the disposal of the body, which produces tensions between discourses.

The historically changing 'social reality' of the corpse is explored within this chapter. Gittings (1984) documents the problems with attitudes to the corpse in the period between the Sixteenth and Eighteenth centuries, which contributed to a growth of individualism so 'the body' discussed should also be regarded as a single item, as well as one in a constituent mass of humanity.

Many writers have explored the live body and the corpse is 'obviously' dead, but the exploration here is on something in between. The corpse concerned is still, for the mourners a reminder of a person (Synott 1993) so the embalmer is obliged to present the corpse in this way. This suggests that Foltyn's (1993) assertion of 'corpses' being transformed into cultural bodies has great significance here, the presenting of the corpse thus displaying a group's social and aesthetic values. The corpse's links with prior social status (and indeed its special symbolic significance) as Hertz (1960) maintains, obliges this circumscribing. It is, of course, plainly evident that the vast majority of theorists have devoted their energies to the study of the living body and the

impacts of the dominant discourses upon it. But as the earlier state section suggests, the body in death is arguably just as involved with major discourses and representations as the body in life, because the values, judgements and reactions of any 'other' focus upon the externality, the physicality, the image, of the exterior, which Bronfen (1992) refers to as the physical signifier of the self. As Featherstone (1982) asserted with reference to consumer culture, the emphasis upon the appearance of the body, with the media and advertising - and the disapproval of imperfection and deterioration, apply to the body - but he does not specify whether the body is being lived within or has been discarded. It does not appear incorrect to extend the concept to the body-in-death; the corpse after all, still retains its 'bodiness' - either attached to a live 'persona' or not. Consideration of appearance (Synott 1993), odours (Largey and Watson 1972) and clothing (Sawchuck 1988) is as important (for many mourners) concerning the corpse as for the live body. Embalming understanding must take these considerations into account.

The majority of this section seeks to illustrate this concealment: i.e. the social control of the 'natural' or 'physical' body. Many writers discuss the concealing tendency of other discourses, the 'actual' body is disguised within the particular discourse that is manipulating the appearance of the body in question. An excellent example concerns fashion (Sawchuck 1988) which disguises the body and produces a 'new look' every season. This disguising, by manipulating appearance, is precisely the role of the modern embalmer. It can thus be argued that the process of embalming is in fact central to the sociology of the body, since the transformatory aspects of the procedure throw into relief the real or natural body which is repressed beneath the treatment. This aspect of the sociology of the body has been neglected within the recent emergence of the body. One aim of this thesis is to explore some of the issues that consequently arise in this area which until now have not been available for analysis.

So how do other theorists regard the body? Turner (1992) sees the body as a representation (of fundamental features of society) and it is suggested that the corpse in death represents these features as equally as the body in life as it is all that is left for mourners as dwindling soul belief removes any other avenues of interaction with

any future existence. We will return to this theme of representation at the end of this section. Turner (1992) asserts that the body is socially constructed through various discourses (e.g. medical, moral, commercial, legal) which tend to problematise the body. For example the legal discourse would aim to regulate the lawful disposal of the potentially difficult corpse, the medical discourse to minimise potential disease transference from the body, whereas the religious discourse would rather focus on the soul and ignore the corpse. Issues of control of the corpse within these discourses are explored later. Turner (1992) also describes the body as a potentiality which is elaborated by culture (which in itself is permeated by medicalism). Examples of this 'potentiality' regarding other cultures' treatment of the corpse has been noted ahead. Cultural perspectives in England regarding this 'potentiality' concerning how the dead should look are, arguably, firmly and deeply entrenched within popular culture. The impact of this upon bereaved individuals will be explored later. The socially mediated identity attached to the body is illustrated by virtually all writers, while they emphasize one of the dominant discourses. As will be shown, the impact of consumer culture does not cease at death.

Douglas' (1973) use of the body as a 'metaphor of society', indicating 'social disease' through illness and Sontag's (1978) relating of TB (initially) to distinction and breeding (or epidemics to a concept of a judgement of the community) may be applied to both living and dead bodies, since the discourses that affect the perception of the body are arranged by the writers concerned upon the body in an 'abstract' sense – not necessarily a live body. Therefore the disguising and transforming actions of discourses can be applied to the body – even at or after death. As Waterhouse (1993) indicates:

"There is nothing natural or pre-cultural about the body, it is heavily endowed with meaning, it can never escape signification, it is always circumscribed by layers of cultural meaning, ritual and custom".

Waterhouse (cited in Scott and Morgan 1993:108)

It would be difficult not to apply this to the corpse. Frank (in Featherstone et al 1991) summarized recent theoretical stances to produce a four-fold typology which described disciplined (e.g. Foucault 1979), dominating (e.g. Theweleit 1977), mirroring consumption – (e.g. Bourdieu 1977) and communicative (e.g. through dance or

illness) (Hanna 1988) aspects of the body. Thus to re-apply Frank's (1990) typology I argue that corpses are the disciplined dead who are enabled to conform to notions of propriety (e.g. by not producing disagreeable smells, via embalming); dominating the disposal process by their presence (in the church, chapel of rest, crematorium or cemetery), mirroring the consumption practices of consumer culture (by wearing special or appropriate death garments) and communicative in as much as that they portray (or are supposed to portray) death as peaceful, familiar and restful.

More recent writers, while focussing on the body have framed their discussion of the body within a discourse on mainstream sociological issues e.g. feminism (Kroker and Kroker 1988), culture (Scott and Morgan 1993) or 'social factors' (Synott 1993). In other words the perception of the body is mediated by cultural factors and in the matrix of late Twentieth century capitalism, the impact of 'consumer culture' needs to be assessed and appreciated. Thus it can be appreciated that the natural body is repressed for example in fashion (Sawchuck 1988) by disguising it within clothing or in the condition of anorexia the discourses constructing femininity are stripped away, by an overly exaggerated slim-ness that reveals the fragility and ultimately unnaturalness of the social construction of female bodies. This drastic thin-ness underlines a culturally mediated perspective, thereby allowing a glimpse of the 'natural' body which should otherwise be completely submerged under the various cloaks of social identity. A similar process surrounds the corpse. Thus the socially mediated identity attached to the corpse is illustrated by seemingly unconnected discourses (whose major link comprises the live or dead body upon which they focus). The crucial impact of consumer culture on the corpse should not be discounted, as its taken-for-granted aspect has great significance for those studying the body, whether alive or dead. The apparent 'naturalness' of English mortuary practice itself reveals a particular cultural accommodation to the concepts of death and dying. Attention paid to the corpse illustrates the strength of belief concerning 'appropriate' appearance. Western cultural accommodation focuses upon the need to make the corpse look familiar and to ensure conformity with socio-culturally particular prescription attached to the corpse – for example in this instance peace, tranquility, wholeness and composure.

Continuing this general discussion of the body, Scott and Morgan (1993) present an edition of contributors designed to highlight the social construction and management of the body. The use of these techniques allow one to also scrutinize the socially constructed nature of English mortuary rites, which will be explored below. Embodied situations are illustrated by such issues as gender, sexuality, aspects of the routine or commonplace in everyday life, deviance, marriage and power. While issues of marriage and power do not translate well to the corpse, gender and sexuality are areas where the corpse is heavily controlled and mortuary treatment itself is so 'routine and commodified' that it has escaped the attentions of many sociological writers. But by carefully constructing an acceptable corpse appearance, embalmers contribute to the process whereby they:

'privilege certain understandings or constructions as against others'

(Scott and Morgan 1993:VIII).

As will be seen, these 'certain constructions' have a powerful influence on embalming practice as the particular prescription of the corpse is heavily endowed with cultural meaning. Each of Scott and Morgan's chapters explore a particular aspect of control or regulation, the purpose of which is to encourage the 'Calling into question what might conventionally be understood as natural' (1993:VIII), illustrating distinctions between biology and culture. The contributors' stressing of the symbolic body image bears a particularly fruitful theoretical harvest when compared to mortuary practice. Presenting a 'healthy looking' corpse which is clean and fresh smelling and groomed to acceptable standards is an integral part of the embalmers' remit and (arguably) of mourner expectations. Being clean and tidy in death is just as important as in life – which suggests that the unlive body - or corpse - has a metaphorical relationship to cultural notions of appropriate body image. Featherstone's (1982) work emphasises this crucial attitude of appearance of the body and the strong influence of the media and advertising on the perception and cultivation of the 'appropriate-ness' of body-display. Media images of death also have a profound influence (it will be argued) upon the expectation of bereaved people regarding the appearance of their dead. Natural bodily deterioration (in the live body) is disapproved of and bodily imperfections, Featherstone argues, are no longer regarded as natural. Featherstone



(1991) suggests that beauty products point to the significance of bodily appearance in late capitalist society and similarly embalming is widely utilised to maintain corpse appearance, whilst also concealing the concept of what Aries (1981), amongst others, has called the 'dirty death', which could be summarised as unacceptable connotations of death.

Synott (1993) usefully explores the significance of the face, hair and odour in relation to the perception of the (lived) body. He describes the face (1993:2) as 'the prime symbol of (the living) self'. This is powerfully illustrated when regarding the dead. It is the facial appearance which conveys the imputed condition of the dead, whether the corpse is perceived as peaceful and appropriate (which may be taken to be a successful encounter by mourners) or otherwise. In England the success of the Bodyshop (established in 1976) which now has 77 million customers in 50 countries suggests that the beauty business is a truly global entity. The historical growth of the major cosmetics firms such as Estee-Lauder, L'Oreal or Avon illustrate just how great the global significance of facial beauty now is. Similarly the significance of hair is described by Synott as "one of our most powerful symbols of individual (and group) identity" (1993:103). Largey and Watson (1972) comment upon the (almost obvious) intolerance of western society to strong odours - and to the moral implications of not smelling sweet! Synott explains the role of odour in Western culture as primarily aesthetic. The obvious overlap between the corpse and the living body is so apparent that it is (almost) taken for granted. I present evidence regarding mourners' responses to rank odour in chapters 4 and 5.

So, to summarise, the emphasis on face, hair, smell and garb illustrate the existence of the disciplined, docile body that Foucault (1977) has described. It is to these governing factors that the body at the point of death continues to be subject and where the embalmer engages within the system to maintain the 'correct' corpse image as a signifier of the 'self' in death (Synott 1993).

How do writers of theory approach the issue of appearance? Hadjusicolau (cited in Scott and Morgan 1993) describes the culturally prescribed 'right' body image as a form of visual ideology. This thesis suggests that social processes also determine a correct image of the corpse, an excellent example being religious discourses, which

are explored later. These are rooted in the foundational religious concepts of the recent past that have been modified by the powerful consumer culture of the late Twentieth century. As cultural categories are relatively rigid they are not amenable to rapid revision in the face of new information and events (such as embalming). It is this that gives rise to the anomalies and ambiguities, which will be discussed in chapters 4 and 5 (such as the corpse looking far more healthy and tranquil, dead than alive). Kroker and Kroker (1988) describe the purely rhetorical existence of the body as aesthetic holograms and Goffman (cited in Berthelot 1996) describes the ritual idiom of the body in an economy of signs. Both terms suggest that the body itself is regarded as a signifier rather than a culture-free mass of human tissue. Bronfen (1992) suggests that embalming transforms the corpse into a representational fetish, which signifies the arresting of death, stopping it 'dead'. Bronfen also compares funerary practice fetishism with iconisation, by displaying the corpse 'as a symbol and as a material substance of the deceased' (1992:88). Of course a fetish is itself not just a representation – the image produced and the 'sign' that is received are not necessarily the same and not necessarily related to each other. As a cultural fetish, the corpse maintains a version of death that looks (ironically) healthy – it is used to represent something other than what it is. Strenuous efforts made to disguise 'natural' death illustrate the depth of the fetish – which could otherwise be compromised by the alternate image intruding into consciousness. Kroker and Kroker's aesthetic holograms suggest that there is virtually nothing apart from the three dimensional 'illusion' that the body becomes, which is similar to the role the corpse plays as a fetish of western death notions, which is an idiosyncratic interweaving of different themes, played out on the surface of the corpse. All four examples describe the body in its culturally dominated disguise and the function of this thesis is to throw into relief the impact of English culturally approved mortuary practice in terms of the visual, holographic or fetish-like nature of the concealed corpse in death.

Bourdieu (cited in Turner 1992) sees the body as a consequence of class practices - for Bourdieu the body is a site on which is inscribed the cultural practices of the various classes. Frank (1990) describes Bourdieu's typology of the body as a form of mirroring - whereby patterns of consumption are influenced by class status. This is

strikingly similar to the results of Gorer (1965) and Kephart (1950), who relate higher class with spartan death practices and lower class with more elaborate customs. Cultural influence is also emphasised, (e.g. Finucane 1982) in relation to the description of ghosts based on religious or scientific beliefs. Finucane demonstrated that the perception of ghosts changed over time, (as perhaps has the corpse). For example the influence of the Reformation (a religious, cultural change) thus dramatically divided Catholic perceptions, which saw ghosts as purgatorial souls from Protestant perceptions which suggested that these apparitions were illusory and demonic. In other words as conceptions of the after life changed and ultimately the soul disappeared, so too did ghosts. The influence of the Reformation, followed by the Enlightenment and the Victorian age of Reason illustrated the growth of scientific rationalism and the eventual decline in attention paid to the corpse, as soul belief declined. Furthermore the influence of scientific thought tended, Finucane commented, to 'strip the encrusted functions of previous centuries' (1982:212), leaving 'the banality of real spectres' (1982:219), which suggests that they were the products of the imagination.

The divide between rationalism and "cultural outlook" is an underlying explanation for the tension between some dominant discourses and individuals' assumptions concerning the corpse. The corpse for mourners can be a very significant, although transient link with the dead (Rose 1999) which may require personal actions such as visiting to produce perceptions of good death (Bradbury 1999). But for rational discourse the corpse is merely a discarded relic to be regulated.

However none of the issues raised here occur in a cultural 'vacuum' and we should examine the corpse in the context of contemporary powerful discursive dialogues the most powerful of which regard the corpse as merely dead. We also need to clarify their impact on corpse treatment in relation to mourner demands. Medical and legal discourses form a significant part of this section but the usage of the religious discourse 'final parting service' will be discussed and its persistence noted (despite diminished religious belief) which produces tensions due to different definitions of the corpse.

### 3. 5 Post Industrialism and the sociology of the body.

While considering the social position of the corpse, it is necessary to take a closer look at the social forces that co-ordinate and dominate day-to-day social life. Berthelot (1986) suggests that the body is the site of an interface between a number of different domains which are here considered as post-industrial discourses. The concept of 'discourses' encompasses the dominant 'dialogue' imposed by powerful social groups upon the commonsensical notions and habits of social life. The work of writers such as Bauman (1987) suggest that this concept of dominant discourses is a powerful determining factor in everyday interaction. A Weberian outlook (e.g. the German state bureaucracy that Weber actually examined) would suggest that this governing is profound. It is necessary early on, however, to add the issue of post industrial fragmentation which has disrupted the encompassing homogeneity of the meta-narratives of the past. This fragmentation (Giddens 1996) has meant that 'competing' discursive interpretations have presented different definitions of the body and hence the corpse, which, consequently, will now be explored.

Certainly the reflection of the body that is framed within various dominant discourses casts a most revealing image and it is to these powerful discourses that we should now turn, so as to discover what the various 'constructions' of the body actually are. Turner (1992) argues that the body is regulated by medical, legal and religious 'superstructures' which govern the physicality of the frame and should consequently be explored. This is not an exhaustive list of powerful discourses, since Turner (1982) also adds artistic and commercial discourses and these latter discourses may themselves exert a significant effect through the powerful interpretations of consumer culture (Featherstone 1982). For example the appearance change in the corpse via embalming or, at the least, laying out, suggests an artistic discourse is dominant, whereas the (medical) sanitation change is rarely commented upon. The commercial discourse has been used in the past (e.g. Mitford 1963) to explain the use of embalming which adds value to the otherwise under-presentable corpse, but the impact of commercialism on the corpse, compared to the living, has been muted. This can be attributed in part to the greater dominance of other discourses (e.g. Medical and Religious) upon the dead. Nevertheless the commercial discourse can be seen

faintly reflected in the practices dictated by other discourses (e.g. sanitizing the medically dead, dressing the presented dead and blessing the religious dead), since there is usually a monetary element to these operations. Analysis of the decline in influence of the dwindling religious discourse will enable the work of Hertz (1960) to be compared with contemporary self help issues to which citizens may resort (Rose 1999, Bowlby 1980).

### **3. 5. 1 Religious discourses.**

The oldest discourse concerns that of the body and religion: religious writings upon the subjugation of the body are a dominant theme of most of the major religions. I plan to use the dominant Christian religions as the basis of this section, since Christian services still dominate the disposal process in England and Turner (1992) asserts that sociology has implicitly accepted a Cartesian position of the separateness of body and soul or mind, which reflects a dominant Christian perspective. However the impact of other faiths will be examined. What is clear from the following discussion is the great variety in social constructions of the body according to religious beliefs, ranging from a discarded relic to a precious vessel. (Cross cultural beliefs will be discussed presently). These will serve to illustrate the somewhat arbitrary religious conceptions of what the corpse is thought to be. From a historical perspective, McManners (1981) mentions that the Reformation brought a radical change in the conception of the corpse, the eradication of purgatory thus severed the link between the fate of the corpse and the eventual fate of the soul, which illustrates one facet of the socially prescribed corpse. This theological link has thus opened a chasm between the two competing versions of disposal ritual. It is clear, as will be shown, that the conception of the tenacity of link between body and soul is of variable intensity, according to one's theological outlook, assuming that it exists.

Broadly speaking the remaining Western Christian religious discourse can be divided into Catholicism and Protestantism. Prior (1989) provides a clear summary of theological, funereal differences. Catholic culture emphasises a physical, sinful body as the repository of the soul (hence the emphasis on the corpse at a Requiem Mass).

The funeral service is there for the benefit of the deceased and the elaborate ritual focuses around the corpse, which is prayed for to enable the soul to more easily reach

its destination via purgatory. (In a similar manner the burning of symbolic cash, hell money, and possessions at Chinese funerals



equips the Chinese soul, too, on its journey). The corpse is also incensed and spurged with holy water, ablutions that are entirely missing from Protestant ritual. (Interestingly enough the Catholic Father will almost invariably walk around the coffin with the impure, dishonourable, (sinister) left hand side nearest the coffin, (Hertz 1960) and he will use the pure and honourable (dexter) right to both incense and spurge the coffin). This both reflects the significance of left/right symbolism that Hertz discussed but also emphasises the polluted symbolic load that the corpse bears, which is apparent, but not clearly transmitted through the message of a declining religious perspective. Ritual is invoked to remind the mourners of the 'new' condition that the corpse in its spiritual condition can attain. The priest, nearing the end of the Requiem mass, will remind the people present that it is:

'their solemn duty to carry out the burial of this mortal body'  
New Funeral Mass Book 1965:18

to await physical resurrection, although this duty is now transferred to other rational discourses. In a manner reminiscent of the ancient Egyptian, the conceptions in Roman Catholic theology suggest a future existence with the corpse which is not present in Protestant theology. Catholicism suggests that the particular corpse will again be the partner to the soul in a new life which suggests a form of ancestorhood.

Contrarily, Protestantism, by denying the corpse, ignores purgatory and consequently forms a different outlook concerning the mourners. The religious service is therefore for the survivors. The soul is no longer considered to be within the corpse and the corpse is now merely a discarded relic. However the corpse is still invariably present at the funeral, although not strictly necessary to it. Its presence apparently acts as a legitimating prop in the social drama of the funeral, perhaps focussing the minds of those present on the need to lead holy and spiritual lives. Prayers concern the bereaved individuals present, not the corpse, which has been marginalised at death.

These competing tendencies affect the conceptions of the corpse which may influence mortuary practice. For instance (according to a young embalmer from Birmingham (personal communication September 1999) it is apparently the practice among Northern Birmingham embalmers to habitually display the dead with interlocked hands and fingers (possibly to hold the rosary) due to the influence of Catholicism and Irish folk habits. Southern Birmingham embalmers, by contrast, lay the hands at the side as the southern area is predominantly Protestant. It could be possible to quantify differences in ritual according to religious denomination, but of course the crucial issue of consumer culture is a distorting factor that renders the comparison far more difficult, since the invasion of consumer culture reflects the growing secularisation of the Western World. While this secularisation is not an absolute feature in relation to religious discourses, it does provide a 'competing' rationale which might alter individuals attitudes towards the corpse. However residual religious 'habits' still abound that regard the corpse as being sentient or asleep, which can be linked to (Catholic) religious concepts concerning the body lying asleep in the grave until the day of judgement (Richardson 1987). This concept of 'mortuary sleep' appears to be a significant social construct concerning the corpse. Similarly the Church of England burial services booklet (1965) lesson specifically deals with death as sleep and the contradictory religious versicles that describe being "dead, yet shall he live" blurs the distinctiveness of death, at least in a theological sense. The versicles suggest that judgement and rest will be in the present and similarly the collect intoned by the Priest pleads "for them that sleep in him". The use of churches in the

Nineteenth and early Twentieth centuries to house the dead prior to burial was a powerful example of this religious - based system of regarding the corpse as a dormant transitional vehicle, one which survives in names



such as chapel of rest or chapel of repose (at funeral premises) for the areas designated to accommodate the dead. The example pictured above is Old Seasalter Church, Whitstable, Kent which functioned in this way until the later 1940s.

The position of other religions varies, which again underlines the religious arbitrariness regarding conceptions of the corpse. There are many examples. Orthodox Judaism asserts that for a while after death the soul is still present within the corpse, so that it needs to be treated gently. Mainstream Moslem beliefs are very similar, concerning the corpse at death, in that a level of consciousness after death (e.g. Firth, cited in Clark 1993) is thought to exist in the corpse. Oral Chinese beliefs follow a similar pattern to the Moslem faith, but extra care needs to be taken to prevent the escape of the Chinese soul by the inadvertent bumping of the coffin against walls or door frames (in a manner similar to electrical earthing or short circuiting) (Tang family, personal communication). In addition, however, Judaic beliefs dictate that the corpse after death is highly polluting, due to its social identity, whereas mainstream Moslem beliefs do not exhibit this. Contact by mourners with the corpse after death is discouraged (Adath Yisroel orthodox Jewish burial society, personal communication) although it may well take place. Contrarily it is common for first



generation immigrant Greeks to lavishly adorn their dead with a calico 'overshirt', fine linen 'vest' (with a hole burnt in it for reasons of tradition) worn over a splendid suit for men or wedding dress for women. The corpse is still necessary for deliverance of the soul and here is venerated. Contrarily, Orthodox Jewish mourners often have their dead starkly, simply shrouded in the traditional way (each limb and the head separately wrapped up, similar to a mummy, in calico with sacred earth contained within). The corpse has no significance for the fate of the soul and consequently here is considered to be repulsive. The Berewan of Borneo (Metcalf & Huntingdon 1991) on the other hand, encourage decomposition of the body as the body needs to be corrupted to allow the 'soul' to escape. Consequently the corpse is considered by them to be an obsolete obstacle. It can thus be seen that different cultural assumptions concerning the corpse are expressed in widely varying significations which are expressed in different methods of treating the corpse. These examples suggest that religious discursive perceptions of the corpse alter according to the theological outlook of the faith concerned.

Richardson (1985) traced the growth of the commercialised corpse (burial of the whole corpse in the Nineteenth century for religious beliefs) to the belief in a physical resurrection of the buried corpse with its partnered soul. Similarly contemporary burial of prosthetic devices with the corpse is not unusual, but this may not reflect any concern for a soul, but a focussing upon the remaining tangible relic of the person – the corpse itself. This can go to quite extreme lengths. The supply of false teeth, glasses, false eyes, etcetera, provides a clue as to the significance of appearance, even in the dead. This is also more fully discussed in chapter 5. Reluctance of crematoria authorities to sub-divide cremated remains (a very significant official term for ashes) also illustrates this point. Even when reduced to a pile of constituent ashes, this slightly 'gravelly' grey material is still designated as a 'signifier' of a whole persona. This approach, however, illustrates the taken-for-granted underpinning of the dualistic corpse/soul situation embedded in Western belief systems. So the trend towards cremation illustrates the depth of the radical shift in religious discourse regarding the corpse and the soul. This suggests that the literal, physical resurrection attitudes of the past have been modified over time which in turn reflect a changing

religious-based conception of the corpse. Instead of preserving the corpse for the 'last trumpet' it is transformed into (far more durable) ashes, if your theological position and cultural habits permit. Religious outlook influences the mode of disposal of the corpse, but the dwindling belief in the soul means that other discourses now have far greater impact. The religious discourse can perhaps best be regarded as a broad backdrop of belief that is quite visible, but is the structure against which more prominent features are regarded. So although a consideration of Hertz and Van Gennep is still highly relevant to the situation of the corpse, other post-industrial discursive elements have significant impact upon the corpse. The growing number of non-religious funerals (personal communication with John Hopley, British Humanist Association) further illustrates this waning influence of the religious post-industrial discourse concerning death. Also, it is necessary to discuss the impact of religious belief outside England. America, a country still far more religious than England, will publicly display the profane, embalmed corpse at funerals, which suggests that secular issues are also intertwined with religious ones. In a similar manner, the presence of the corpse on funerals in Ireland (Prior 1989) for both Catholic and Protestant families suggests that religious issues are influenced by other factors too. Despite my discussion on page 110 of fundamental theological differences, the corpse is still invariably present at the funeral, although its theological significance may be fundamentally dissimilar. This does suggest there are other factors which alter the significance of the corpse.

Religions' dominant place has been claimed by other dominant post-industrial discourses which can be broadly regarded as representing the scientific rationalism that became dominant for several decades following the 1930s and is reflected in the growth of therapeutic discourses in post-war England (Crichton 1976). It is now widely understood (e.g. Illich 1976, Sontag 1978) that the medical discourse, with the decline in significance of the religious discourse, has assumed far greater significance, and it is now appropriate to continue this section with an analysis of the impact of medical discourses upon the corpse.

### **3. 5. 2 Medical discourses.**

Turner (1992) points out that the 'regulative moral functions of religion' (1992:18) have now been transferred to medicine (and, he might have added, psychotherapeutic regimes (Rose 1999)), a key shift which has much significance for funerary practices. Turner (1992) explores the Weberian view of medicine as now comprising the basis of social control. An obvious and relevant aspect of this concerns the replacement of priest by doctor at the bed-side (Aries 1981). It is not difficult in early Twenty-first century capitalism to experience the effects of medicalisation and its powerful impact upon the perceived and physical body, both alive and dead. People rarely go to a priest for a cure to bodily ills. Medical sociology attempts to serve the function of mediating the space between medicine in itself and the sociology of the body. Berthelot (1986) suggested that Nineteenth century studies first conceptualised the body as an organic mechanism. This almost 'obvious' statement illustrates how all-pervading this point of view has become. The invasion of the medical point of view in the cultural perception of the body is embedded within much of recent sociology (e.g. Armstrong (1983). Work by writers such as Illich (1976) who emphasised the subtle medicalisation of society and the conception of the body as a machine to be 'doctored' or Sontag (1978) who saw the body as the seat of the 'medical body' supports the claim that the medical view has become increasingly pervasive. Similarly, Kroker and Kroker's (1988) analysis of anorexia, set within a medical context, illustrates the invasion of a 'medical' aspect in relation to post-industrial discourses upon cultural conventions concerning femininity and appearance. O'Neill (cited in Frank 1990) suggests that medicalism is a strong theme which posits that experience of the body is conditioned by parameters which institutionalised medicine has set in place, referred to by Kleinman (cited within Frank 1990:141) as a 'healthist' society. A potent example of this is the tendency to regard the corpse as a locus of disease which needs (after death) to be sanitised (Healing et al 1995). This is a common belief amongst embalmers (Scudamore 1966, Haler 1983, Dicks 1993). The impact of medicalisation on the body appears self evident. How does this affect the corpse? The growing use of the embalming technique over the last seventy five years can arguably be seen as an attempt at accommodation of medicalisation prevalent

even in the mortuary, so that the socially unclean body can be treated in a sort of 'post-mortem doctoring' to approximate the notions of propriety prevalent in consumer culture. Howarth (1992) and Smale (1985) have both focussed upon embalming as being the central thrust of funeral directors' recent attempts to project a more 'professional' image and thereby upgrade the status of funeral directors. A pseudo-medical technique is now necessary to 'properly' present the corpse for the 'last look', embalming having now replaced the practice of the layer-out of the past.

Modern English mortuary practice implicitly echoes the powerful influence of the medical discourse. This is an implicit form of rationalisation and medical discourses partially represent scientific-rational discourses which became dominant during and after the 1930s. This rationalisation itself is reflected (on the body) by what Elias (1985) called the civilising process (e.g. table manners). He noted the evolving of a sophisticated method of using tools (not fingers) with which to eat and a structured interaction situation (sitting at a table, hands washed, behaving quietly etc) which he argued illustrated this process of civilising. Consequently the corpse could be either ignored and therefore banished to a hidden place, or, if considered of some value, submerged underneath the consumer mortuary techniques of the Twentieth and Twenty-first century. (Whereas the nineteenth century layer-out used to temporarily change the appearance of the dead simply by closing the eyes and mouth). In a similar manner to the expectation that 'doctors make us feel better', it is presumed that the embalmer will 'make the corpse look better', so that the corpse will possibly, according to mourners, therefore feel better. The medical discourse has a powerful impact upon the corpse but it is clearly not the only post-industrial discourse involved. Beneath the medical discourse there is a submerged, but powerful, governing reaction which has a powerful influence. This governing medium is better known as the legal discourse and it is necessary to consider this in connection with the social context of the both the living body and the corpse.

### 3. 5. 3 Legal discourses.

Legal (or governmental) discourses, identified and analysed by writers, most noticeably Foucault (1977), are primarily concerned with aspects of social control. Foucault's major work with regard to the impact of discipline and punishment on the social-physical body (e.g. seen in hospitals, prisons and factories) illustrates the 'control' aspects of society. Imprisonment of the physical body (not the mental persona) is a focal point of the justice system. Giddens (1991:57) describes Foucault's body theory as analysing the impact of 'disciplining power' on the body (in modernity). It is not surprising that this aspect of body-theory has been so fully explored, as the 'control' element of modern capitalist society has many and varied facets. Turner (1992) mentions that various discourses tend to problematise the body, exposing the desire for 'control' associated with modern capitalism. The analysis of the legal discourse is further extended, according to Frank's overview by examining methods of control which help us to detect regulation as our experience is "conditioned by parameters" (Frank 1990:135). Frank's approach thus can assist in exposing the controlling features of so-called 'normal' society. For example a feminist approach (Bronfen 1992) illustrates the controlling effect of male-dominated society on what was done to the female body by the pairing of death and femininity as a means of coping with, and thus controlling, the prospect of death itself, for men.

Foucault's study of political violence emphasises the enhanced self-reflectiveness concerning the study of the body, seeing the body as a site for political violence. Greater concern with one's own appearance in the public sphere of modern life illustrates this self-reflectiveness, which is an excellent rationale for the modern embalming process, which removes the most noticeable features betraying death. Frank's recent overview (1990) relates the impact of feminism, Foucault and modernity within the sociology of the body which

"teach(es) us to look for the effects of politics on what is done to bodies"

(1990:131)

This leads to a commodification of the body, which links the post-industrial legal discourse to the commercial one. Kroker and Kroker (1988) emphasize the rhetorical existence of the body, the rhetoric being illustrated by the repression of the 'natural'

female body under technology (Eileen Marion, in Kroker and Kroker 1988) and fashion (Kim Sawchuck, in Kroker and Kroker 1988) or the negating of gender in pornography (Berkeley Kaite, in Kroker and Kroker 1988).

This controlling legal discourse can be seen in the anxious manipulation of the corpse, treated to prevent potentially worrying corruption and leakage. Mortuary practice can be regarded as a submerging of the natural body under a strongly Foucauldian sanitary control, governing the imposed externality of the body and preventing it from appearing as a 'natural' corpse. Bronfen (1992) comments that the

"fear of death is so strong that European culture had made the corpse into a taboo. It sees decomposition as the body's most polluted condition"

1992:60

This, I feel, is a perceptive comment which supports the issue of Foucauldian sanitary control. This is also reinforced by Bradfield (1994), who cites a legal case from as early as 1908, pointing out that lawful retention of a corpse is only permitted when:

"a person has by lawful exercise of work or skill so dealt with a human body ... that it has acquired some attributes **differentiating it from a mere corpse** awaiting burial"

(Bradfield 1994:15) [my emphasis].

There can hardly be a more robust indicator of social transformation and control, a social situation that also displays the government of timescale regarding the corpse - lawful retention betrays a backdrop of powerful regulation. This applies, it is argued, to both the corpse and the living body. Legal definitions of a corpse are not, however, static. Although this is also dealt with in the body at death section, there is merit in noting the historical legal changes in the definition of the corpse. For example the burial of the still-born will be dealt with later, but the changed legal situation regarding the non-viable foetus illustrates the *social evolution* that these 'tiny people' have undergone. Prior to 1992 non-viable foetuses (under 19 weeks of age), were officially classed as clinical waste, which thus could not be cremated at licenced crematoria, and were disposed of via the hospital incinerator with other 'rubbish'. The generation of bureaucracy to deal with foetuses in the new norm-enforced baby funeral illustrates the massive step taken regarding the foetus/human definition. This in part explains the debate about frozen embryo destruction recorded, for example, in the popular

press in mid August 1996 when the press were printing comments about 'infanticide', regarding what were now 'proper' individuals; an issue that would have gone unnoticed twenty years earlier. Regulated disposal of the dead illustrates this Foucauldian control - in regimented cemeteries or immaculate crematoria. Regulation is also reflected in legal definition. Ashes of a cremated individual, within the legal system, are regarded in exactly the same manner as an intact corpse. Licences for exhumation, care in identity, a reluctance to sub-divide and appropriate religious rubric, (there is a special advice sub-section to guide officiants at ashes disposal ceremonies in many crematoria service books), are common parameters for both the intact body and its ashes.

#### **3. 5. 4 Fragmentation of discourses.**

It is appropriate at this point to mention the influence of change upon the post-industrial rational discourses such as law or medicine regarding the cultural background which has so influenced funerary practice. This can be broadly classified as the decline of scientific rationalism. Post-modern issues suggest that the once dominant signs have become fragmented and confused. Consequently multiple interpretations of the corpse and the death situation abound which challenge the once predominant rational conceptions. Fragmented discourses (e.g. Bauman 1987) mean that a "patchwork quilt" of beliefs now tend to control the perception of the corpse. For example, as I shall show in subsequent chapters, despite a nominally rational approach to their dead relative, it is striking that very few mourners can actually refer to their relatives as 'just' a corpse and a nearly uniform demand for a religious service, despite the lack of formal beliefs, betrays the impact of a religious discourse which is usually absent from other areas of life. Comparative rational-scientific dominance is epitomised by the growth and acceptance of cremation, as opposed to burial, as a means of funerary disposal, although the bare rational perspective is overlain with a veneer of religiosity ('dust to dust, ashes to ashes' fits in well with both burial or cremation). It is widely recognised by theorists such as Giddens (1991) that the homogenous, "monotheistic" hold of scientific rationalism over the thought processes of individuals has been challenged by the condition known as modernity. Giddens

(1991) attributes this fragmentation to the growth of 'post-modernity', whereby the disembedding mechanisms of non-traditional contemporary society have undermined the traditional forms of authority which were, until relatively recently, prevalent and unchallenged. Giddens notes that:

"the body...has been much more deeply invaded than before"  
(1996:33)

but this invasion in post-modern society is characterised by the eroding foundation of globalisation which comprises the evacuation of tradition by the disembedding characteristics of the condition Giddens describes as 'high modernity' (1991:27). Within the funeral this therefore weakens some traditional habits of dealing with the corpse which may create tensions. Bauman (1992) mentions that this aspect of post-modernity dwells upon the 'transient and ephemeral' (1992:22) in the changing social world of the present, which has allowed formerly well established post-industrial discourses to become disengaged. As people lose contact with underlying rationales, so they question their necessity. This has proved to be of significance regarding funerary practices. Chamberlain and Richardson (1983) record the practice of friends and neighbours paying respects (or the 'last look') at the end of the Nineteenth century. Yet Howarth (1992) argues that this has now become antiquated. Ironically what was once a community based experience has had to be 'rediscovered' by the post-industrial medical discourse (i.e. by Parkes 1972 and Bowlby 1980).

Bauman (1987) regards this growth of a managed society as explaining the rise of state-rational discourses and he presents a 'lightning tour' of historical factors which have led to the separation of scientific, moral and aesthetic discourses which he suggests originated in the Seventeenth century separation of reason and culture. Social and cultural 'archaism' was henceforward subservient to reason and scientific knowledge. Bauman suggests that cultural beliefs were downgraded as being the product of an inferior social group, which were re-named superstitions - which was a new tool of social control, allied with that of (later) education. Previously mentioned criticism of outmoded funeral customs is again an excellent example of this re-dubbing. It is merely the product of superstition (according to rational discourse ie Puckle (1926)) for mourners to visit the corpse, which rational discourses regard as an



object to be manipulated for knowledge. (A somewhat drastic example of this concerns Von Haagens 'Bodyworlds' exhibition of plastinated bodies 2001). What was once claimed as necessary ritual has been regarded, more recently, as something akin to superstitious mumbo-jumbo (for example waking the dead, which is now often regarded as an almost 'pagan' practice). This is not to say, however, that the rational-scientific perspective has complete dominance over community-cultural notions. High modernity and its disembedding is quite evident. In chapters 4 and 5 it will be shown how bereaved people nowadays navigate their way through numerous competing discourses, picking the bits which appear to them necessary and discarding the elements which appear unnecessary. It is thus ironic and important that the concept of post-modernity should emerge when rational discourse has been so well developed in late Twentieth century capitalist culture. The impact of consumer culture and what Bauman (1987:188) describes as the 'extreme fragmentation of sites of authority' has dislodged the supremacy of rationalism, but in so doing has confused many sources of authority, which has left people with few guidelines as to behaviour - which is especially marked in relation to funerary ritual.

### **3. 6 Societal exit and the corpse.**

In the first sections of this chapter I have outlined the seminal contributions of Hertz and Van Gennep. I have argued that these analyses form a helpful framework for understanding change in post-modern society. In the previous sections I have attempted to apply Hertz's thesis to various social discourses concerning the contemporary situation regarding funerals.

However I now wish to consider the contemporary importance of the work of Van Gennep. As I have previously noted, Van Gennep's work concerning funeral rituals centred, not upon rites of separation, but upon rites of transition. Furthermore he argued that the structure of the rites was of a tripartite nature. Consequently I now turn to the importance of rites of separation, transition and re-incorporation which affect corpses in contemporary society. The impact of these rites upon bereaved people will be the subject of chapters 4 and 5. It is clear that embalming is intimately

affect corpses in contemporary society. The impact of these rites upon bereaved people will be the subject of chapters 4 and 5. It is clear that embalming is intimately connected with the management of the corpse through the transitional period prior to final disposal at the funeral.

I propose to briefly summarise each of Van Gennep's three stages in relation to contemporary situations, then to draw out some more detailed examples of each stage after each summary.

### **3. 6. 1 Separation.**

Van Gennep explored the separation of the corpse at death expressed through various rites indicating the changed status of the corpse. Within the contemporary situation the issue of separation is also evident and the new, separable, status of the corpse is expressed throughout the massive and hidden bureaucracy surrounding death. People cannot simply die in contemporary society and death can be divided into expected, normal deaths and unexpected deaths, which are treated as problematic. Generally speaking the more difficult the death, the greater the bureaucracy. A feature of contemporary death ways is the eventual collection by the modern funeral director and the transportation to a threshold area awaiting the rites of transition and re-presentation to enable it to conform with socio-cultural norms, which occurs after rational bureaucratic disposal procedures have been actioned.

An obvious point to make about the treatment of the corpse at death is that it is inevitably separated from the living. At the point of death the corpse becomes apparently impure, awkward, and thus problematic for death workers. It becomes a potential threat to the order imposed by discourses and is thus the focus of elaborate discourse rites and rituals that form between it and major discourses. These rigid regimentations again underline Van Gennep's tripartite analysis and emphasise Metcalfe and Huntington's (1991) discussion of the symbolic and sociological contexts of the corpse. The body's 'new' social identity as a corpse renders it now problematic and some of the relevant issues are discussed here. The corpse is 'usually' located in a mortuary, whereas the nearly-dead (who can resemble corpses) are still left on the ward - as are the comatose, vegetative 'alive' before life preserving machines are

switched off. Medically, at the point of social exit, the need arises to ensure life is extinct, and this need occurs so that the corpse can now occupy its new and separate position. (If it is not yet a corpse then clearly the link between its soul (or person) and the mourners is not as it should be - the body still represents a slightly different set of symbols).

At the point of social exit or separation the corpse is regulated by powerful discourses such as the law, through the Coroner and Registrar, and its new status as a corpse is confirmed by the rational procedures noted here. The different discourses need to confirm the new status of the body as a corpse and 'officially' consign it to the threshold (liminal) area so that it is physically separate. It should be noted that the definition of a corpse is not a static scenario. For example the growth in 'legitimate' funeral activity regarding the non-viable foetus since legal changes in 1992 should be noted as an example of the social evolution of an 'authentic' corpse. The evolution of further categories to the concept of corpses illustrates the impact of contemporary bureaucracy within the processes of separation which control the passage of the corpse. Another example concerns the still-born, (without the legal position of life, with little apparent medical status and in the past with minimal religious significance) now need to enter the regulated system to be 'officially' relinquished, where once non-regulation was the norm. (Prior to 1926 there was no civil requirement to register still-births). It was quite usual in the past for this 'non-living' death to be buried with minimal ritual (e.g. Chamberlain and Richardson 1983, Prior 1989).

Control and segregation of the corpse is not, at first, apparent, but the regulation of the corpse by medico-legal discourses is strongly emphasised by the need for paperwork to allow the regulated discarding of the redundant body, passing through the bureaucratic system, via a range of certificates. This aspect of control is seen most when it impinges upon the relationship outlined by Van Gennep, since it throws this relationship into relief. The great majority of these official papers serve to convey the corpse into the transitional period by processes of separation. Across the globe, religious rites eventually govern its passage out of the transitional place of society. This might appear somewhat surprising, since a great many countries have widely differing religious traditions. The medical reasoning behind consigning the corpse

officially into the transitional space is revealed by writers such as Armstrong. Armstrong (1983) has argued for the growth of the dispensary gaze – the diseases focussed on social spaces. This echoes Kleinman's 'healthist' society (cited in Frank 1990) and can be extended to the mortuary. The medico-legal concern for this control is so strong that local authorities have powers under the Public Health Act of 1984 to remove a corpse to a public mortuary and take necessary steps for burial, should the need arise. But the law here only concerns the bodies of the dead – the status of the body while alive is not at all the same. Any rights the living body has are stripped away at death. In death, the registrar's certificate for disposal has a tear-off portion whose failure to return (thus notifying 'proper', regulated disposal) prompts at the least a sharp reminder from the registrar to expedite matters (Bradfield 1994).

Rigid bureaucracy defines the corpse's legal status after death and dictates when it can or cannot be moved through the 'death system' in a normal manner. This officialdom serves as a form of 'passport control' into the transitional period. It is timely to now consider in more detail the legal, bureaucratic regulation of the corpse prior to disposal. It is worth noting that most of the 'rival' areas of the system control the body by their own definitions, but with no corresponding change in the actual physical state of the corpse. Tight regulation of the corpse ensures proper and regimented progression of the corpse through the various "watertight compartments" of the death system prior to disposal. The agencies concerned include the coroner, vicar-general and home office, which emphasize the control that the corpse endures and the procedures, permissions and confirmations necessary to lead to eventual regulated disposal. Although these agencies illustrate the control aspects of society, the conformity of mourners to these stipulations again further underlines the crucial significance of the body to the social rites of disposal and thereby underlines the relationship between the body and its fellow variables in the disposal ritual. Clearly as Bradfield (1994) records, the corpse is seen as having significance for symbolic or other reasons and its process towards eventual re-incorporation is dogged by rules; the demands of the competing discourses must be satisfied prior to disposal, the corpse-within-the-system must be examined, certified, registered, booked, accounted for, sanitized, accommodated, conveyed, prayed over, and eventually disposed. As

Metcalfe and Huntington (1991) maintain, the corpse is indeed a highly condensed set of symbols and its passage through the transitional period suggests that its social identity is altered, as these diverse acts performed on or for it suggest.

However regulation is encountered most strongly at the point at which it is most seriously challenged. Consequently at 'difficult' deaths (murder, suicide etc) removal is more difficult because these awkward deaths challenge the regulatory system which epitomises the dominant rational discourses which govern the corpse in transitional places. It is clear that unexpected and therefore unregulated deaths pose a challenge to the usual regulatory, rational processes, which are thus exposed when they are invoked to deal with the threat of unexpected deaths. This rationality was absent from pre-literate societies studied by Hertz and Van Gennep, when the influence of religious explanations meant that no other discourses were considered for explanation, but the function of consigning to a liminal-transitional place was the same as for rational discourses. Rational discourses appear to impede the transition of the unexpected corpse while it is being regulated.

The last issue at separation and into transition concerns the contemporary funeral director, who becomes the caretaker and shelterer (Howarth 1992) of the corpse. The funeral director has to manage the contradictory demands of competing discourses concerning the corpse. This can cause problems. For example the relentless progress of decay often does not match the pace at which the medical profession work (and certain medical paperwork needs to precede the embalming process). This creates tension between rationally-led and culturally-led discourses to disguise the 'rational' process of decay from the 'cultural' need for sleeping intactness. But this cannot be done without satisfying the major legal discourse. Any treatment prior to registration constitutes an offence, illustrating another facet of the Foucauldian government and control of the corpse even after death. It is evident that the corpse prior to disposal from the transitional place is accommodated and regulated in a special way, due to its corpse-like properties. Fox (1993) mentions the 'general community notion of modesty' (1993:40) in relation to examinations on the body, a concept which has great currency after death. The emphasis on 'proper' methods of mortuary management reflects this view, a point not missed by other researchers into

the death system (e.g. Smale 1985, Naylor 1989, Howarth 1992), who suggest (from the perspective of scientific rationalism) that these 'mortuary habits' are unnecessary, while also acknowledging that the community/cultural perspectives oblige funeral staff to perpetuate those habits. This is a useful example of the 'shifting sand' produced by the evacuation of tradition (Giddens 1996). The concept of 'proper' care is never static and embalming is the latest (mortuary) example of this.

Another example concerns Sawchuck (cited in Kroker and Kroker 1988) who describes the discourse of fashion as one that anchored the body into specific positions. It is thus significant in Twentieth century capitalism that the mortuary wear on page 130 which Litten (1991) commented had not been radically redesigned for over a century (late Nineteenth century to the early years of the twenty first century) should be recently challenged by custom made 'burial garments' which resemble 'normal' clothes. This development suggests that the contemporary corpse is now more individual and identifiable in the chapel of rest and illustrates another facet of the social control and regulation outlined by Scott and Morgan (1993). Unlike the problems involving 'ordinary clothes', so it is claimed, these garments are designed to hang 'correctly' on the corpse and so, in the traditions of consumer culture, produce a 'better' image of death.

### **3. 6. 2 Transition.**

The major focus of Van Gennep's work concerned the issue of transition itself, whereby the corpse was outside of society but was not at that point ejected from the social world nor completely incorporated into the world of the dead. A central feature of this transitional period in contemporary society concerns the management of the corpse in this normless period, the staving off of natural processes by the technique of embalming and the juggling of the various discursive interpretations concerning what is going on. Embalmers and funeral directors very clearly support the mourner constructions of appropriate death behaviour by colluding with mourners' expectations of corpses presented as peaceful, odourless and intact. However funeral staff also collude with rational discourses by transporting the dead for autopsy and working within the medical and legal disposal system. This issue is, unfortunately, the site of a

whole set of contradictions. The popular usage of pseudo religious terminology for corpse accommodation (ie Chapel of Rest, Chapel of Repose) anticipates the eventual religious disposal. However the normless transitional period is emphasised by the custom of presenting the corpse as 'half alive'. Transition can thus be regarded as being just as problematic for contemporary societies as for pre-literate societies, as clearly the corpse cannot realistically be regarded as 'not-quite-dead' in the context of rational beliefs. A feature of the contradictory processes concerns the impact of rational discourses, which reflect mortuary customs as clearly nonsense (ie Mitford 1963), but this mish-mash of folk beliefs and customs creates tensions for mourners, which will be explored in chapter 5.

It is very clear that the contemporary management of the corpse between the moment of death and final disposal aims to house the corpse in a place that is hidden and separate, but accessible. This appears to match the rational discourses need to hide the corpse in special places such as mortuaries. Historically this has altered, due to distancing and now necessitates additional techniques such as embalming and refrigeration to maintain the illusion of a 'normal' corpse. In the period prior to the Nineteen-fifties when the corpse was more likely to lie in the front parlour, there may have been an arguably greater need for presentational abilities when bearing in mind the community-based ritual that could be widely predicted at this time, which reflected an intimate relationship between body, soul and mourners. The growth of the chapel of rest from the 1950s and onwards (Gore 1993) is indicative of the separation of the corpse from society but this separation also reinforces the important role of religious rituals by echoing this final function with vague religious labels. The chapel of rest forms a vital threshold 'halfway house' by separating the corpse from the living, but enabling access to be accomplished, albeit within socio-cultural boundaries. The chapel of rest has overtaken the use of the domestic front parlour as mortuary accommodation and certain obvious parallels can be detected connecting both sites. Both have a certain domestic feel, both are semi-public but also private, they are recognised areas of access to the dead and they should be secure. Religious discourses historically identified the corpse with a state of sleep and this is thus a reason for the contemporary habit of presenting the dead 'as if' they were not quite

dead and therefore as if they were asleep. Smale (1985) and Naylor (1989) explored at some length the social construction of mortuary reality whereby the dead were managed within the funeral firms they researched. Thus the dead were accommodated in a manner which clearly divided the dead from the living, but which also maintained a quasi-existence that accorded with the perceptions of mourners.

Ultimate incorporation of the corpse into the world of the dead, as Van Gennep explored, would be initiated within the transitional, liminal phase, which therefore clearly separated the corpse from the living, but enabled a certain relationship with the dead to be maintained. An obvious example of the separation of the corpse from the living concerns the practice of accommodating the dead within that mortuary artifact common to western deathways, the coffin. This clearly demonstrates to the mourner that a changed status has occurred (normally the living do not occupy them) and coming into contact with the dead inevitably means acknowledging this cultural 'death device' which forms a barrier between the living and the dead. Thus the custom of providing nutriment and comforts in pre-literate societies can be detected within contemporary actions which now take place within demarcated threshold points in the 'death system' (Howarth 1993). This is seen by the practice of dressing the corpse, providing gifts such as flowers and visiting the corpse, which are required within the socio-culturally embedded coping processes of mourners. As the corpse passes through various areas of the transitional phase (hospital, mortuary, embalming room, chapel of rest) it is manipulated by the death system and for the death system.

Embalming plays a crucial role in the transition of the corpse for the mourners, by disguising the actions of the rationally orientated medico-legal systems and presenting an appropriate and culturally approved appearance for mourners. Ironically embalming is necessary in order to allow urban cremation, the logical conclusion of rational funeral practice according to Jupp (1990) the time to function properly while still balancing the needs of competing discourses with a problem-free corpse. The hidden nature of the funeral industry and of embalming in particular makes embalming itself a problematic act since it has to be necessarily disguised from almost all discourses. Metcalfe and Huntington (1991) suggest that the peaceful image of the embalmed corpse reflects the basic values of (American) fulfilled and 'proper' life. But



as the corpse is hidden in contemporary England, this is a more difficult assertion to make. The information in chapters 4 and 5 casts light upon this. Embalming can therefore be seen as a presentational tool maintaining an illusion of composite body wholeness, an illusion that after coroner's autopsy is more apparent than real. To interrupt the perceived wholeness of the corpse disturbs the relationship perceived between it and the soul (or person) by the mourners. This can challenge the cultural notions of transition. Mourners may themselves be influenced by other factors, such as the media and the therapeutic regimes for self government (Rose 1999). Featherstone (1982) emphasises the significance of appearance and bodily presentation in late Twentieth century capitalist culture. The media, he argues, has influenced the sort of appearance which is expected, a statement which applies as much to the transitional corpse as to the living. The illusion of restful sleep in death must match the expectation of TV and film image, which in contemporary Twentieth century culture is now vitally important. Paradoxically, assumptions regarding this vague expectation of the appropriate 'death' appearance has itself arguably fuelled the growth of 'care for the body' prior to disposal. Lasch (cited in Featherstone 1992) commented that the culture of narcissism first took shape in the nineteen-twenties; mortuary practice itself (which I showed in chapter 2 finally 'got going' in England in the nineteen-thirties) illustrates the ultimate narcissism.

A problematic concept for discourses to negotiate concerns the notion of what is 'right and proper' for the corpse, which has no uniformity across discourses. Mourners (as chapter 5 confirms) expect a corpse to be respectable and fit to be seen, but exactly what this comprises is problematic. Hertz mentions that the attention paid to the corpse reveals the strength of the link between it and the mourners and the soul which in less developed cultures was apparent. This link is subtly transformed in western secular society which regards external appearance with greater significance now as a key artifact of personhood. It thus follows that cultural deathways focus on what is done with the body, since this still represents the soul or person. However rational discourses (such as law and medicine) focus upon what caused the corpse to be so – how it may look is irrelevant. This distancing of the relationship of body to soul and mourners has contributed to the growth of rationally oriented perspectives

regarding the corpse. This tension of rational and cultural outlooks has to be managed within the transitional period by the funeral director, who in turn relies upon the embalmer. This is a central contradiction in that the corpse is re-presented within the transitional period as being 'semi dead' for the benefit of mourners, who infer a sort of existence for the corpse as it is betwixt and between life and 'complete' death. This therefore prompts some distinct reactions for many mourners, which are puzzling to rational discourses.

MALE GOWNS

An obvious feature regarding this 'quasi-alive' state concerns clothing, which is a significant feature of this period. Clothing is very significant in life and death and is indicative of the process of transition within the liminal space.



Thus Feldman (1994) argues that the dying are de-sexualised, which appears to apply to the conventional deaths of the old - shrouds are 'unisex' and male & female gowns can be very similar in style,

FEMALE GOWNS

if not colour.

This has apparently superceded the ages-old custom of white garments for spinsters and purple for married women, which confirmed certain marital status assumptions.



However sexually- based differences are still evident for the young or those who die unconventional deaths. Male and female garments are obviously differentiated in terms of collar style, feminine frilly decoration or masculine 'dressing gown' appearance.

But to emphasize the sexual attributes of the dead would be considered to be in bad taste by many - unless specifically requested (which does very occasionally happen). A critical variable to consider regarding Feldman's desexualising is that of age at death. It is widely accepted now that most deaths occur among the elderly. Traditional mortuary garments of the past (not the special clothes mentioned within historical sources) would once have minimised sexual differences because the average age at death (then being lower) meant that the corpse still retained at least some of the features identifying sex. However the death of the young re-focuses attention where the deaths of the elderly do not. The clothing for the young usually emphasises more fully consumer culture, in both style and colour. It is common for the younger dead to be dressed in their own garments. Post-modern fragmentation and individualism enable far fewer generalisations to be made about mortuary wear, but its very existence suggests that a 'benchmark' of habit or tradition is commonly accepted. Bodies (corpses) thus 'serve as signifiers, are attributed meaning' (Fox 1993:26). What significance do the dead hold? It is apparent that embalmers attempt to construct a 'pseudo living' body out of the corpse. The emphasis here should be on the word 'pseudo', since it would be difficult to maintain the convincing fiction of 'nearly-aliveness' in the dead, unless it was supported by the living. Requests to "take care of", "look after", "treat gently" by bereaved individuals betray this assumption of residual personhood. This process of transition is carefully managed through hidden techniques so that the corpse is kept paradoxically unchanged. The dynamics of the death system are the motive force of the processes of transition in contemporary society, as opposed to physical and natural changes within the corpse which characterised pre-literate society transition.

Perhaps therefore it is no surprise that writers such as Elias (1985:44) describe death as being 'socially repressed' within this cultural device of pseudo 'suspended animation'. As death is uncomfortable for Western culture (Smale 1985), the stark

reminder of the corpse needs to be scaled down to approximate the sleeping death notion (Aries 1981) prevalent in cultural conceptions of death. (This notion of sentiency will be explored in chapters 4 and 5).

There is a huge variation in mourners' beliefs which need to be interpreted by funeral staff. Sherlock (cited in Scott and Morgan 1993) maintains that social processes perpetuate a correct image of the body (in her case, dance) but the all encompassing nature of these processes extend also, it is argued, to the correct image of the corpse. Powerful cultural perceptions of a familiar and natural death is often manifested by mourners and it is the burden of the embalmer to attempt to approximate these (community-based) social death processes. Similarly the direct involvement of women with the commodification of their bodies (Morgan in Scott and Morgan 1993) spills over into the chapel from 'real life', as the governing discourses still exert their modified pressures. Makeup, hairstyle and fashion are occasionally in demand in death as much as in life, but sometimes it can be difficult to produce the desired appearance. The corpse may need to appear in accordance with cultural prescriptions of correct-ness, regarding appearance and condition. This thesis perhaps can be regarded as an effort to expose this cultural accommodation that until now has not been fully examined by other writers such as Smale (1985), Naylor (1989), Howarth (1993) or Parsons (1997). Again it is the embalmer who has to mediate the gap between rational discourse views and cultural expectations of bereaved people, but this is disguised. This is a central issue of this thesis and accounts for the difficult nature of the corpse and the embalming process being a focal point to mortuary practice.

Synott's (1993) explanation of the body as a social category with different meanings imposed by different sectors of the population also has currency with this discussion of the corpse. It can be argued that the corpse can be interpreted by actors within the death system in widely discrepant ways. Critics such as Mitford (1963) regard the assumption of personal attributes within the corpse as crazy and a product of the funeral industry, but this is clearly only one point of view amongst many others. This illustrates the conflict between the scientifico-rational outlook and the folklore-culture debate which influence Hertz's tripartite analysis. Whichever point of view is taken

some sort of action is necessary, as western culture is not familiar with the decay 'normally' associated with the dead, as Gorer (1965) pointed out. This need to disguise natural processes illustrates the complex link between the various discourses, as they regulate the symbolic corpse. At the public funeral the whole body, safely and hygienically enclosed within the coffin, usually needs to be present since this has a link with the implied fate of the soul and the feelings of the mourners (Prior 1989). The strenuous efforts to locate inaccessible dead victims of disasters and have them present at the funeral underlines their symbolic importance. It took the Royal Navy *ten weeks* to locate the last victim of a helicopter crash during the Gulf crisis of 2003. (Contrast this with the reported anguish after the wrong victims were returned after the terrorist massacre at Luxor, Egypt in the summer of 1997. Due to problems with identification, funerals for two English victims took place with the wrong corpse present). Significance does not only extend to correct final identity, it can also encompass wholeness or symbolic wholeness of the corpse. After amputation or serious injury, it is not uncommon for the bereaved to request a coffin whose size does not betray the surgical trauma sustained by the occupant, (e.g. for those who have had both legs amputated, a 'proper' length coffin which has a large empty space at the foot end where legs would have been).

This attention paid to the corpse at social death underlies its crucial, Hertzian significance, for those who subscribe to the 'community-cultural' perspective as a prior indicator of personhood. In modern Britain, Gorer suggested that the physicality of the corpse was abhorrent to the living, due to the institutionalised decay of religion, a thrust backed up by Fulton (1965) and Hinton (1967) and emphasised in the works of Malinowski. Thus although purgatory has been eradicated from Protestantism, concern for the state of the corpse can still be manifested, but this is arguably not entirely due to religious-based ideas, but also to notions prevalent in consumer culture. These focus upon the corpse as 'self' which demands an acceptable body image in death.

### 3. 6. 3 Re-incorporation.

The far end of the transitional process aims at the re-incorporation of the corpse into the world of the dead and of the mourners back into the changed social fabric of society. The contemporary concepts of the world of the dead is of a final place which is still governed in many ways by broadly religious discourses. However the diminishing impact of religion in increasingly secular English society means that religious-based concepts are poorly known by mourners. It follows that re-incorporation of the living is a far more difficult issue.

The status of the corpse in the new world of the dead is not a well developed theme in contemporary English deathways, since overt belief in the afterlife is not a major feature of late Twentieth century consumer society. Featherstone (1991) suggests that secularisation of the corpse has resulted in the eclipse of the traditional religious purpose of the corpse as a transitory vehicle to a spiritual end. The corpse now represents the remnant of the person in that something is being done for the person who has died by treating the corpse. This changed concept of the corpse illustrates the invasive nature of what Giddens (1996) has referred to as 'post-traditional society', which is characterised by an erosion of traditional values. This provides a rationale for the embalming procedure, as religious explanations appear to dwindle. However a religious finale is still very much the dominant method of dispatching the dead (Pickering 1974). The resilience of other rites such as burial plot visiting and anniversary 'in memoriam' entries in newspapers suggests a continuing belief in another existence after death. It is thus crucial that the corpse, as the last reminder of the body, is 'properly' sent to its destination by the correct form of folk religion (Naylor 1989).

The contemporary re-incorporation of the dead now occurs during a matter of hours with the impact of cremation. This is in direct contrast to the weeks, months and years associated with the gradual re-incorporation associated with burial (Naylor 1989). Attitudes towards the corpse at social exit can be gauged by regarding the disposition of cremated remains which also illustrate Van Gennep's emphasis upon death as a transition. The reduction of the corpse to something that Hertz described as non-corporeal, in this case ashes, is a physical reminder of incorporation into the

world of the dead, which permits the transitional mourners to adopt reconstructed social relationships. It is clear that appropriate disposal of ashes is an important part of the re-incorporation process for many mourners, since the 'cremated remains' is the only surviving physical remnant of the corpse after cremation, as project 5 suggests In chapters 4 and 5.

Concern for the corpse appears to be tenuously related to religious affiliation, but more closely linked to personal, therapeutic issues (Rose 1999, Chichton 1976), although Jupp's point (1995) that Catholic funerals (as expressed within the rubric) are more concerned with the discarded corpse than Protestant funerals is still valid. This concern is seen through the incensing of and sprinkling of the coffin with holy water. Even the place where the corpse will lie is significant. The Catholic grave has to be blessed (New Funeral Mass Book 1975) to render it suitable for the Catholic dead. (Special areas of many cemeteries are still consecrated for specific denominational usage, but the significance in late Twentieth century England is now minimal). There is no equivalent Protestant ritual - only the living are prayed for, the corpse is discarded. This difference in Catholic and Protestant ritual suggests a differing religio-social perception of the corpse. However it is very clear that minimal religious beliefs still govern the re-incorporation of the corpse into the world of the dead. Vague denominational background determines the precise form of re-incorporation but alternate religious viewpoints produce some tensions. Concepts of the corpse as a 'discarded relic' (Protestant) and 'future vessel' (Catholic) therefore suggest different methods of consignment from liminal transition. However profound theological differences are rarely aired at the funeral. Concepts of post-modernity suggest that multiple interpretations of events co-exist with each other so that the impact of religious rituals are muted and prompt a variety of reactions from mourners. Nevertheless re-incorporation is still associated with religious discourses, although now somewhat diluted and in tandem with therapeutic techniques, and are by far the most common method of incorporating the dead into the world of the ancestors and of the living back into society.

### 3.7 OVERVIEW.

Hertz's tripartite relationship can be meaningfully employed to discover the corpse as a metaphor of transition. Death, which is regarded as a process, concerns the possibly significant, symbolic corpse, whose rites of separation through various discourses are painstaking, which thus concerns the liminal period. As the place of the soul has receded within contemporary society, Hertz's analysis possibly points to the significance of the body and hence the corpse at times of death, or to its growing irrelevant redundancy, in contemporary, therapeutically oriented, England. As other countries such as America (where embalming is very widely employed) or Northern Ireland (where embalming is well known in areas) are still widely regarded as religious countries, it is clear that the significance of religious belief is not itself the only determining factor governing the apparent significance (or otherwise) of the corpse. But the corpse still appears to dwell within what Van Gennep (1906) has called a liminal period, where norms are typically suspended. While within this threshold state the corpse is not completely socially dead. Various culturally approved actions with the corpse may take place within this period.

The impact of the state and its major discourses on the corpse is clear, in that the major discourses regularise, control and discipline the corpse (Foucault 1977), which is expressed through the dominant interpretations of the law, medicine and the church. The term 'body' within these discourses is a very widely used term, which corresponds to the corpse at death, which is attributed with personality. Religious and medical constructs (shown to be somewhat arbitrary) throw light on what 'a body' actually is, which is further thrown into relief by 'foreign' religious definitions of the corpse. The contradiction of rational and non-rational outlooks on the body are seen in funeral practice (which is itself an excellent illustration of a rite of passage) which reflects cultural prescription (and reinforces Hertz's tripartite relationship). At the point of death the body is intimately bound up with dominant (and somewhat arbitrary) discourse prescriptions (an excellent example being the foetus) which are more clearly discerned in relation to Hertz's work. Prior to disposal these competing discourses exercise a contradictory influence upon the perception of the corpse.



The recent emergence of the sociology of the body has allowed a 'new' area of social theory to develop which focuses on the body as a metaphor, concealing within it the natural body, enabling the corpse to be seen as a representation which is influenced by consumer culture. Exploring the body in life thus has correspondence with the body in death as consumer culture does not, at this point, release its influence. Stripping away this disguise allows one to see the natural body, which is one emphasis of my thesis - the cultural accommodation of death by embalming. Western notions of death therefore can be regarded as a social construct which can be observed through death practices concerning the corpse and embalming.

Embalmers are employed to maintain the culturally approved appearance due in part to the relationship inferred between the corpse and the person and mourners. Embalming thus represents the interaction of a hidden discourse which has responded to the necessary secularisation of society by preserving the physical corpse for the benefits of the mourners, during its liminal transition.

Despite cultural process which influence appropriate appearance, the liminal corpse is constrained within the massive state-rational system of regulation and control in contemporary funeral practice. This section concludes the academic background to this thesis, which has been concerned with examining the literature concerning the corpse.

It is timely now to explore some related issues which I anticipate will examine current knowledge about the significance of the embalming process and current concerns with the corpse. Some of the projects in the next chapter explore the reactions of mourners to the moment of confrontation with their embalmed relative and the mixed reactions concerning this.

Other projects provide information about the embalming occupation, its links to funeral directors, a glance at the historical development of the process of viewing (as this action is referred to by funeral directors) and the concerns that embalmers themselves have with their role in re-presentation of the dead. These issues form the focus of the next two, research-based, chapters. The links of these research issues to the literature should become self evident.

## **Chapter 4 RESEARCH PROJECTS.**

A number of issues associated with the contemporary management of the corpse thus appear to have been raised which merit some sort of investigation, to narrow the gaps in the literature. There are many areas where too little is known concerning the death behaviour of mourners. It would be useful to have an idea of how often mourners view their dead and who it actually is that does this. What significance does viewing have within the rest of the funeral ritual? Does the experience have any value and relevance to contemporary society and indeed does it still happen? Who and how many are the embalmers and exactly what are embalmers trying to do? Some measure of an answer will be produced to these questions which will, at the least, enable some rather more accurate data to be generated than that produced by other researchers. Although the separate investigations here are all different, they follow the issues connected with viewing though from alternative perspectives. Project 2, however, explores the complete lack of embalmers in the period 1920s to 1960s in parts of rural east Kent and Project 7 mainly details the growth of embalmers from the 1950s.

### **4.1 Introduction**

I plan to discuss briefly the issue of viewing the dead, as it is dealt within the literature, followed by some methodological and ethical issues. Each project is then briefly outlined, so that the overall form of the 8 projects can be more easily seen, followed by some detailed discussion of the methodology of each particular project.

The cultural ritual of visiting the dead commonly referred to by funeral directors as 'viewing' is well known within the literature (Fulton 1965, Parkes 1972, Williams 1956, Dumont & Foss 1972, Crichton 1976, Ennew 1980, Naylor 1989, Howarth 1992) and forms for a large number of families an integral part of the funeral ritual. The act of 'viewing' usually relates to the habit of visiting the dead in culturally acceptable places when corpses have been re-presented in an appropriate manner. This usually happens after any medical or legal systems have relinquished their control of the corpse and after the body has re-emerged from the 'death system' (Howarth 1992) within which it has been regulated. The process of 'viewing' in funeral premises takes place within culturally specific areas which can be referred to as 'chapels', 'chapels of rest', 'resting chapels', 'resting rooms' etc or

some similar title. Although 'chapels' may vary widely, there are overlapping characteristics common to most of these places. Overriding parameters suggest that the chapel will conform to the ideologies of the funeral company and will reflect whatever is considered to be appropriate by the local people. This may well differ as one moves around the country. An obvious parameter is that all of these areas will be where the dead are housed and as such will be close to the 'backstage' area (Naylor 1989) but also accessible to the public parts of the premises.

The practice of viewing is not a recent one. Puckle (1926) suggests that originally the communal visit functioned to confirm that no violent end had come to the corpse, a practice that Broderick (1978) considered was part of the ancient coroner's duties, to verify natural death by inspection. The folk practice of viewing crops up regularly in historical sources (Hazlitt 1904, Kephart 1950). Pine's work (1975) describes the importance of embalming to the emergence of American viewing practice after the civil war. Roberts (1971) noted that prior to World War 1 it was the custom for children to visit the dead at home and pray over the corpse and Williams (1912) quaintly commented that viewing was 'rigidly observed by rustic people'.

The perseverance of the practice of viewing was due to its perceived importance. Laquer (1983) who explored the pauper funeral of 1750 – 1850 commented that the importance of paying respects (an older term for viewing) was that this confirmed that you had a place in society; you were still someone, even in the poorhouse. Richardson's (1985) discussion of the impact of the Anatomy Act of 1832 focussed on the denial of this basic gesture, as the bodies of the poor were 'anatomized' as soon after death as practicable.

Despite the existence of the ritual in the past, more recent interpretations have emerged in the later 20<sup>th</sup> century. Hinton (1967) suggested that viewing had declined in the home; Pine (1969) suggested that there was in Britain 'relatively little' viewing. This issue of apparent marginality of viewing is reflected in the more recent academic works of Smale (1985), Naylor (1989) and Howarth (1992), although Crichton (1976) asserted that viewing was 'widely practised'. Gorer (1965) appeared unsure of any value in the viewing ritual, Pine (1975) asserted that now viewing in England did not happen. Phipps (1987) suggested viewing was unhelpful. This was possibly due to the increasing separation of death from normal

life, as Prior (1989) noted, which Jupp (1990) described as the distancing of death. This separation of life and death itself has had an impact on the perception of the 'picture of death' that viewing produces. Roberts (cited in Houlbrook 1989) comments that old customs like visiting and touching have been abandoned due to professionalisation - a statement that I was sure did not accurately reflect contemporary practice. Lindemann (1944) confirmed that being able to view had therapeutic value regarding his study of the victims of the (American) Coconut Grove Nightspot tragedy. Naylor (1989) suggests that today this ritual functions to restore personal identity and worth to human remains. Young et al (1995) also asserted that viewing helped the grieving process.

Barley (1987) summarises the positive aspects of viewing (after embalming) as being to communicate the image of restful sleep, by arranging the corpse so as to be associated with cues normally associated with sleep. The issue of viewing also encompasses the placement of the coffin and corpse in the chapel. Indeed, is the 'chapel' actually a chapel? Does the head of the coffin face to the 'altar' or away from it? Is the coffin in the centre of the room or at one side? What size should the room be, how should it be decorated? How should it be lit, should there be music playing, should the room smell nice? Culturally defined 'proper' settings can be rigidly enforced or adhered to, well after any rationale has disappeared, which again reflects the strength of culturally constructed discourses concerning death.

Social scientists focus a great deal on methodology since this can have a pre-determining action on the sorts of data that are produced. Being aware of potential sources of bias is the first in a series of steps to its understanding and interpretation, so that data produced does not contain inherent flaws. An issue of fundamental importance concerns reflexivity (Hammersley and Atkinson 1983), recognising that I was a part of the social world I was exploring. Although impossible to disenfranchise myself from it, I had to continually monitor what I was doing, while interacting with the benefit of 27 years of funereal experience and associated assumptions. I had to acknowledge that all social research is *participant* observation. To strive for a greater degree of ecological validity, I needed to spread my avenues of data collection and these avenues became visible as the various projects grew and matured as the investigation unfolded. I had planned to produce a diversity of information concerning the various viewing issues that were

raised, to put into some sort of empirical perspective the significance that viewing has for mourners. This would also serve as a form of triangulation (Hammersley & Atkinson 1983) of data, in that comparison of data relating to the same phenomenon, but derived from different phases of the fieldwork and different points in the viewing process, would contribute to a validity check of the information produced. While access was unproblematic, a much more challenging issue was that of my difficulty in suspending my preconceptions and familiarity with the 'obvious' issues surrounding mortality. There was no way I could play a novice and therefore ask stupid questions about the commonplace. I had to extract the familiar in the apparently strange (Goffman 1959) or the strange in the familiar (Garfinkel 1967). So a fundamental issue for me was one of establishing a degree of distance from the data (what Hammersley and Atkinson describe as 'estrangement').

There are eight distinctly separate research projects in this chapter and I plan to examine the methodologies within each of these and critically evaluate them to reveal clearly and comprehensively whatever results have been obtained. The eight separate pieces of research are listed below.

1. Mourner's viewing preferences
2. East Kent funeral customs
3. Embalmers' checklist of qualities.
4. Historical viewing preferences.
5. Funeral rituals and viewing.
6. Funeral Directors and Embalmers.
7. Registered embalmers.
8. Doris and Caroline.

These were quite varied exercises. Some were also quite simple and small, but one project was a far more wide-ranging and comprehensive exercise. An overriding feature of all the pieces was that the research approach within them should be sensitive to the nature of the setting. There were real mourners in many of the research settings, whose feelings had to be considered. I present a brief summary of each project below, before a short discussion of ethical issues. Each project is then described in greater detail in the main body of the chapter.

#### **Project 1. Mourners' viewing preferences**

The largest and longest exercise concerned the actions and impressions of 274 mourners concerning the habit of viewing the dead (or not doing so) and their reactions to this experience. This involved me speaking with them and noting down information that they told me.

#### **Project 2. East Kent funeral customs.**

This second project pre-dated this thesis and was the principle data gathering action for Gore (1993), which was a local study of elderly funeral directors and associated workers who worked in the period between the late 1920s and the mid 1980s.

**Project 3.** Embalmers' checklist of qualities.

This was a small and simple piece of work concerning a check list of desirable and undesirable qualities concerning the appearance of the dead, filled in by embalmers at an educational conference. This was designed to reveal how embalmers themselves thought the dead *should* look.

Four sources of data were gathered from written sources for projects 4, 5, 6 and 7; two of which were drawn from the funeral records of our family funeral company. These sources can be used to provide a source of sensitizing concepts, which might provide potential lines of enquiry. All four of these sources can be regarded as documents in context; that is to say as documents recording information that is generated by or for the social situation (in this case relating to embalmers and funerals) and used for other purposes. These may not be exactly the same as the 'official data' (Douglas 1966) that Douglas saw as providing an important source of information, but all four sources provide a relevant and reasonable snap-shot of information that is germane to the issues at hand.

**Project 4.** Historical viewing preferences.

This project was based upon a sample of historical viewing preference of mourners since 1972, largely gathered from archive material.

**Project 5.** Funeral rituals and viewing.

This project, also concerning our records, featured an analysis of the components of contemporary funeral ritual, compared with mourners' viewing habits.

**Project 6.** Funeral Directors and Embalmers.

This exercise concerned a comparison within the same geographical area of registered embalmers and registered funeral directors. This was to confirm or reject the assumption contained in the works of previous researchers such as Smale (1985) and Howarth (1992) that funeral directors and embalmers are largely the same individuals.

**Project 7.** Registered Embalmers.

This was a record of numbers of registered embalmers, drawn from the earliest years of the twentieth century into the twenty-first, from various sources.

#### **Project 8. Doris and Caroline.**

This last piece of work was a qualitative account concerning two young women and their very vocal reactions to viewing at our premises. This was an unplanned piece of research and I just happened to be present, I was able to record in great detail what went on and see how these young women interpreted the situation.

#### **4.2 Ethical issues.**

The purpose of research ethics is to ensure that no harm is done to participants. There is a significant problem when eliciting a response from distressed individuals. To draw out information in order to expand data categories with no regard for the human situation that is traumatising individuals would be an appalling manipulation. These people were often elderly, slightly confused and meeting with me at a vulnerable time. So to burden them with unexpected information at a difficult time would not have been helpful.

In addition, death is a traumatic time of crisis – mourners have a right to expect positive help. People do not need to be further upset by tactless questioning and the researcher has no moral right to trample upon sensitive issues just to get a result on a data sheet. People are far more than mere laboratory specimens. There is a responsibility to support and aid if at all possible, but the information that is collected should be accurate and reflect the situation being investigated. Gentle and thoughtful phrasing is necessary to elicit a 'true' response that does not manoeuvre the mourner into a self-perceived corner which obliges them to say what they feel they ought to, regardless of their own real feeling.

The British Sociological Association's ethical practice statement has some clear issues regarding research which should be raised. (British Sociological Association (2002) *Statement of ethical practice for the British Sociological Association*). Researchers enter into a personal, moral relationship with those they study and have responsibilities regarding the data generated by those relationships. Physical and psychological wellbeing should not be affected,

especially as research relationships can be characterised by disparities of power and status. It is very clear that my research was strongly linked to these issues.

So as far as is possible, research should be based upon informed consent, so explanations in terms meaningful to the participants should be used. It is incumbent upon the researcher to find ways to minimise or alleviate any distress concerning apparent intrusions in their private and personal lives. Additionally, special care should be taken when research participants are rendered particularly vulnerable by virtue of factors such as age or disability. I reasoned that the burden of loss could make my participants vulnerable and I made sure that potential distress was avoided. It is also important in covert research to safeguard the anonymity of participants and this should be respected. As I was involved in a covert situation, I felt that explanations of highly moral-sounding research issues would be confusing to many of my participants, due to the obvious issue of age and infirmity and the overwhelming impact in some circumstances of grief. I reasoned that minimal impact would be characterised by (arguably necessary) disguise. As I discuss on pages 164 – 166, many participants seemed to gain ‘therapeutic value’ from my visit and the opportunity to talk. I quickly abandoned pursuing those who appeared upset because this did not seem a likely way to obtain any useful data, as well as providing a potential source of discomfort and embarrassment. Living and working in a small community meant that I was very aware of the significance of personal contact and the potential for complaint. I know that after a period of a half-a-dozen years, there has not been a single case of funeral or post funeral dismay at my research overtures. ‘Grapevine talk’ circulates through small communities very easily, so I reasoned that in these sensitive circumstances my approach seemed the most appropriate. I judged it more likely to do harm if I asked for consent than if I proceeded as a ‘normal’ funeral director. The publication of the results in a Ph. D will do none of them any harm.

#### **4.3 PROJECT 1: Mourners’ viewing preferences.**

The process of visiting the dead in England is a private, family orientated practice for the most part and researchers must therefore be in particularly close proximity to gain access to mourners and investigate what is going on. As part of my job entails co-ordinating funeral arrangements, it proved an ideal way of



gaining information from bereaved relatives about their encounters with the corpse, when meeting with them on their own territory where they were as relaxed as possible. This enabled me to build up a general picture concerning frequency of contact over a large sample. The data was gathered over a period of one and a half years in the late 1990s and became a part of my occupational routine. It is possible that mourners could have interpreted my questions within the context of 'funeralising' (Unrah 1979, Barley 1987). The 274 mourners I visited assumed that I was visiting for *their* benefit, not mine, as my following discussion suggests.

To preserve the notions of personal service and to (hopefully) make the funeral experience more bearable for relatives, a visit would be made prior to the funeral by the funeral director, to confirm and clarify any issues or outstanding questions posed at the original arrangement phase. As this visit occurred only a day or so before the funeral, the practice of viewing had usually taken place by then and so it was possible to include with this visit the necessary questions to ascertain what had happened and the mourners' verdict on the experience. It was surprisingly easy to initiate a response from mourners. Although I felt at times to be a somewhat ruthless extractor of information, there were many times when I felt that the mourner appeared to gain far more from the experience that I did. Talking is of itself often helpful and many of these relatives had no one else to discuss this particular issue with. Doctors and priests minister to people, but their focus is directed to physical or spiritual issues and rarely to chapel-related ones. Our discussions quite often contained cathartic elements.

Constructing a 'working identity' proved to be effortless, since the appropriate garments in this context were my everyday work clothes of black jacket and pinstripe trousers. I had become a covert participant observer who could move with ease in this particular sort of death-related social situation. Dressed in this way I could 'impersonate' a funeral director with ease because that is what I appeared to be. My disguise in the field was perfect and this was because I had a 20 year head start in terms of 'funeral situations' in this particular area. Had I been dressed in a different way, it is possible that I might have obtained different responses for several reasons. For instance funerals can be considered private events in England and to ask pertinent questions about a dead relative for no clear reason might have been interpreted differently. By engaging in participant

observation as an already-existing participant, my way into the social situation after death was made much easier than if I had been a 'non-funeral' person, who might not have appreciated what the viewing situation entailed. My attempts at 'impression management' (Goffman 1959) appeared pretty convincing, but as I only spent 15 minutes or so at each interview, this was not a great issue. I did not feel I was misleading my participants since my questions concerned a sort of funeral 'quality control' and essentially were there to check on mourners' experiences. I paid special attention to asking questions that were not leading mourners into any particular response. These questions were as non-directive as I felt I could make them. I discuss the initial social situation regarding these questions presently.

So the relationships within the interview were initiated and maintained without difficulty and my attempts at impression management appeared totally convincing. In these instances my 'gatekeeper' proved to be a member of my secretarial staff, who could prepare mourners concerning my visit. In this way I enjoyed privileged access to a special social group. I could enter with two very separate agendas, one concerning funeral production and supervision and the other concerning experiences with or without the corpse. I quickly learnt my 'viewing questions' and could insert these when appropriate into the conversation.

The sample of mourners was generated according to my ability to visit at their home or upon chance meeting at one of our premises. So the sample could not be regarded as having been generated randomly, although the somewhat haphazard nature reduced, so I felt, any inherent bias in my data collection. As the division of the 274 interviews into 145 viewing and 129 non-viewing mourners was more-or-less half and half, I reasoned that I had not unwittingly avoided problematic mourners who, for example, either did not want to discuss their reasons for avoiding their dead relative or were pre-occupied with maintaining over-close contact with the corpse. The overriding majority of these visits concerned 'normal' deaths, since these occasions were those about which mourners could talk. Difficult, traumatic or untimely death (or unco-operative respondents) produced greater problems of interview and I did not think it fair to pursue these 17 respondents merely to satisfy my data collection, when they were living through a time of considerable distress. There were times when it was

possible to gather the appropriate parameters and responses, but more often in these circumstances an abandoned interview seemed the best way through the social situation of chapel visiting. Therefore the majority of mourners were in the elderly age group and the relatives they came to see were similarly elderly. Youthful visitors were a smaller segment of the sample.

#### 4.3.1 Interviews.

When meeting mourners to confirm funeral details and pursue details of chapel visiting, it seemed wise to build up some kind of rapport before talking about their relative. I was aware that there was at times a considerable social distance between my mourners and me. I knew only too well that I was not 'at home'. I was in someone else's home territory and I had a number of 'fronts' to maintain. I felt that I balanced these competing requirements well. There were obvious questions to ask at the beginning of the interview. Knowing who I was talking to was useful and checking that the clergy had made contact also instilled confidence. I needed to know a little about people and make them feel more comfortable before I launched into questions about their dead relatives. To rush in would transgress a number of etiquette rules that I felt still governed these funereal situations. Asking "How long have you lived here"? also meant that I would know a little of the life history. In other circumstances, to enquire within ordinary conversation about the appearance of a dead person would probably have been greeted with surprise, dismay or suspicion. I got the impression from mourners that for me as a funeral director to ask this question was entirely normal. The seemingly simple question "How did X look"? almost always produced a straightforward response. As not all the answers were favourable, this suggests that these mourners were not just being polite. Mourners appeared to answer directly; there was no obvious 'flattery'. Also elderly people can at times express themselves in very blunt terms. A spade is a spade and a poor death experience can be (and indeed was) reported in clear and unambiguous tones. After these responses, to ask about prior experiences, whether present at the death or afterwards and previous experiences seemed to flow fairly naturally. If mourners did not wish to view, the innocent questions about previous experiences still appeared to make sense and mourners appeared comfortable

talking to me about their prior experiences. In this way my interactional strategy was a form of pleasant interrogation and my questions are listed below:

#### Viewing mourners

1. Did you go and see your relative
2. Have you seen anyone dead before – long time ago or current
3. What did you expect to see
4. What is important about viewing
5. How did (the deceased) look?

#### Non-viewing mourners.

*(ie those who may have viewed elsewhere and not at funeral premises).*

6. Did you go and see your relative.
7. Could I ask why not.
8. Have you seen anyone dead before – long time ago / current
9. How did (the deceased) look?
10. How should they have looked.

Mourners appeared comfortable discussing with me their opinions about contact with the dead. If they were uncomfortable about this, they were able to control body language and intonation and fool me completely. A more realistic interpretation was that mourners found my questions appropriate to the situation and therefore answered them. The social situation may have been far more conducive to response or to constrain the respondent from replying, but the result time and again was a brief summary after a short moment of thought concerning the overall impression. This may have been a positive or negative result and often mourners fell into the overwhelming majority who interpreted the appearance of the dead as 'peaceful' or 'restful' or communicated by some similar phrase the (possibly English) cultural assumption that the dead are resting in limbo. No one said to me 'Why do you want to know this'? Almost all merely answered my polite questions from their experiences of loss. It could

well be that some funeral directors are ideal social surveyors, that they have communication skills which can effectively link up with individuals who are highly traumatised at a time of great crisis in their lives; or can extract the requisite information in a reasonably pleasant and business-like manner. For whatever reason, the respondents seemed inclined, willing and occasionally enthusiastic in their answers and I was a willing and active listener (Hammersley & Atkinson 1983).

#### 4.3.2 Parameters.

Prior to visiting, it was simple to gain some initial parameters concerning ascribed characteristics from our arrangement forms concerning the relationship to the deceased person, stated preference to view or not, age, gender, etc which formed a useful basis for the 'interview'. This inevitably took place within the family home and it was usually possible to note some 'bullet points' in situ and write these into a short report outside in the car. I was very focussed on recording detail as soon as possible, before I forgot parts of it or was tempted to unknowingly transform it. I was surprised at how much I could recall from such brief bullet points, while it was so fresh. These were more fully recorded on file cards later in the day and stored. This was a great drain on time, since it was time consuming to do properly but this was the complete extent of the data, so care and attention were essential parts of this exercise. The actual responses of mourners were recorded as fully as possible. This was comparatively simple since the responses of many proved to be a brief verdict on the occasion.

However the meaning behind these responses was something far more problematic. Mourners' actions were based upon and permeated by social meaning, attitudes and beliefs. I had to try to interpret the world in the same way as they did. At the same time I had to treat as 'anthropologically strange' (Hammersley and Atkinson 1983) the settings concerned to attempt to make explicit the assumptions that were taken for granted, but I also had to understand the social meanings within the actions. So I had to approach the social world of the mourner in a manner that respected their constructs and allow them to reveal its nature to me. I also thought it important to note verbatim what was said as it conveyed so much about mourners' experiences and interpretations and was a vital clue to the worlds they lived in. It proved unproblematic simply to note these

comments, which seemed to focus on the implied state of the corpse or soul from the external appearance of the body. In this way a specific portfolio of information about how mourners organised their perceptions of the world was generated which provided clues as to how mourners constructed their realities. Their comments betrayed the moulding processes of social contexts and were social phenomena themselves, reflecting largely English concepts of mortality, reality and coping with loss. These situated vocabularies (Hammersley & Atkinson 1983:153) were a powerful definition of the situation. I had ten initial issues to raise, which in practice was reduced to five questions concerning viewing or five questions concerning non-viewing. This meant that I only had to manipulate half of the questions per interview, which proved helpful. It was at times challenging to gain the information I required but for viewing families I could usually extract information about the previous experiences of death, expectation at our chapels, what was important, if expectations were met and what was 'a good job'. These details were usually collected in a surprisingly comfortable way. For non-viewing families the issues of 'why not', 'any prior experience', 'if so how did they (the corpse) look' and 'how should they look' were similarly collected

#### 4.3.3 Issues.

I was concerned that I might be putting into peoples' minds a response that might not have existed. It would be foolish to say 'How nice did your relative look'? because this would serve to reinforce the perception that this was how corpses should look and therefore how mourners should perceive them. So by avoiding the use of any descriptive words, the way was open for mourners to tell me their interpretations of the viewing situation. Where experiences were expressed negatively, it was usually possible to draw out some reasons behind this. The simpler phrase 'How did he/she look'? initiated for the vast majority a (polite) description of their reactions, which could have been either a flowing torrent of praise or a briefer report of disappointment. I felt it important that I should not take these reports in a personal manner. Accurate and truthful response was what I was looking for, not a retreat into English manners where people would be nice to me, despite the traumatised circumstances when I risked pushing them past their boundaries and provoked confrontation. It did seem to me that mourners told me what they were feeling. If the presentation was not

what it should have been, many mourners came straight to the point. I felt it important to enable mourners to tell me what they actually felt, by encouraging 'real' answers.

After asking the initial questions concerning the verdict in the chapel, it seemed a natural question to ask about mourners' prior experiences. This approach had two consequences. It suggested that there was some important background to my visit to these mourning people and also told me about their prior experiences, which would provide a framework for their current expectations. To ask if the deceased had been seen by them at hospital could be interpreted either as when the person was alive or dead. If mourners told me about 'live' visits, I would prompt further about after 'death visits' at hospital, which turned out to be very common. I had not expected this. Nurses' efforts to enable family members to see recently dead patients were often welcomed by mourners.

#### 4.3.4 Categories and tabulating.

Two initial categories were generated: those who elected to view and those who did not. This, however, began to create issues since mourners had differing prior experiences of death that went beyond electing to view or not. Some mourners had confronted the dead in the distant past, others had seen this current (dead) relative only days or hours before. I was not sure at that point if this would produce different results, so I created a four-way split into viewing people who had, or had not, had previous experiences of death and similarly non-viewing people who had or had not had previous experience of viewing the dead.

Consequently the category of current and prior became an important part of my data, since those who had not visited currently (before our premises) could only have had a general idea of how pleasing or otherwise their relative might have looked, based upon an experience that may have happened years ago. Often I was given a verdict based upon no familiarity with how this particular dead person had actually appeared prior to death or at death. The four sub-groups were tabulated, for ease of reference, into alphabetic groups from A – D, where A had absolutely no current or prior experience of death and B had prior, but no current experience. Both of these two categories were 'currently ignorant'.

Category C had no prior experience but had experience at the present time and category D had seen death widely. These latter two categories were 'less currently ignorant' of death.

Tabulating these responses became very simple since a 'death visit' could be annotated as YP (yes, I visited at some prior time) or NP (No I did not visit at some prior time) and similarly for current visits: YC or NC. I became quite skilled at writing this summary down while maintaining eye contact with mourners and noting their impressions of previous death contacts. It appeared to me that mourners assumed I was noting some important feature for the coming ritual. From their reactions it appeared to me that my note taking appeared congruent with the context of the setting. Of course there were times when people either could not or would not respond to my questions. By re-phrasing or asking later, some appropriate response could be made, to enable me to include these others in my sample. However where individuals were too upset or just not inclined to answer, their incomplete responses were excluded. This was, however, a comparatively rare event and only 17 interviews were abandoned or not pursued.

#### **4.4 PROJECT 2: East Kent funeral customs.**

It became increasingly obvious to me in the early 1980s that the occupation I was working within was changing. The craft methods of the past were gradually fading away and funeral organisations had become full time custodians of the dead. I felt that there was more information to gather besides my own assumptions. I produced a small series of semi-structured questions that dealt with the occupational experiences of funeral directors and associated workers whose experiences spanned the period between the late 1920s and the mid 1980s. These questions were designed to enable the respondent to transmit a snapshot of experiences concerned with 'typical work' from a period far ago. All of these interviews were taped so that maximum information could be gained, whilst also allowing me to interact with these 24 elderly men and women that were my sample.

Interpersonal skills are a valuable occupational tool for those who work with mourners and I suppose I was using my conversational abilities to their maximum to put my respondents at ease. The very elderly is an age group that I converse with regularly and making conversation about horse drawn procedures or wood



working craft techniques was not at all difficult. Almost all the respondents were initially a little apprehensive about being recorded, but this evaporated when they got into full flow with their life story concerning events from 30, 40 or 50 years ago. As these events were well in the past and contained no 'secrets' or formulas for commercial success but concerned customs, habits and working practices now almost extinct, almost all the participants responded with great gusto and enthusiasm. It appeared that no-one had ever asked them questions about their working practices and some wonderful details were recounted. Information produced was abundant and produced a fascinating picture of an occupation undergoing change. Keeping these elderly people on the topic in question was quite easy although I had to resort to the pause button on the cassette recorder at times, when the conversation strayed too far from my objectives.

All respondents were asked about the methods of coffin construction used in their firms, the practices of taking people home to the front parlour, transport details (motor or horse) and a brief resume of common funeral rituals of this period between the late 1920s to the 1980s. The largest majority of these elderly people had known my father, who therefore appeared as a sort of 'gatekeeper'. However once we had talked, several respondents passed me on to others who could be helpful and who would consent to talk to me, based on the recommendation of the previous respondent.

The tape was later transcribed and the information was put into a common running order. This was a laborious and time consuming, but very necessary part of the field work. This was necessary as some elderly gentlemen, once in 'full flow', moved from subject to subject with such a clarity of recollection that it seemed better to let these people talk and guide them back to my agenda only when they had exhausted their relevant additional thoughts. All of these experiences were first hand information concerning events that have been poorly recorded in the literature, apart from Chamberlain and Richardson (1983) and Adams (1991), whose information has some overlap with that gathered by me. By cultivating a link through the avenue of my father's occupational involvements, which covered (for the oldest) almost half a century, I felt that an authentic and down to earth account was produced which conveyed the toil, work and effort of

earlier practices and highlighted the mortuary problems of the front parlour in the period up to the 1950s, when this custom began to dwindle.

One of these interviews concerned Muriel, a lone female embalmer from the later 1930s, whose son had told me of her (unusual 1930s) occupation. Muriel could talk to me of 1930s embalming because I was also an embalmer. Her frank and thoughtful conversation conveyed very well the problems of being one of a handful of women embalmers in a period when the industry was dominated by men. My questions were varied tremendously for her interview since none of the East Kent men had any knowledge of embalming, although they had all, for periods spanning decades, been responsible for the daily management of deaths in their own local areas.

#### 4.5 PROJECT 3: Embalmers checklist of qualities.

It is clear that embalmers operate within a social milieu which enables them to work within clearly defined social boundaries, so that common expectations are engaged and maintained. These cultural expectations may be considered as a sort of 'social backdrop' against which mourners and embalmers generally react so that on the one hand mourners expect to be confronted with certain death images and on the other hand embalmers produce congruent death images. The issue for many social scientists is how to gain access to these death image producers.

Registered members and students of the BIE may attend the bi-annual educational conference usually held at Keele University and this seemed a good way of gaining information from a selection of 54 embalmers about how the dead should look and related

EMBALMERS AND THE BODY

This is a serious questionnaire - please take the time to answer it.

Please circle the relevant parts about you.

Are you  MALE  FEMALE  STUDENT  MEMBER/FELLOW

.....

Preservation	Presentation	Sanitation
Which of these three above is the most important.....		
2nd most important.....		
3rd most important.....		

Which of the terms below describe the correct appearance of the dead for viewing (circle as many or as few as necessary):

Peaceful, dead, dishevelled, tranquil, untidy, recognisable, restored, foul, repugnant, asleep, normal, contented, others.....

Do you think individuals benefit from the viewing ritual? Yes  No

Please explain this answer briefly:

Do you think the average bereaved person is aware of the challenges in making an autopsied subject viewable? Yes  No

Which parts of the face do you think are important for successful viewing:  
Eyes, mouth, nose, ears, chin, lips, cheeks, other ..... (please specify)

On the body do you usually:

CLOSE EYES? Yes/No.	CLOSE MOUTH Yes/No
ARRANGE HANDS Yes/no	COMB HAIR Yes/No

issues. As a member of the BIE, I had access to these people and could ask them to fill in a small and simple questionnaire which asked, among a number of topics, how the dead 'should' look. Respondents were asked to complete the sheet illustrated.

The list of descriptive words were randomly arranged and injected into this list was the simple term 'dead'. In addition a simple list of superficial 'tidying actions' was produced and embalmers had to circle the actions they routinely performed. This included closing eyes, closing mouth, arranging hands and tidying hair. There was nothing terribly elegant about this research design. It restricted embalmers' choices of words to those produced, although these words covered a wide area around the issue of general concepts of presentation with the dead. The process of both producing this list and choosing from it involved the issue of selection and interpretation. I had selected 'obvious' concepts and elaborated upon them with descriptive words and embalmers had to select the ones they felt most appropriate to the 'proper' presentation of the dead. This whole process depended upon the culturally appropriate interpretation of what these words conveyed. It is likely however, that embalmers would have a similar set of background assumptions regarding death presentation, due to the socialising process of embalming training. So I felt that their responses would reflect their day-to-day work. I expected embalmers to come and tell me that the whole exercise was stupid, since I was enquiring about such obvious issues, but they did not. Embalmers were also asked about their opinion of the helpfulness of the viewing ritual to mourners and the awareness of mourners to the challenge embalmers faced when preparing the body for viewing.

This was a very simple piece of research and may have been affected by certain obvious forms of distortion. However the results suggested otherwise, as several key elements were not highlighted by many respondents. The response rate was very encouraging and all the respondents appeared to understand what was requested of them, judging by the completed forms. The results do not suggest that the respondents only ticked off the trite, obvious attributes, although I imagine that this could have been an obvious temptation, leading to distortion in the results.

#### 4.6 PROJECT 4: Historical viewing preferences.

A significant question about the practice of mourners coming to view their dead concerned some sort of historical context, against which to place contemporary activities. Had viewing happened more in the past? Roberts (1971) commented that prior to World War One it was common practice for children to visit the home where the dead lay to pray over the corpse. Was this practice now declining? The implicit approach of theorists such as Gorer (1965) and Hinton (1967) is that death awareness in the 1960s and 1970s was receding then and should thus today be less familiar. This is not borne out by my research, the first section of which involved a simple data collection task.

A snapshot answer to this issue could be found within our family funeral records. This information was collected from statistical records, which were collated (in the earliest years) before I became involved in the company and almost all entirely before my research project became focussed. Because of the way the raw data was recorded, I felt that this reflected what was actually happening as the information was collected by others whose aim was completely unconnected with my later project.

This proved to be a straightforward piece of data collection because of a change in the administration of funerals.

<u>DIS</u>		<u>ARRANGEMENTS</u>	
Name .....	.....		
Occupation/Description .....	.....		
Date of Death .....	Age .....	.....	
Place of Death .....	.....		
Home Address .....	.....		
.....	Telephone .....	.....	
Remove to .....	(In/Out of Hours) .....		
New/Re-open/General Grave No. ....	Class .....	Con./Gen./Cath. ....	ft. ....
Memorial by .....	.....		
Burial/Cremation at .....	.....		
.....	on .....	( ) at .....	.....
Service in .....	.....		
Clergy .....	Cheque/Cash fee. Organ .....	.....	
Music/Hymns .....	.....		
Ashes .....	Ashes Container .....		
Application Form by - ( )	Received by .....		
Mr/Mrs/Miss .....	Telephone .....		
.....	.....		
Form E/Medical Forms by Dr. ....	Dr. ....		
.....	Limousine(s) from .....		
Hearse from .....	.....		
Flowers to .....	Deliver to .....	Cards off .....	
Coffin .....	Gown .....	<u>Viewing</u> .....	
O/M/A: Dr. ....	H.T. ....		
Dressing .....	Jewellery .....		
Death Notices .....	Jewellery Received .....		
Donations to .....	Acknowledgements .....		
Special Instructions .....	.....		
<u>ESTIMATE</u> .....			
Instructions from .....	.....		
A/c to .....	.....		
.....	.....		

From 1972 onwards the organising of funerals in our company appeared to have been re-organised and the proforma information sheet that the interviewer completed at this point now included a viewing preference question, as the illustration above shows. This itself perhaps is significant as the practice of chapel (as opposed to front parlour) lying was by then so well established that now one had to enquire of mourners concerning this action. Prior to this point 'viewing' was almost automatically contracted into the funeral arrangements as the front parlour in the family home had been almost invariably used. At that time, to avoid confronting the corpse, you had to avoid the front parlour and the actions of any family members who might be determined to foist this action upon you. I can recall many mourners telling me how unpleasant the results of this coercion could be. It was thus possible to gauge the response from next of kin or executors concerning the request to come in and 'pay last respects' or not, since their decisions were routinely noted at the arrangement session.

It could have been very difficult to misinterpret this data collection exercise, since the subsection 'Viewing Yes/No' was almost entirely unambiguous. One or other of the choices had to be highlighted or crossed out. If neither happened, this was interpreted as a 'no', since no preparation would have been instigated, as 'yes' was not highlighted. It is worth noting that accurate interpretation of mourners' wishes is a vital part of any funeral company and, knowing the individuals who were then responsible for the organising of funerals, I was confident that the details were correct and indeed if there was a change of mind, that the details were amended. This produced a historical summary of mourner preferences which could be tallied up, compared to the annual total and converted into a percentage for comparison. This meant that 8548 record sheets were counted for the period 1972 – 2005.

A possible issue concerned the transferability and generalisability of this piece of micro research to other areas of the country. While it might be theoretically possible to compare other company's records from different areas (if this sort of information was recorded) there is no real reason to believe that one area of the south coast should have a higher preoccupation with death, or indeed a great aversion to death, than any other area. It is perhaps rightly considered that this piece of work, whose raw data was originally recorded by others, is a unique snapshot of hard data in an area (and at a past time) where cultural assumptions

and folk habits make accurate assessment of community habits in relation to death behaviour particularly difficult to quantify.

#### **4.7 PROJECT 5: Funeral rituals and viewing.**

Official documents may be rightly regarded as a more (or less) biased source of data and be treated as social products. They need to be examined and not used uncritically as a resource. This is a thoughtful, cautious approach to the issue of value-free information and suggests that 'official' information can be interpreted in a useful way, provided this is done in a sensible and realistic manner. In funeral companies, records are made and used in accordance with organisational routines and communicate shared cultural assumptions. The information contained within these assumptions reveals what mourners perceive to be important within the funeral ritual. A brief survey of funeral arrangement data sheets was carried out in July 1995 to assess the practice of viewing compared to various other funeral ritual details. These documents are the modern equivalent of the forms used in project 4.4 and a sample sheet of this appeared on page 174. It appears common in many funeral companies for notes and instructions to be entered on a record sheet and confirmation of action to be taken so that appropriate ritual can be performed for each family. Each family appeared to construct their ritual, within cultural parameters, according to their own agendas. Upon this information an accurate indicator of ritual details could be assessed, since an invaluable 'tailor made' summary was recorded concerning the ritual requests and needs of each individual family by the funeral arrangers, none of whom were aware of my research. The procedure comprised analysis of sheets taken from a random point in contemporary company records until 100 viewing and 100 non-viewing arrangements had been found. It is a perhaps widely understood point that individuals wanting to view their dead have still retained some personal link with the corpse. The congruence of this with other aspects of funerary ritual was expected to become apparent upon investigation, so a (more-or-less) complete lack of ritual items could be predicted to accompany the non-viewing scenario. Similarly the link between the natural and social body (Llewellyn 1991) was predicted to become apparent. Those who paid attention to the natural body would also make adequate arrangements with respect to the social body.

I had to first find out what were the basic parameters around which funerals were routinely organised. This was a fairly simple pre-research task. I looked through several sets of arrangement forms to find what factors were common to funerals and whether these basic ingredients were related to viewing preference:

Elaborate disposal (or not) of ashes  
Use of a limousine  
Church service  
Dressing of the body  
Hearse to a significant location  
Type of coffin  
Embalming  
Burial

A sub theme concerned the issue of whether viewing preference was related to other areas of funeral ritual in the production of extravagant or simple funerals. For example I was interested in whether a church service, or use of a limousine or particular ashes decision (etc) went hand in hand with viewing or whether this was unrelated. I was to attempt to uncover a pattern. Again the records of Gore Brothers Ltd were called into use and analysed to assess whether any features were highlighted. Any obvious features that were missing would become apparent when comparing the 100 who did view from the 100 who did not. The underlying aim was to see whether mourners who were loosely connected to the deceased and who may have arranged simpler funerals (in terms of specific features) were those also likely to refrain from viewing. Alternatively it could have been the case that viewing was not connected to the degree of funerary requirement but to other factors. An immediate point to make concerns the relative prevalence of viewing. By the time 100 viewing arrangements had been found, this had out numbered the non-viewing arrangements by 30%. Thus after 100 viewing sheets had been found, selective collection of the next 30 or so non-viewing details sheets was necessary to enable the sample to become balanced, which reflected the greater tendency to view rather than not to view. Relevant data were collected from the sheets concerning the categories at the outset of the exercise compared to viewing. These variables were postulated as being likely to convey assumptions of attachment to the physical body.

#### 4.7.1 Definitions of categories.

Since interpretation of the category headings may vary, my own conception of each follows. Elaborate ashes disposal covers situations where ashes are buried or scattered where someone else's of significance are (ie spouse's etc) or placed somewhere meaningful in anticipation of the ashes of significant others being placed there eventually. Transfer to a family grave, purchase of a special ashes plot, taking away to be scattered somewhere meaningful or being retained by a family member were all taken as indicators of 'residual person-hood'. Basic strewing of ashes (indicated on arrangement forms by the lack of instruction to 'scatter with...') was taken to mean that conceptions of any residual self-ness was low. Similarly choice of (the mutually exclusive and expensive) option of burial over cremation was anticipated to marry up with viewing - since the concern for non destructive disposal (burial) over the process of cremation was anticipated to coincide with concern for the natural/social body.

Use of a limousine, similarly, was assumed to reflect concern for public ritual for the social body - often used when other family vehicles were available. Church service and elaborate coffins, I hope, speak for themselves, except that church services are frequently an 'added dimension' to the disposal service at crematorium or cemetery (but this thereby adds an indicator of concern for the social body when individuals want to (or need to) have a 'bigger show' for their dead). Dressing of the dead in special personalised clothes (as opposed to mortuary garments) indicating the retention of person-hood in the dead and embalming were again assumed to be reflected in the viewing ritual.

The category of hearse journey was defined as the journey of the hearse (the vehicle which carries the coffin) to a significant address - the family home, a sibling's house or other significant place. The final act of 'bringing someone home' and the sentiments that underlie this act, compared to the unconsidered meeting directly at the crematorium would reflect concern for the self and the natural/social body. When the hearse went direct to the cemetery, crematorium or church, this was presumed to indicate a commensurate lowering of inferred residual selfness in the dead by the relatives.



#### **4.8 PROJECT 6: Funeral directors and embalmers.**

An assumption contained within Smale (1985) and Howarth (1992) is that essentially funeral directors are also embalmers, an assumption that I was sure was poorly founded. I was also quite certain that it would be difficult to detect this, given that funeral directors are 'front of house', public people where embalmers are 'backstage', hidden people. One possible avenue concerned *registered* members of organisations, whose names would therefore be contained within a central register of the organisation concerned. This would obviously exclude any unregistered individuals, whose shadowy existence would be camouflaged in the unregulated depths of marginal funeral companies.

The funeral industry has a surprising diversity of organisations and corresponding to the BIE (for embalmers) is the BIFD (for funeral directors). The geographical areas each organisation is subdivided into are different, but this could be compensated for. Access to 'official' membership lists would not be a major issue, I assumed, since these official organisations were not secret societies and I belonged to both. So I produced a large scale map of southern England and plotted on it all the registered members and students of BIFD region K and the appropriate area of southern division BIE members and students (which was a larger area) and then excluded any BIE members outside the geographical area of region K. This left me with a collection of names covering different towns and thereby enabled me to see at a glance where the same name in BIE membership was reflected with the same name in BIFD circles. Region K BIFD covered Kent, Surrey and Sussex, which was, I thought, a fairly representative part of the UK. It would therefore be simple to assess whether a name appeared in both the funeral director and embalming organisations, or only in one or the other. By comparing the co-incidence of names, it would be possible at a glance to spot the overlap, if it existed.

#### **4.9 PROJECT 7: Registered Embalmers.**

Embalming appears at an early point in the literature. Froggart (1904) argued at some length for the introduction of embalming because he felt too few undertakers practised this. Bell (1906) pleaded with chemical manufacturers to stop using arsenic as an ingredient, Souchon (1908) published an early embalming fluid 'recipe' and Puckle (1926) was particularly unhappy about the

work embalmers did. Other researchers have written about embalmers and embalming (Smale 1985, Naylor 1989, Howarth 1992) but there appears nevertheless a lack of accurate information about these individuals who practice the art of embalming. Broderick (1978) guessed that 50% of the UK dead were embalmed, Young and Healing (1995) reckoned that 70% of the dead were embalmed. Pine (1969) maintained that 7 – 10% of the UK dead were embalmed, Crichton (1976) thought embalming quite commonplace and West (1988) that the post-war period had led to a growth of embalming. These researchers therefore present a variable picture of embalming.

But whichever way one reads the literature, an obvious issue that stands out from the assumptions of the researchers is that there has been some sort of embalming practised for over a century in England. But how much? This itself is difficult to quantify, but a much easier factor to assess is the number of practitioners who carry out embalming. Again the use of official documents can do much to shed light on this issue and membership lists which indicate the number of registered or qualified embalmers. Those who practise but are not registered remain camouflaged within the industry.

Within the historical development of the BIE are embedded numerical reports of members, which in the early years were passing references to numbers and which became official lists of members. Access to these was not difficult for me and hidden within these lists of male embalmers was an index of the feminisation of the embalming occupation as the years went by. This was an interesting sub-theme.

It should be borne in mind, however, that numbers of embalmers do not necessarily coincide with the amount of embalming carried out. Embalmers may become registered as a form of qualificationism (Dore 1976) and not necessarily actually carry out the procedures of embalming. However as an index of the growth of the practice, it would be difficult to sustain the argument that any growth of qualified embalmers was not actually related to the increasing volume of embalming routinely carried out in England, so one issue can be related to the other.

#### 4.10 PROJECT 8: Doris and Caroline

This project covered an important issue that I felt could have been lacking. This concerned what was really happening, behind the polite veneer of English social customs. Although there will probably always be individuals who will “say what they feel”, it is arguable that (especially at times of distress) these individuals will be in the minority. English people rarely consider it polite to abruptly shatter others' illusions. The polite response “s/he looked fine” may well hide the mourners' true thoughts that the person looked terrible. Accurate response can more easily be generated from those whose social skills are less well developed - children or adults with varying degrees of learning disability. The majority of parents in England apparently seek to shelter children from death confrontation either by preventing a visit or by prior confirmation of a 'proper' or expected image. Thus one potential avenue of more accurate data is usually blocked. The same cannot be said for all adults. Two individuals falling into the latter category of learning disability were Doris and Caroline, two young learning impaired women in their early 'twenties, living in sheltered accommodation, who (in the summer of 1995) came to visit their friend who lived in an adjoining institution and who had died “while they were being hyperactive”, as they told me.

A key feature of any social research is the ability to grasp situations as and when they arise and extract the necessary details from the encounters. By hanging around in the field, the field worker may hope to come across opportunities that may arise in the usual, run-of-the-mill days. If you are in the right place, at the right time, you may well find many 'encounter rituals' to draw from. To the field researcher these two women's opinions were invaluable (as they conveyed some assumptions of mourners, untainted by convention) so their experience is recorded in depth. Being confronted with these two naive but brash women, I tried to assist where possible, by shielding (if necessary) these women from the unexpected or shocking by a series of discussions and probes as to their expectations. The impression they gave me was one of astonishing naiveté. Doris, Caroline and I had a long conversation to see if there were any clues to likely problems that might arise. Their friend had apparently fallen and severely injured himself; both could give graphic account of the “blood and stuff coming out of his nose and mouth”. Clearly this had shocked them. They had been hustled away from the hospital (where the coroner had custody after

autopsy) with the excuse that the man “had already been removed” to our premises. But he had not been taken away.

The reason for this distracting manoeuvre was obvious to me. Both were resolute and obstreperous that they would not leave until they had seen him, so speedy collection was imperative, coupled with hasty preparation so that our office could regain some element of normality, since both individuals were most curious about the funeral office and its proceedings. The normal calm and quiet environment was being severely compromised by these two inquisitive women, interested in finding out about a hitherto unknown world. Questions were asked about the nature of death transport, coffins and also about the dead themselves. We spent a few minutes composing 'message cards' to the dead man, Doris wrote one (phrased according to my suggestions) but as Caroline couldn't read or write, I wrote the other. While it was obvious that neither woman relished the forthcoming prospect (judging from comments and facial expressions) neither wanted to leave without performing this important act. “I've got to do this now”, they told me and “get it over with”. Armed with the information that the last scenario had been poor, I reasoned that a last look in our chapel (confirmed with a quick glance at the man himself) would probably be of some help. Being aware of both the procedure and timescale for urgent collection and preparation, I had managed to co-ordinate questions, message cards and conversation so that when we had finished talking, all was ready. I briefly excused myself to check all was satisfactory and having done this, I returned to the young women. When all was ready I escorted both women to the chapel. Both were obviously nervous but Doris was clearly disturbed. During this experience, some far-reaching questions were asked of me, which I endeavoured to answer. However the last question had me stumped. Doris asked me what people ate “when they were in heaven”. This ‘natural experiment’ was revealing in ways that will become clearer when discussed in the results section.

An important issue to discuss concerns the impact of the participant observer on the setting being studied. An obvious point to raise is that if I was not there, then I could not have influenced the actions of these two women in any way, but they would have been highly upset about being abandoned in a chapel of rest at a time of great trauma. I felt that I played my part in the chapel viewing process in a routine and ‘normal’ fashion and gently probed for information that enabled

me to assist these two individuals at a crisis point in their young lives. These young women told me of their feelings and interpretations of the situation and I noted these details down.

These eight diverse projects covered a great deal of ground and produced information on some related but wide-ranging issues and areas. The methodologies concerning these data exercises have been discussed, critiqued and analysed here and the results will be found in the following chapter where they will be presented and discussed.

## Chapter 5 RESULTS

The results of the 8 projects are presented in the same order as their discussion in the methodology chapter with some discussion of the individual results provided by each project. The overview at the end of the chapter synthesises the results from the projects.

### Project 1. Mourners' viewing preferences.

The total sample comprised 274 interviews. Of these, 145 (52.9%) concerned mourners who viewed in the funeral chapel and 129 (47.1%) concerned mourners who elected not to view. Funeral chapel viewing, was in addition to any other encounters mourners may have had with the dead at other points in the death system. This issue is discussed in section 5.2.

The accompanying tables 5.1.a to 5.1.d display some of the characteristics of the sample of mourners I visited. These first four tables explore detailed comparisons of relationship, gender, age and reaction to the corpse, split into the viewing and non-viewing sections. Table 5.2 compares the total sample of individuals and their history of death contact.

#### 5.1.a Relationships.

**Table 5.1. i Relationships N = 274**

	Spouse	Child	G/chld	Other Relative	Non Relative	Multiple visitors	Totals
Viewing	48	74	5	11	4	0	145
Non-viewing	39	65	2	13	9	4	129
Totals	87	139	7	24	13	4	274
	31.8%	50.7%	2.6%	8.8%	4.7%	1.5 %	100%

31.8 % of the sample were spouses and 50.7% were (adult) children organising the funeral of a parent. Adult children appear to dominate this part of the process, who were concerned with their aged, deceased parent. A reason for this dominance can perhaps be traced to the mobility associated with modern urban living, in that adult children who are likely to live and work away, may not always be present when a parent dies and may follow 'traditional' ritual in viewing the corpse at some later stage in the death process. A lower total of spouses visiting could be attributed to age characteristics. Spouses visiting in the later age groups were rare because of being pre-deceased. This backs up Gorer's conclusions that

death in England is more of a private, family affair compared to other cultures and this social organisation concerning close kin is an ongoing characteristic of English funerals.

### 5.1.b Gender

**Table 5.1. ii Gender N = 274**

	Unknown	Male	Female	Multiple	Total
Viewing	1	42	95	7	152
Non-viewing	0	41	85	3	122
Totals	1	83	180	10	274
	0.4%	30.3%	65.7%	3.6%	100%

Twice as many women (65.7%) as men (30.3%) in my sample had arranged the funeral and were therefore the people I interviewed. The dominance of women in this part of the process also suggests that a traditional, female role is still being played by women, confirming the assumptions of female involvement in death by writers such as Roberts (in Houlbrook 1989) and Richardson (1987). As table 5.1.b shows, the sample was split into two more-or-less equal halves, with gender characteristics evenly spread across the viewing and non-viewing categories.

### 5.1.c Age

**Table 5.1. iii Age N = 274**

	0-19	20-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60-69	70-79	80-89	90+	Missing	Total
Viewing	2	9	8	27	38	25	26	9	1	0	145
Non-viewing	0	6	3	17	36	30	24	11	0	2	129
Totals	2	15	11	44	74	55	50	20	1	2	274
	0.7%	5.3%	4.0%	16.0%	27.6%	20.0%	18.2%	7.2%	0.3	0.7%	100%

I estimated the approximate age group of the mourners and from this it is quite apparent that those in the middle years become more involved with funeral arranging than those in younger or older age groups. This may well reflect the issue that the young will die less frequently than the middle aged or old, or that the middle aged are more likely to have an aged, deceased relative.

The age distribution follows a classic 'bell shaped' curve, with hardly any of the extremely young or old and a gradually increasing total (from 20s upwards and 80s downwards) to the largest group within the sample of individuals in their fifties. The age-related issues of the mourners sample appear to back up the urban, mobile society suggestions outlined earlier. Extremely aged spouses would possibly have a younger person (such as a residential home officer etc) to assist

them. The young (up to 19) appear to be excluded from funeral arranging, which leaves the ascending numbers of mourners in the 20-29, 30-39 and 40-49 age groups, whose parents are more likely to die as these adult children become older, assuming that these age groups represent children and not spouses. If one also assumes that spouses are likely to occupy most of the 60-69,70-79 and 80-89 age groups, the chances of these individuals being the adult children of parents at least ninety years old seemed small. Again the divergence into viewing and non-viewing categories appeared unremarkable, with a similar number of values for most age groups for both viewing and non-viewing groups.

#### 5.1.d Reactions.

**Table 5.1. iv Reactions N = 274**

	Positive	Negative	Neither	Remember as they were	Missing value	Totals
Viewing	100	20	24		0	145
Non-view	65	32	9	17	7	129
	60.2%	18.9%	12.1%	6.2%	2.6%	100%

It is likely that individuals' viewing habits can be regarded as a form of 'folk religion' (Clark 1982); it is something that one just does when bereaved. The reaction of mourners to what they saw, either at an earlier time in the death system, or in the chapel of rest, was dependent upon a large number of variables, (such as prior viewing experience, prior hospital experience etc) which may have influenced the response of mourners. The comments from mourners who viewed were very positive (100/274 or 36.5% of the whole sample) and many of these were very complimentary, as the comments below demonstrate:

*Just waiting for him to wake up*

*Peaceful, best he's looked for years.*

*Perfect! Exactly as I remember him.*

*Glad to see her, she looks so peaceful*

*Wonderful, so peaceful.*

*Wonderful! Better than he last looked*

*Like a Victorian lady*

*Fantastic! Waiting for him to wake up!*

*Wonderful! Younger!*

*I thought I saw his eyelids flicker*

*Absolutely at peace – you've given me a better picture*



These comments are not surprising because embalming would have taken place and the appearance in many circumstances would have been enhanced by the disguising actions of the embalmers. For the great majority of visits the 'tidying up' efforts of the embalmers were appreciated and many mourners seemed appreciative of the 'new picture' compared to 'natural' encounters at hospitals, where reminders of death (eyes and mouth open etc) betrayed the event of death. Despite many mourners telling me how much they appreciated the natural 'last look' at the hospital, in many cases the chapel image 'picture of death' was preferred, as their comments suggested. I mentioned in the methodology chapter that I became proficient at collecting 'summaries' of impressions as those above demonstrate. These comments (page 168) suggest that for many English mourners 'death' is perceived through specific cultural optics, which appeared to enable mourners to encounter the corpse in familiar and unchallenging ways. Project 3 about embalmers' presentations of the dead also reflected this. The perception of rest, slumber or peacefulness appeared the most common responses with 66/274 or 24%, and the assumption that dead people should somehow look 'better' with 29/274 or 10.6% the only other major theme. The expected appearance was often that of the familiar and unchanged scenario that Naylor (1989) outlined, but also combined with the notion of sleep. Metcalfe and Huntington (1991) also describe this institutionalised expectation of well-ness in the dead which is reflected in my mourners' comments. The dead were presumed to be composed and (as Parkes (1972) noted) inferred to be at peace from how they looked. More accurately the state of the ongoing person/spirit/soul was inferred from the condition of the body - a strikingly medieval belief. Part of the construction of the persona depended to an extent on the condition of the body. This emphasises the importance of physical appearance in 'constructing' the dead and provides a rationale for the frequent attempts to re-present the body in contemporary culture by techniques such as embalming.

However issues governing a positive or negative outcome were far more complicated than my initial research design could accommodate. Some mourners appeared to have trouble with interpreting the appearance of the corpse, as the comments overleaf suggest. The simple question "How did he/she look"?

produced a whole range of answers that I felt, in the main, accurately reflected the experiences of mourners.

*Pale, but asleep*

*Wasn't like her*

*Peaceful, but nothing like him*

*Better here [than hospital]*

*Didn't look like her*

*Changed – not what I expected*

*Not terrible, but not brilliant.*

*Peaceful, but not quite the same.*

*Beautiful, but it wasn't him*

*Lovely, but not quite as she was*

*More like himself*

*Nice and clean, but it wasn't him*

100 viewing mourners and 65 non-viewing mourners (so a total of 60.2%) found their experiences positive and 52 (or 18.9%) found their experiences negative or upsetting. It is possible to deduce from mourners' comments that previous experience played a part in current interpretation of appearance. This was obvious in the statements above but also inferred by comments such as:

*Not the same.      Lovely but not quite as she was.*

Mourners' comments suggested that they related what they saw to prior experience. Some appeared to expect an unchanging 'death picture', as the disappointment in the comments above suggest. An excellent example of this occurred in January 2003 when Rosemary, a member of staff, reported to me a conversation between family members and herself in our chapels. The surviving husband was very pleased with the re-presentation whereas the daughter, who visited later, was not. Gentle coaxing produced the following remarkable narrative. It transpired that on a previous visit some years ago to see a different family member, the person then in our chapel looked as if they were alive, whereas her mother today looked as if she was dead, which was something her daughter found disappointing. Similarly Pam (another office lady) related to me

her experiences with a family who had viewed a family member in the past who had looked to them much younger, a visual aspect missing from their contemporary visit and something they had complained about the 'natural' corpse in its raw, untreated 'biological' state is hidden beneath the disguise of contemporary embalming processes to produce the socially acceptable and apparently 'natural looking' corpse. This does provide clues as to the coping processes of English mortuary practice, where odour and leakage are unacceptable and the dead are maintained in a corruption-free condition until the funeral. Mourners' comments suggest that they are confronting the person, not just the corpse, of their expired relatives. However with diminishing soul belief, the corpse is not only the past receptacle of the unique individual who has lived, but it is now the final reminder of the person who has died. So if the condition of the corpse now indicates the state of the person (not soul), a peaceful looking corpse appears to be frequently interpreted as implying that the 'person' is also at rest

#### 1.e Prior death experience of mourners.

The basic issue concerning mourners' motivation for viewing was not addressed by me directly, but anecdotal comments mentioned at my interviews with mourners suggested that mourners came to view for reasons of duty, intense desire (as an expression of affection), or because they regarded this action as part of what one 'normally' does. Williams (1956), Roberts (1971) and Laquer (1983) all emphasised how important this activity of 'paying respects' to the dead was in the past. However the frequency of viewing, compared to not viewing, suggests that general contact with the dead is a far more frequent affair than contemporary commentators such as Hinton (1967), Jupp (1990) Howarth (1992) and Quigley (1996) suggest. Table 5.2 (overleaf) shows that 145/274 or 52.9% paid a visit to their relative. So a total of 261/274 or 95.3% had encountered the dead somewhere. Only condition A in the non-viewing section had absolutely no experience of prior or current death and had elected not to view. The data suggests that mourners regard viewing as an important or unavoidable part of the funeral ritual. Although only 52.9% of the total sample decided to view, 116 of the remainder (or 42.4%, so nonview conditions B,C & D) of the total sample told me that they did not need to view again [at the funeral premises] since they had

already encountered their relative elsewhere, whether the reaction was good or bad. This still supports Gorer's conclusion on the same issue from 1965, namely that death awareness was much higher than he (or I) anticipated.

I was interested in what prior experience of death my mourners had had, which might therefore have influenced their viewing or non-viewing experiences. I arranged the mourners into categories (table 5.2) which showed their previous experience of death, which reflected prior contact (i.e. at any time before) and current contact (of this current death). This produced 4 categories of mourners whose contact ranged from none at all (condition A) at one extreme and complete experience (condition D) at the other extreme. I was not sure what this experience of death might produce, so I broke down 'death experience' into current or prior exposure. Careful questions produced the somewhat arbitrary conditions B and C. I reasoned that someone who had never seen prior death and had not seen current death (condition A) would have very little knowledge of 'real' death appearance, whereas the polar opposite condition D would have plenty of experience. Similarly those who had seen death at some point in the past (prior) but had not seen their current relation dead might not have a realistic image of this death. Those who had never seen anyone prior and whose only experience of death was based on current experience might also perceive death appearance differently. An obvious difference between the viewing and non-viewing data sets was that one set were giving me their impressions of what they had seen in the chapel of rest, whereas the other were telling me why they did not wish to confront the corpse or confront the corpse again.

**Table 5.2 Breakdown of viewing and non-viewing mourners.**

	Viewing	%	Non-viewing	%	Both	%
<b>Condition A</b> Not seen current or prior	12	8.3	13	10.1	25	10.1
<b>Condition B</b> Seen prior, not current	24	16.6	22	17.1	46	18.7
<b>Condition C</b> Not seen prior, seen current	32	22.1	42	32.6	74	30.0
<b>Condition D</b> Seen prior and current	77	53.1	52	40.3	129	52.2
<b>Totals</b>	145	100%	129	100%	274	100%

It struck me that my visits to mourners reflected a hidden social fact within English culture. This was that some experience of the dead was very widely

experienced, which was the opposite of my initial working hypothesis. It appeared that only a tiny fraction had had no prior experience and no wish to view. This I found surprising.

It was also striking that in both viewing and non-viewing conditions, the numbers in the categories tended to increase as the level of death exposure grew. If contact with death was such a traumatic act, surely increasing contact with the dead would have been accompanied by a reduction in numbers concerned. Rising numbers (as contact frequency increases) suggests that close family contact with the corpse after death is an important or unavoidable feature of funeral ritual. It also appears that only a small minority of mourners will successfully evade confronting death as they proceed through life. The balanced nature of the data (into viewing and non-viewing samples) also needs commenting on. Although not entirely randomly collated, the numerical parity also suggests that the “aversion to death” theory which is thought to be present in English culture, needs to be adjusted. Comparison of the ‘raw’ categories (table 5.2) disregarding eventual viewing behaviour reveals a distinct bias towards death experience, rather than lack of experience, as is usually supposed. 129/274 or 47.1% of the sample were concentrated into category D – those most experienced with death and only 25/274 or 9.1% into the completely inexperienced category A. This itself is a significant trend. So it follows that 90.9% of the sample had seen death somewhere, (ie the total of categories B,C and D and the viewing element of category A) which makes the so-called ‘hidden’ aspect of death somewhat difficult to sustain. [*Only the non-viewing condition A (13/274 or 4.7.%) had absolutely no experience of death at all, since the viewing condition A had viewed at funeral premises but with no prior or current experience of death on which to base their opinions*]. The contemporary ‘distant death’ scenario looked like being discarded.

Why then do commentators often presume to be an issue the supposed lack of death contact? It may well be that those who dread viewing the dead are a far more vocal group than people who do view the corpse, but a more plausible argument suggests that looking at the dead is currently regarded (in popular culture) as being a deviant act – so it is not publicly supported but is privately practiced. This suggests that the ongoing notion of taboo is still present concerning English death ways – a taboo that is necessitated by personal links

from mourners with the dead. This also suggests that Sudnow's (1967) comment that relatives were seldom present at death and seldom saw the body prior to removal is dated and does not appear to apply to my new data as 203/274 or 74.1% of the sample fell into conditions C and D who had either seen the current death or both current and prior death. It is possible that a revision is timely regarding popular death mores. The data draws one towards the position that the body therefore has assumed greater significance since it is the only tangible link with the deceased that mourners have left to focus upon. Accordingly it now appears to be at the centre of obsequies.

### **1.f Discussion**

While in England, viewing is a personal, family oriented event, it should be borne in mind that I visited close relatives and did not ask my sample if anyone else had viewed. Therefore the sample was not a random selection of anyone who had visited, but a selection of (usually close) kin who had arranged the funeral and whose viewing preference and characteristics I recorded.

Not all of the expectations of mourners appeared realistic and the foundation of some can be traced to the influence of consumer culture and to a lessening familiarity with death within mainstream English culture as individuals tend to die in institutions (as opposed to home) and are now carefully presented by death specialists prior to display. Similarly media images of death are a constructed and comfortably distant exposure to death and are not 'real' in the same sense as physical exposure to actual, real death whose sights and smells are missing from televisual images. Some mourners found the experience of 'real' death unsettling, as table 5.1.d shows.

A very clear issue that arose from the data collected was that encounters with the corpse were frequent and for a proportion (32/274 or 11.7%) of my mourners in the non-viewing categories this was not a pleasant experience. (Non-viewing mourners had seen their relation elsewhere in the death system and chose not to view again for several reasons, one of which was the awfulness of this initial contact). Basing my assumptions on the responses of mourners, I reasoned that any bad experiences would dissuade mourners from viewing since they had received enough of a shock already. Paradoxically good experiences would also mean that mourners might feel it unnecessary to view yet again, later in the

process, since they already had a 'positive memory picture' with which to remember their relative and any further exposure was felt unnecessary or might risk replacing a 'good' image with one that was inferior. Nevertheless the rising numbers through the non-viewing contact categories (table 5.2) suggest that visiting the dead at some point was almost unavoidable. Another feature of non-viewing families was that they had either been present at, or after, death and had seen a culturally acceptable death picture. They therefore had no reason to view again. This suggests that access to the corpse is in fact widely encouraged and the overwhelming majority of mourners (261/274 or 95.2%, so all except non-viewing condition A) confronted the corpse at various points in the 'death system'.

A difficulty encountered in analysing the results was the sheer variability of response. I noted from Parkes' (1972) discussion of his data an obvious similarity to my results. His sample was almost exactly divided into equal halves concerning a happy or sad reaction to viewing. I found that it could be similarly difficult to predict responses from mourners. Often a 'poor' image could be greeted with superfluous praise and a very acceptable image dismissed for varying reasons. I felt that the different responses to encounters possibly reflected previous life events, assumptions and life experiences. There is one excellent example within my data. At one point a pair of sisters had polar opposite views of what they saw in the chapel of rest, the only difference being that one had been present at death and was familiar with how her mother had looked (and saw the chapel image as 'good') whereas the other had not seen her mother prior to any chapel visits and had no idea of what to expect and described what she saw as 'terrible'. Their different experiences of the same person at the same time produced very different reactions. So it became clear that there were many issues that were simply not covered by my questions and I felt that there were responses that fell into polite English terms rather than those of persons who actually told me that their relatives looked:

*Terrible... Awful; a terrible shock; Looked worse... if that was possible.*

It we turn back for a moment to the Wellington death mask on page 96 when I commented that the image produces there would almost certainly, today, elicit a

poor reaction from mourners, it becomes evident that concepts of an 'acceptable' visual image appears to have significantly shifted. Judging from current comments from mourners, a current portrayal of this nature today would almost certainly be interpreted as a 'bad' image by mourners, due to the excellent disguising mechanisms of contemporary mortuary practice. Dead people today should, according to mourners, resemble their living images more fully.

### **Project 2: East Kent funeral directors and embalming.**

The research for this project became my M. Phil thesis and took place in the late 1980s and early 1990s when I interviewed retired funeral directors, coffin makers, chauffeurs and other funeral workers. This was an exercise in funeral history and while all of the 24 elderly people I interviewed knew something about embalming, this practice was for all of them a skill that was brought in from outside their businesses on an 'ad-hoc' basis, if at all. None of that sample had any embalming-related abilities. I found this surprising, since the period concerned (from the 1920s to the 1980s) was dominated by the use of the front parlour for viewing and mortuary accommodation purposes.

There had been one funeral director in Folkestone who had been an embalmer, but he died some years before my fieldwork. So it does seem reasonable to conclude that embalming, at least in the rural areas of East Kent, was (according to my respondents) an unusual practice until the end of the 1960s. This does suggest that at that time the presentation of death was somewhat stark, compared to contemporary techniques which disguise death (Barley (1983), Pine (1969), Howarth (1992) or soften the appearance of death (Naylor 1989). Again, perhaps Wellington's death mask would have been more favourably viewed in the era from the 1930s to 1950s.

### **Project 3: Embalmers check list of qualities.**

Table 5.3.i (overleaf) shows how the sample was made up. Despite the BIE becoming more female oriented, the majority of the respondents were male, but female responses made up a large minority.



**Table 5.3 i Embalmers**

<b>N = 54</b>	Female members	Male Members	Female Students	Male Students
	12	34	6	2

A major criticism of questionnaire-type surveys is that respondents will record what they think constitutes an acceptable answer or one that they may disagree with, but fits into accepted social mores. This may be so, however I contend that whether embalmers indicated their own personal preference or were responding to apparent social mores and indicated what they thought to be the 'correct' answer, the answers still provided information on the social construction of death, from the perspective of embalmers.

**Responses to questions N = 54**

<u>Table 5.3 ii</u>	<u>Rank 3 qualities</u>	
Preservation	1 <sup>st</sup>	79
Sanitation	2 <sup>nd</sup>	100
Presentation	3 <sup>rd</sup>	118
Total responses		297

The 'key three' qualities of presentation, preservation and sanitation were ranked by all (except one respondent). By adding the ranking recorded by each respondent for the same quality, it was possible to find which qualities were most valued by embalmers. The lowest score (ie the score with the most 1s or 2s etc) and therefore the one most valued by embalmers was preservation (79), followed by sanitation (100), with presentation (118) coming in last. This suggests that embalmers know only too well the challenges of decay and under-emphasise the attribute that mourners require, which is that of visual presentation. Embalmers did not indicate presentation (which could be regarded as the most important 'public' quality) as significant as preservation, which hides the natural process of decay.

Table 5.3 iii Correct death look N = 54

<i>Quality</i>	<i>Score</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Peaceful	51	94.4%
Asleep	40	74.0%
Normal	35	64.8%
Recognisable	30	55.55
Tranquil	27	50.0%
Contented	23	42.5%
Restored	22	40.7%
Dead	2	03.7%
Dishevelled	0	00.0%
Untidy	0	00.0%
Foul	0	00.0%
Repugnant	0	00.0%

The whole of this question was essentially a ploy, since no sensible embalmer would really describe an appropriate death appearance as *dishevelled, untidy, foul* or *repugnant* and indeed not a single score was recorded for these qualities. Most embalmers selected from the list of *peaceful, tranquil, recognisable, restored, asleep, normal* and *content*, terms describing how they thought the dead should be. As can be seen, 94.4% thought that the dead should look peaceful, 74% that the dead should look asleep, which again emphasises the issue of ‘rest’ in the dead, so common in popular culture. The terms normal, recognisable and tranquil also appealed to half or more of the sample, with contented and restored scoring quite close to half of all responses. While not perhaps surprising, the responses of embalmers produces an indication of the sorts of ‘obvious’ qualities that the corpse should possess.

Although the somewhat deceptive nature of this question could have ‘tricked’ the embalmers into not considering fully the implications of the choices. The results provide an interesting insight into what embalmers think they are doing when they work. Only 2 embalmers (both female) thought that the dead should actually look dead. Embalmers apparently think they are there to change the appearance of the dead so that they do not actually look dead, but present a manufactured impression that appears determined by commonsensical cultural notions.

<u>Table 5.3 iv Viewing helpful N = 54</u>		
Yes	51	94.40%
Spoilt	1	1.85%
No answer	2	3.75%
Total	54	100 %

Was viewing beneficial? It was not surprising that 94.4% thought this so although two embalmers did not answer and one answered both yes and no. A slightly wider, but more accurate question might have been phrased 'in most circumstances'...etc as there are times, perhaps after major road accidents or other trauma, when viewing would not be at all helpful.

<u>Table 5.3 v Autopsy challenging N = 54</u>		
Yes	54	100%

Every embalmer was convinced that mourners had no real idea of how challenging it was to make an autopsied person viewable. This too was a hardly surprising result, but confirmed a 'gut feeling' of mine that this would be the probable answer.

<u>Table 5.3 vi Facial features important for viewing N = 54</u>		
<i>Feature</i>	<i>Score</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Mouth	27	50.0%,
Eyes	23	42.5%
Lips	16	29.6%
Cheeks	11	20.3%
Ears	6	11.1%
Chin	6	11.1%
Nose	5	09.2%
All features	23	42.5%
Missing value	3	5.5%

This was a question reflecting 'trial and error' in that I considered relatively immovable features (Nose, Ears, Chin, Cheeks) as fairly unimportant, but they featured in responses, but I was surprised how few embalmers considered the

mouth and (closed) eyes significant, at only 50% and 42.5% respectively. Perhaps the somewhat arbitrary difference between mouth and lips confused some embalmers. 23/54 or 42.5% considered all features important, which I felt to be a sensible answer. 3 embalmers did not answer this question at all.

<i>Feature</i>	<i>Score</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Close eyes	54	100%
Close mouth	54	100%
Arrange hands	51	92.5%
Arrange hair	54	100%

Every embalmer closed eyes & mouth and tidied hair and all except 3 (so 92.5%) also arranged hands. It is very clear that there are obvious tasks to accomplish to create the culturally acceptable death image, and embalmers appear knowledgeable about the parameters of presentation in which they work. The dead are 'arranged' in similar ways to conform to culturally appropriate death images. The results back up the contention that there is a socially prescribed death image that embalmers work to, whether they agree with them or not.

#### **Project 4 Historical viewing preferences.**

Table 5.4 overleaf, displays the data. The total data sample for this exercise was 8548 arrangement sheets, which represents that number of funerals and their associated instructions, as table 5.4 overleaf shows. The data was collected from company records over a 33 year period and paints a 'snapshot' of mourner requests concerning the prospect of seeing again their dead relative. An overall indicator of trends by percentages was also produced. This enabled a clearer overall picture to be generated, compared to merely manipulating the raw number of bi-annual totals, which tended to vary year by year.

Several obvious issues appear by simply reviewing the table. In the early 1970s the percentages of families who wanted to view their relative was (only) 28%. The reasons behind this are not clear and while investigating these was not really part of this project, I had some ideas.

**Table 5.4 Viewing preference in Margate 1972 – 2005**

	Year	Numbers/total electing to view at funeral premises	Percentage Viewing
	1972-3	155 / 553	28.0%
	1974-5	180 / 560	32.0%
	1976-7	152 / 497	30.5%
	1978-9	144 / 567	25.0%
Decade average			<b>28.9%</b>
	1980-1	163 / 502	32.0%
	1982-3	155 / 490	31.5%
	1984-5	210 / 580	36.0%
	1986-7	243 / 609	40.0%
	1988-9	273 / 673	40.0%
Decade average			<b>36.5%</b>
	1990-1	243 / 657	37.0%
	1992-3	236 / 474	50.0%
	1994-5	245 / 453	54.0%
	1996-7	231 / 456	50.5%
	1998-9	210 / 402	52.2%
Decade average			<b>47.7%</b>
	2000-1	210 / 368	57.0%
	2002-3	193 / 337	57.3%
	2004-5	212 / 370	57.3%
Totals:		<b>3455 / 8548</b>	<b>40.42%</b>

Notes

Number written first denotes actual number of mourners who indicated that they wished to view their relative. Last number refers to total of arrangements each year.

I was initially puzzled by the low proportions who viewed in earlier decades. Accounts from writers such as Roberts (in Houlbrook 1989) suggested that in the period from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to 1940 'viewing the body was completely usual' (1989:198). However a number of individuals in project One told me how uncomfortable they were in the past with being compelled to view the corpse in the days of 'front parlour' viewing. Front parlour viewing lasted in the Margate area until well into the 1950s. It is likely that a whole generation of mourners, in the 1970s, still remembered these earlier, possibly harrowing, experiences and saw no reason to repeat them. Possibly the increase of optimism in science and rationality in the 1950s and 1960s (seen in the 1970s) meant that emotional ties to the body were weaker.

It is also possible that other experts in the 'death system' such as clerical or medical personnel may have discouraged viewing in the past. The clergy may have done this for spiritual reasons (to diminish the emphasis on the now redundant body) and medical personnel for the scientific-rational ideas above. As the role of the church has dwindled, so the impact of the clergy has declined, which may therefore have removed a potential viewing inhibitor.

So as English society becomes more secular and the religious ideas underpinning the concept of the body as a shell for the spirit dwindle, so the focus on the corpse as the total remainder of the once living person can be expected to grow, as more and more families have less religious consolation with which to comfort themselves at such times of crisis. All they have left for consolation is the physical body. The data would appear to indicate that the apparent dwindling in soul belief has made the physical reminder and remainder of a unique individual, his lifeless corpse, of greater contemporary significance.

Another factor which can be employed to account for the changes over 30 years concerns that of mobility. The growth of social mobility has enabled more family members to live far away, in pursuit of distant careers. As families grow apart, due to members working and living in different parts of the country, so the 'last look' at the hospital or hospice has become (for distant members) difficult due to geography and hospital schedules. There is, after all, a finite time that the dead can 'lie about' in hospitals awaiting the last look by distant kin. A scheduled encounter later in the funeral process, in tandem with the funeral arrangements would therefore have to occur on funeral premises. However the current practice is for nurses *now* to provide a 'last look' in hospital (in contrast to 1960s practice, when the dead were apparently hustled away from sight and were then hidden in funeral premises) was helpful for some families, if they were close enough at hand to visit.

It is however slightly implausible to assume that distant visiting kin can explain the huge change in viewing rates. A compelling explanation is that viewing rates have increased because mourners consider viewing as (again) being a part of the funeral ritual, possibly due to the dwindling of religious beliefs as outlined above and the growth in the significance of the physical body in conceptions of self.

It is also possible that the technologies surrounding corpse presentation may have augmented the visual appeal of viewing. In many cases in the 1960s and

1970s, no 'enhancement' of the corpse had taken place, which might not have prevented undue shock or surprise to mourners of the reality of death. Although the whole issue of mourner expectation is fraught with difficulty, there is some evidence to suggest that embalming presentation may have augmented the somewhat stark picture of death in the 'eighties and 'nineties, which may have made this part of the funeral ritual more appealing.

By the new millennium, the percentages of families opting to view their relative had risen to a peak of 57% by 2004-05. This rise over the three decades has been steady as table 5.4 shows.

In the light of the arguments of those such as Hinton (1967) and Pine (1975) who suggested that the English shun contact with the corpse, or that it had become distanced (Jupp 1990) these results were surprising. They are also totally at odds with the 'denial of death' thesis. This suggests that things have changed in the 30 or so years since these writers recorded their findings. The data supports the contention that the social construction of the dead relies to a larger extent upon contemporary contact than these earlier writers assumed. The apparent growth of viewing suggests that a revision of the 'English way of death' is timely and, by inference, the role of viewing and embalming in the construction of the corpse. While this sample is just one local area of one county, these figures are (in the absence of more wide-spread data) an interesting signifier of a trend which signals more death contact than previously anticipated. This data appears to support the contention that there has been a significant change in the after-death behaviour of mourners (compared to the 1970s) in the direction of greater contact with the dead.

### **Project 5 Viewing and funerary ritual.**

One of the issues debated through this particular project concerned the possible uniformity of ritual for 'types' of funerals. I thought it likely that 'elaborate' funerals would have a higher number of elaborate features and 'simple' funerals would contain more simple bits (or less elaborate bits). The table shows that viewing mourners seem more likely to employ a limousine and a hearse to a special location, to ask for embalming or dressing, but are no different regarding a desire for a church service or elaborate ashes disposal.

**Table 5.5 Funeral ritual**

<b>Factor</b>	<b>% of viewers</b>	<b>% of non-viewers</b>
Limousine use	81	40
Significant hearse	79	33
Embalming	97	52
Dressing	26	8
Church service	15	12
Elaborate ashes disposal (excluding burials)	63	60
	N = 100	N = 100

The option of dressing, as indicated, was exercised by more than three times as many viewing families as non-viewing families, but the overall level appears low. A possible explanation for this lies with funeral arrangers themselves - perhaps the option of the body being dressed in familiar garb was not explored by them for a variety of reasons. (n.b. By 2003, it had become apparent that this was a far more regular request). Not surprisingly those who paid greater attention to the body by viewing were more likely to decorate it with personalised garb. It was striking that the process of embalming was almost universally practised for those families who were viewing, indicating the concern of funeral arrangers that the best presentation (and importantly preservation while in the chapel) was available. Non-viewing embalming reflects the need to preserve the body prior to the funeral, still practised in just over half the arrangements. The extended timescale of funeral organising in urban society could make the reliance on refrigeration alone a cumbersome and problematic variable in the complicated logistical disposal of the body. Dressing and embalming can be regarded as 'private self' embellishments.

Use of a limousine and ceremonial journey for the hearse (ie starting from the family home or other significant point) can be taken as indicators of consideration of the public self of the dead and were linked very positively to viewing. When the public body has shrivelled away from public view, the private body is similarly hidden.

I suspected that elaborate ash disposal would accompany viewing preferences. I was wrong. The quite high and virtually equal level of considered



ashes disposal for both viewing and non-viewing suggests that concern with the public body were quite high irrespective of whether relatives confronted the private body or not. [Other research projects suggest that many people see their dead elsewhere – so this point needs to be made with caution]. Ashes disposal can perhaps be regarded as a separate, post-funeral variable. This option may be outside the control of mourners because ashes may well follow other, pre-deceased family members to a family grave or similar family plot at crematoria, following a death logic popularised by the Victorians, irrespective of viewing practice.

### **Project 6: Funeral Directors and Embalmers.**

The comparison of registered Funeral Directors and Embalmers from their respective institutes by home towns enabled me to explore the overlap between these two occupations. Where the overlap occurred, this was completely obvious, since the home address (in both lists) of the same individual had to be the same. Whether these individuals actually worked in their home town or not was irrelevant.

Registered funeral directors	131	59.8%
Registered embalmers	88	40.2%
Total	219	100.0%
Individuals mentioned in both registers:	24	= 10.9% of total

It can be seen from table 5.6 that funeral directors outnumber embalmers by nearly half as much again. This does seem initially surprising, but a possible explanation is that not all the dead require embalming, but nearly all funerals are co-ordinated by a funeral director. It is worth mentioning that not all working Funeral Directors or Embalmers are actually registered with either Institute. To ascertain just who might be working, unregistered, within funeral firms was a task I reasoned just too problematic to attempt. Even though I was a working Funeral Director and Embalmer, I was pretty certain I would be denied access to the

working areas of funeral firms to determine who did what and to see if there was any overlap.

There is the possible option of individuals in one of the occupations occasionally being involved in the others. While this might indeed occur, in practice this would be difficult for the following reasons. Unless 'extra' embalmers were needed when funeral directors were not busy, funeral directors would be out on the road' with public actions or arranging funerals when embalmers would be engaged in their activities. In practice, were this to happen, funeral directors would have to find another person to fill in for them, while they were engaged in embalming or related activities. In practice this is extremely difficult to do. Conversely for embalmers to leave the embalming areas and assist in 'public' activities, would also entail a change of uniform into funeral attire and familiarity with the family for whom the funeral requires conducting. While these dual options are available, they are to my knowledge rather rare.

The table demonstrates that of the total of 219, only 24 people appeared on both lists of funeral directors and the equivalent area of the BIE membership list. This produced the overlap of only 24 people or 10.9% of the total sample. This therefore means that 89.1% of the sample worked in totally separate areas within the industry, which confirmed my hypothesis of two distinct occupational areas, rather than the supposed amalgam assumed by researchers such as Smale (1985) or Howarth (1992).

### **Project 7: Registered Embalmers.**

Table 5.7 (overleaf) displays the numbers of individuals whose names were put onto one of several different registers indicating their proficiency. The numbers do not record embalmers within the same organisation.

The 1901 total of 400 simply records the results of several popular 'courses' run by two visiting American professors, whose week of lectures to interested undertakers produced the 400 apparently able embalmers. Contrarily by 1927 the BIE was founded with approximately 20 members, whose members had grown to 600 by the beginning of World War Two. It was possible to deduce this because a contemporary house journal commented that a quarter of the membership were in the forces and the number of embalmers called up was

150. Values from 1958 onward relate to membership lists published within BIE sources. It is likely that the Second World War disrupted this publication of separate lists of members for a while.

**Table 5.7 Registered embalmers in Great Britain 1901 to 2004**

N										
U								1229		
M										
B							1049			
E				967					966	
R					895	856				888
S			600							
	400									
		20								
YEAR	1901	1927	1939	1958	1967	1975	1986	1995	2000	2004
Female			0.5%		1.7%	2.3%	6.5%	13.02%	16.9%	20.9%

The presentation of numbers indicated that the number of qualified embalmers has fluctuated over the years. There are several reasons and hypotheses for this. It is likely that the 1958 total had been artificially enhanced because in the late 1950s two embalming organisations amalgamated. The BIE joined forces with the BES (British Embalmers Society) which was a 'competing' embalming organisation that was run by the NAFD (National Association of Funeral Directors). Some older BIE members suggested that BES standards were not as high as those of the BIE, so recruitment did not keep up with occupational attrition after the amalgamation (which reflects the comings and goings of new and older members) as the process of qualifying was now more demanding. In addition, the introduction of refrigeration may have made the necessity for embalming less imperative during the 1960s and 1970s. The value for 1995 includes any European, American and Australasian embalmers, which are not included in any other totals, which therefore has artificially inflated that

total. Additionally the Data Protection Act has meant that members now have the option of not being published in the list of members. The impact of this is apparent in the 2004 values, where some members are either intentionally or unintentionally missing.

The totals suggest that embalmers' numbers peaked in the mid 1990s and have been at or about the 900 members mark for over 50 years. It is possible that numbers of embalmers recovered after the 1970s as the population became more distanced from death due to the impact of cremation and the by now widespread use of chapels of rest. Embalmers were required to produce acceptable death images, described by Naylor (1989) as 'softer' images. Perhaps the present decline in the last few years reflects an increasingly mobile labour force, who leave the occupation (for various reasons) quicker than new embalmers can be trained.

A clear feature of the data, however, concerns the growth in female embalmers within the BIE from more or less zero in 1901 to almost 21% by 2004. The numbers of embalmers alone do not support the contention that the practice of embalming itself has grown, although other reasons may account for this plateau (such as a greater use of refrigeration from the 1960s and more unqualified embalmers). However there is evidence here of a sustained level of embalming, judging from the numbers of qualified embalmers. It is likely that the amount of embalming carried out by embalmers has risen too, as the death rate has grown.

### **Project 8: Doris and Caroline**

The 'results' of this project essentially comprise a write up of my record of the behaviour and speech of the two young women. Doris was obviously a few years older than Caroline, but both appeared to me to be of a similar naivety concerning the real world. Doris's hyper-ventilating and panic stricken gaze betrayed the psychological trauma this poor woman was going through. At the entrance both hesitated, so I went in first to 'blaze a trail' for them to follow if necessary. Caroline entered and immediately began to pray in a low monotone with hands clasped in typical prayerful fashion. From her facial expressions, my notes suggested that Doris meanwhile had become almost frantic. Gentle reassurance suggesting that he could not harm her and coaxing from Caroline, who had

interrupted her prayers, ushered Doris in who, after glancing inside the coffin, pronounced that the whole experience was 'disgusting' and 'bad', an opinion repeated several times and accompanied by obvious distress. Doris told me that she was frightened. We all retreated to the safety of the office and, in an attempt to elicit the problem, concluded that the man had been the subject of fruitless attempts to save his life which had resulted in some facial swelling due perhaps to medication or trauma. It was certainly nothing that the embalmer had done, since there had been no time to do anything - he looked exactly as he had when he entered the premises (but the staff at that point considered that there was no obvious problem with his appearance – he looked 'normally' dead). This was not the end of the procedure, however. After a cigarette and discussion, both went back again, for a repeat performance of the prayer and distress scenario. Why was there an extra visit? One obvious explanation could not be discounted. While the experience was hardly comfortable for Doris, I could not help but detect that she did not want to 'miss out' on what was apparently an afternoon out. Doris asked Caroline if she could pray for her as she 'didn't know how to do this'. Eventually the message cards were placed on the man's chest and we all retreated for a final discussion. While the experience evidently was profoundly upsetting for one and not ideal for the other, both women felt obliged to visit and perform this important ritual, presumably of social support. Their expectations were shattered by an image which, to us, appeared a reasonable picture of death, but which, for them did not conform to 'normal' appearance.

It is clear from the testimony of these young women that viewing may be a traumatic procedure – as Parkes (1972) found, but it is felt to be necessary by a large number of people. Data that is collected regarding this ritual needs to be accompanied by the necessary thoughtfulness and tact to prevent further distress and any modification of behaviour based upon poor research strategies. An unexpected result from this episode was the conclusion that (at least for these two young women) the religious overtones associated with viewing that Puckle (1926) objected to so vigorously, are still in place and like so many mourners (Naylor 1989) there is very little guidance available to gauge what is 'normal' or acceptable in the appearance of the dead.

## Overview.

This overview brings together the expectations of mourners and embalmers concerning the appearance of the corpse. In other parts of my thesis I have argued that the constituent parts of the death system have separate agendas with conflicting aims and objects. It quickly became clear that my study revealed a huge gap in information regarding viewing experiences. Viewing of the dead is an integral ritual of the funeral – although unfamiliarity with death images produces a varied reaction from some mourners. Viewing, which emphasises the link of body and self and takes place at culturally defined places, is widely practised, compared to a previous period when contact with the dead appeared to be discouraged. Media images encourage a ‘peaceful’ death image, however the appearance of death is now modified or ‘softened’ (Naylor 1989) by embalmers who know only too well the disguise they are perpetuating, whereas mourners appear ignorant of these actions.

Viewing is an age and gender related habit and commonly practised by the sample, especially by spouses and adult children. Only a tiny fraction had not encountered dead people at all. Reactions to appearance were often mixed, although positive interpretations were the verdict of over half the sample. Prior experiences appeared to determine this. A clear feature of the data was that it was split fairly evenly into 52.9% who viewed and 47.1% who did not view. ‘Chapel’ viewing appeared to take place quite late in the funeral ritual sequence, after the release of the body from the ‘death system’ into the hands of the embalmers. This therefore produced some challenging issues of preservation, whose resolution mourners appeared to take for granted.

Not surprisingly, embalmers therefore regard preservation as the most important attribute of embalming according to project 3 and only 2 of the sample of 54 actually thought that the dead should look dead, but the vast majority considered peaceful sleep a desirable quality, something that 24% of mourners mentioned in project 1. There appears a very specific culturally acceptable death image that embalmers produce (closed eyes and mouth) and felt compelled to produce.

There is evidence to suggest in project 2 that in some areas of the country, embalming was relatively unknown until the 1960s and onwards. The occupation of funeral directors and embalmers in project 6 appear to be

(virtually) mutually exclusive. Of the sample of 8548 arrangement sheets from 1972 – 2005 in project 4, the percentages of families opting to view rose from 28% to 57.3%. It is tempting to compare the 28% viewing totals of the early 1970s and onwards with the lowest post war total of qualified embalmers in the 1970s. The numbers of qualified embalmers appear to have kept pace with the growth of the popularity of viewing and the feminisation of this occupation (which has been around for over a century and well established for at least 50 years) has grown. It was possible to link elements of the funeral ritual in project 5 such as vehicle usage and embalming to the practice of viewing. On an anecdotal level, there are those who seem to view because they are curious or feel that it is the required act at such times. Doris and Caroline in project 8 found this an experience with good and bad points.

There are certain well aired views concerning the post-war changes in death rituals which can be employed to cast light on the findings reported here. Death has become disconnected from mainstream experiences and is to be regarded as a transition. This has in turn removed some awareness of the reality of death and thus made the embalmer's job rather more demanding. The growth of cremation and its subsequent distancing of death (Jupp 1990) has also led to an estrangement of 'real' death from the popular context. Many mourners appeared to expect their relative to be unchanging, which can be traced to the whole issue of the liminal phase of the funeral. Paradoxically the actions of embalmers (a practice which arguably has grown) would hide any evidence of the passage of time, which would enhance the apparent liminality of the funeral parlour setting, by re-presenting the corpse in an acceptable manner at an acceptable location. The appearance of the body at death has taken on a commercial significance (Smale 1985) within post-modern society and so the significance of embalming is therefore critical, but, as some projects suggest, is concealed.

## Chapter 6 Conclusions.

It is now time to bring together in this concluding chapter, the major points of this thesis. I propose to incorporate the various research – based issues in conjunction with those within the literature and I plan to summarise the thesis under the topics that run through many of the chapters. These themes concern death, embalming history, the corpse, embalmers, mourners and the state.

This thesis has explored the problematic negotiation of corpse identity in contemporary England through the mediums of literature and research. The recent emergence of the sociology of the body has allowed me to scrutinise elements of the social construction of mortuary rites in relation to the significance of the physical body. Commentators such as Laderman (2003) highlight the inherent significance of the corpse in funeral rites and point to the 'ritual enfeeblement (2003:14) of virtually all faiths concerning meaningful funerals for the victims of the American 9/11 terrorist tragedy when so many families had no physical body to focus on. Attention paid to the body provides a clue to a cultural understanding of death (Metcalf and Huntington 1991) and it is clear that the processes outlined in this thesis portray a fertile array of customs which reflect this understanding.

The origins of this thesis concerned my disappointment with the level of knowledge of existing researchers concerning the funeral industry and embalming in particular, which I felt did not contribute adequately to the emerging sociological interest in death. In addition I discovered few accounts of the care of the body prior to the funeral, which was something I felt I could remedy. Because of this paucity of sources, the confusion between media images of death and the real physical changes that occur at death meant that death care and its related interests were reduced to a contemporary form of 'witchcraft'. This meant that almost anything uttered or experienced was reproduced as either typical or truthful. Existing (and somewhat dated) opinions (ie Aries 1981) considered contemporary experience of death marginal and therefore assumed that contact with the corpse of no real significance in contemporary England. Contrarily one of the most convincing findings from my research was the growth in viewing practice (project 4) in the sample over a thirty three year period and the wide experience that I found my subjects had had with confronting death (project 1). This is due to therapeutic influences (Rose 1999) which may prompt mourners to confront the prepared corpse. This does suggest that



the corpse has become, for mourners, far more significant; with greater emphasis on the corpse from medico-legal 'superstructures' (ie the large proportion of corpses subject to autopsy) and the growth of personal significance in the corpse as the final reminder of the person who has died.

## 6.1 Death.

This thesis is concerned with death related issues. Death represents a process of transition, when liminal aspects are experienced. Constructed images of death are largely peaceful ones, when the concept of sleep appears prevalent. This idea appears to be inherited from the earliest Christian period (Finucane 1982, Phipps 1987). The corpse is transferred to a threshold area where it awaits rites of transition and within this space it is re-presented through the embalming process. Although death is a biological process, it should also be regarded as a constructed social accomplishment (Edwards et al 1995) where beliefs, meanings and activities are grafted on to the organic event (Hertz 1907). The work of theorists such as Hertz (1907) and Van Gennep (1960) formed a helpful framework for understanding death rituals in contemporary society. Hertz's analytical framework suggests that diminishing soul belief could lead to a greater emphasis on the corpse or a loss of its significance, the former of which project 4 appears to confirm. I have argued that adjusting to the fact of death has a tremendous significance upon mourners, who fall back on various social-cultural devices to enable them to cope with the issues that personal experience with death highlights. The embalmed corpse was, for a large proportion of my sample, a significant socio-cultural coping symbol. After emerging from the disguising processes of the embalming room, mourners' comments suggested that the corpse was not considered to be completely dead until the final moments of disposal.

Concepts concerning death were expressed through the viewing ritual, when the visit to the chapel of rest for the last time appeared to be an important component of death customs. When compared with other funeral actions (project 5), a complicated pattern emerges, which suggests that mourners selected appropriate rituals to express their feelings of loss. The qualitative narrative concerning Doris and Caroline (project 8) illustrates the significance of the habit of viewing the dead, which

was an event that both women felt 'we just had to do', although it was not for them a particularly pleasant experience. This habit was an example of folk religion (Clark 1982) which can be described as the acceptance of, and confidence in, established rules and procedures.

## 6.2 History

Different embalming meanings reflect the changing meanings of the body but historically the process of embalming has always rendered the body socio-culturally acceptable. The historical relationship between preserved and present bodies and funeral rituals (Van Gennep 1907) reflects the changing relationship between the body and soul. Early religious meanings for embalming which involved preservation of the body had disappeared by the early modern period, when surgeons manipulated the corpse for reasons of status enhancement. The impetus from Nineteenth century public health reforms indirectly influenced the perception of the corpse and its appearance. These sanitary measures removed the corpse when action regarding (for example) cholera reform led to the founding of distant cemeteries. So in America corpses were sanitised in their communities by the emerging embalmers in their communities, whereas British corpses were quarantined in relatively distant municipal mortuaries.

Later Nineteenth century and early Twentieth century (British) reasons for embalming were reflected in the growth of social hygiene, when the hidden corpse was seen as a potential locus of disease and decay. Contrarily, in America, public display of the corpse was encouraged. Quigley (1998) mentions that most travelling circuses in the 1920s and 1930s in America had to exhibit a mummy to entice the crowds and it appeared common in this period for quite graphic images of notorious criminals (such as John Dillinger or Ma Barker) to be displayed in the media and of course the dead were displayed in funeral homes in a very public manner. However domestic English death habits were particularly private. From the nineteen thirties, embalming interest coincided with increasing state concealment of the corpse which has led to its disappearance from 'surface culture'. This has thus hidden the rationale for embalming. The practice of embalming in England was not widespread until after the Second World War, when the introduction of the Welfare State, the

growth of urban pressures and particularly the impact of cremation served to encourage the (slow) growth of embalming practice as pre-funeral timescales lengthened considerably. This is reflected in the growth of qualified embalmers as project 5 confirms. It has been argued that from the post-war period onwards the familiarity with 'real' death images started to recede, as the dead were accommodated more regularly at distant funeral premises and less frequently in the front parlour. Some mourners in project 1 could give me graphic accounts of this period which they used as reasons not to view. Now embalming appears to be an integral, but hidden part of the social construction of death in contemporary appearance oriented society, as the now crucially significant corpse is visited.

### 6.3 The Corpse.

It is clear that embalmers work upon the corpse, but the body (as the living equivalent to the corpse) has only recently been 'discovered' in sociological literature. It had been taken for granted (Turner 1992) until this point. As far as I could see the dead body was also similarly taken for granted because it was hidden and disguised. And because the corpse was hidden, this also meant that the interaction of mourners with the corpse was marginalised because it was hidden. Bronfen (1992) describes the corpse as a symbol, which Synott (1993) describes as a reminder of the person and it is the material substance of the deceased. Featherstone et al (1991) comment that the corpse is now the only remnant of the person, so treating the corpse is one way of doing something for the person who has died. As the body is now so closely linked with the self (Synott 1993, Berthelot 1986) it is now quite appropriate to focus far more in terms of time and experience upon the corpse, to preserve it for the final obsequies and react to it as if it were the person who had recently vacated it. There seemed to me here an enhanced opportunity to sociologically explore the (dead) body. When considering this in the context of the diminished significance for the soul, it struck me that the body could now be more significant as Hertz's theoretical work concerning the transitional nature of rites predicted. I found that in many situations the state of the body was used by many mourners to indicate the state of the person, whereas in the past this indicated the state of the soul, so that the corpse was now a metaphor of personal, not religious, significance (project 1). Featherstone (1991) describes this as the secularisation of the body, so that the body is now no

longer a transitory vehicle to a spiritual plane, but is in itself significant. The body has thus replaced the soul as signifier of self (Berthelot 1986) in life and so has undergone increased significance at death. This can therefore be used to explain this heightened significance of the corpse, as it is the last tangible link to the self and so is carefully looked after within contemporary funerary practice.

The corpse was also a metaphor of past significance. It struck me that there were some interesting ramifications to this. The condition and appearance of the dead is now of crucial importance as project 1 suggests, and I found that the idea of the sleeping dead (an extremely deeply rooted idea) was a concept that mourners in project 1 and embalmers in project 3 used time and again. This construct appears to reflect centuries – old beliefs (Barlow 1962). This appeared to be a convenient cultural construction, since the use of sleep indicated rest and peace, which were qualities that mourners appeared to value in the dead. The recent growth of corpse significance and shrinkage of soul belief was reflected in the occupational characteristics of a previous generation of funeral directors (project 2), most of whom had no involvement with embalming, as the corrupting corpse was, until the 1960s, merely a discarded receptacle for the still important soul and so of limited significance. This suggests that the practice of embalming now has a crucial role to play in the social construction of the corpse, as mourners come to terms with physical death, as they have done for centuries, but with little religious belief through which to express their concerns and beliefs. So to fall back to Hertz's schema, as the soul has lost some of its significance, this appears to have focussed more attention on the body as it becomes the only 'target' left for many mourners. So in tandem with medico-legal superstructures that also gauge significance from the physical body, this has propelled the hidden corpse into a position of heightened significance. Paradoxically, this significance has been disguised as it has been hidden.

The corpse occupies a liminal position, a situation which signifies a sacred, ambivalent, intermediate period. Van Gennep's (1907) work has enabled me to reflect upon this situation, where normless semi-existence seems to occur. In this threshold place natural processes have become culturally unacceptable, while the corpse is the subject of pre-funeral rites. Although theorists such as Baudrillard (1993) and Foucault (1977) suggest the body is controlled or regimented; because the corpse is hidden in marginal areas such as funeral premises or mortuaries, its

regulation is somewhat ambivalent, so the cultural definitions of mourners appear to be very significant. Embalmers struggle to reproduce appropriate socially approved appearances and themselves acknowledge that the dead should not actually look dead (project 3). This corresponds with the concepts of visual ideology (Hadjucicolau 1993) and aesthetic holograms (Synott 1993) that are significant in our appearance oriented society. This also suggests that the corpse has become some sort of representational fetish (Bronfen 1992) and that its (ideally acceptable) appearance signifies good death (Baudrillard (1993). I therefore concluded that embalming was employed to support powerful definitions of the corpse. Difficult deaths expose this regulation, as far more has to be done by embalmers (for example after autopsy) to accomplish these definitions.

Many of my 274 mourners in project 1 appeared to be looking, in the main, for a good representation of death. This project enabled me to explore one aspect of the socially constructed nature of English mortuary rites where the social control of the natural body (for instance in life, through fashion) also governed the nature and appearance of the corpse so that in a truly liminal, transitional situation the corpse was situated, unchanging, in a context devoid of the usual norms. Mourners appeared to take this for granted and only embalmers truly appreciated quite how challenging the maintenance of this temporary stasis could be, as project 3 confirmed. This whole issue corresponds with Featherstone's (1982) conclusion that appearance in contemporary society is significant and (in this context) the impact of the media is crucial. A critical feature of media constructions of death was that live actors would portray the dead, when in reality dead people do not look 'as if' they are alive. This suggests that the role of embalming in contemporary death practice is now problematic as it can be extremely difficult to make dead people appear as media images portray and (it could be argued) many mourners have little idea or experience of 'authentic' death images. The embalming process was therefore a process used to render the appearance of the corpse as 'natural', when 'natural' did not correspond with 'real'. As the corpse is now for many people the only part of the person left after death (due to the erosion of religious beliefs) its appearance and condition are for many mourners crucial.

## 6.4 Embalmers

The starkly 'real' images of death are routinely transformed by embalmers, who disguise these (often unsettling) images by skilful camouflage. So it is rare for mourners to confront stark, horrifying images of undisguised death, due to the painstaking work of embalmers. Project 3 suggested that embalmers are aware of a culturally determined image to which the corpse should conform. However embalmers apparently do their work too well since they hide the reason for their existence. This is a significant issue regarding the ultimate recognition of embalming, since it is very difficult to recognise what has been hidden. The clues to the existence of embalmers are thus submerged below the cultural 'surface' so their social visibility is reduced, however they still have to produce death images that fit the socio-cultural picture of good death. This picture, judging from the comments of mourners, should involve the corpse looking 'peaceful', perhaps 'healthier' but certainly 'culturally proper' and unchanged. This last concept has produced problems for contemporary embalmers.

Although professional status for funeral directors is apparently based upon embalming (Howarth 1992) the process is actually accomplished by embalmers and stigma managed by passing (Goffman 1959). The profane body is treated by embalmers, whereas the sacred funeral ceremony is managed by funeral directors. Lengthening pre-funeral timescales and the frequency of viewing the dead mean that embalming is frequently practised as an example of a Foucauldian (1977) sanitary control system. This does produce a problematic dichotomy, since embalmers are clearly necessary, but not necessarily acknowledged. However state control methods have been consistently that of submerging the obviousness of death by physically distancing the dead in mortuaries and private buildings. This socio-cultural location has been a problem for the embalming occupation. As embalming reappeared and the BIE emerged in the 1920s and 1930s, so the body itself disappeared. The issue of the self disguising paradox of the embalming process means that embalming could thus be regarded as a 'phantom' profession, as it has not successfully 'hit' anything of social significance to have achieved status, which explains a situation in which the process clearly exists but has no recognition (Turner 1984). Embalmers form a sort of funeral 'caste' who work usually within the BIE, which resembles a sort of sect. They are very well concealed and hidden members of an industry usually well known for its

own discretion. So although embalmers lack enough legitimacy, it would be inaccurate to say that they lacked any legitimacy. Routes concerning access and information about embalmers can be considered however, to be 'semi-official'. Unfortunately the BIE does not satisfy sociological definitions of a profession (such as Freidson 1977) but membership is still sought for reasons of status, achievement and as an apparent promotional move by upwardly mobile funeral personnel. However as a semi-profession, the status incongruity of higher qualified embalmers (Naylor 1989) compared to less qualified funeral directors, means that they will occupy a problematic occupational niche.

If fifty years ago embalmers appeared quite marginal (project 7 page 187) the growing numbers of registered embalmers now suggest they have assumed a far greater significance. Researchers such as Smale (1985) and Howarth (1992) have assumed that the occupations of funeral director and embalmer are more or less congruent, but as the occupation of funeral directors and embalmers appear almost mutually exclusive (project 6 page 185) this leads me to conclude that the internal tensions within the funeral industry will continue to grow. A significant issue that has been detected in the analysis of registered embalmers, is the progressive feminization of the occupation from 0.5% in the 1930s to almost 21% by 2004 (project 7 page 187). As the highest qualified (but hidden) members of the funeral world, the processes whereby embalmers become more prominent will, I feel, gradually emerge. This is because without their actions, the crucial significance of the corpse will mean that mourners will detect unfortunate reminders of natural corruption (when for decades this awareness has been receding) which will lead to dissonance. Contact in marginal areas such as mortuaries or chapels will, however, continue to render embalming and embalmers problematic, since as nobody knows embalmers are there; there is thus no social legitimation. So it follows that socio-culturally, embalming has become an invisible process, which fits in very well with the dominant discourses submerging the body. But this does not mean embalming is insignificant for mourners. The significance of the 'last look' which Richardson suggests 'can be detected for at least three centuries (1985:62) has not apparently receded, as contact with the corpse is a common experience (project 1) and evidence suggests that this is a growing phenomenon (project 4). It is therefore likely that embalming will

continue to be employed in rendering the natural corpse acceptable, which suggests that embalmers will continue to operate to produce these images.

## 6.5 Mourners

Contemporary interest in grief and bereavement may be attributable to the demographic features of an ageing population. Mourners expect to be comforted by the 'sanitised' and comfortable dead, who should conform to quite strict 'socially normal' Foucauldian criteria. Many mourners appeared to interact with their dead relative as if the corpse were still partly alive. It is clear that mourners in the main do not accept the dominant interpretations of death as either failure (medical – Illich 1976 & 1977, Sontag 1978) a state of impurity (religious – Douglas 1966) or a threat (legal – Foucault 1977). This provides a reason for embalming. Bauman's (1988) critique of consumer practice suggests that the utility function of purchases has been eclipsed, in late capitalist society, by the 'sign function' – which means that products are purchased for what they denote, rather than for their actual function. This suggests that the restored and presentable corpse (the 'sign function') is now the dominant rationale for embalming practice, as opposed to its earlier utilitarian function to counteract decomposition. This is certainly seen when examining the responses of mourners to chapel viewing – how the dead look is important to mourners; they are unconcerned with how well preserved the dead are. An issue I found puzzling was the sheer variability of mourner response to the whole issue of death and contact with the corpse. Rose (1999) suggests that individuals are reacting to 'therapeutic issues' which may well lead them towards contact with the dead in a form of self-healing. As individuals tend to possess unique complexes of life experiences, it follows that mourner responses to the dead will also vary with personal circumstances.

In addition mourners do not realise what constructions they are supporting (in other words the 'culturally approved' condition of the dead is actually 'natural' according to mourners). It thus follows that if there is no realisation that this is a social construction, then society will neither appreciate embalming for what it is, nor appreciate the embalmers for what they do since their actions will be unacknowledgeable.



## 6.6 The state

Part of the reason for the 'phantom occupation' of embalmers rests with powerful state discourses that prefer to disguise (attempting to control and submerge) death, rather than acknowledge it, by making death private or invisible. However if the state has caused the body to disappear, this will thwart the occupational aspirations of embalmers, as there is therefore little mechanism left with which to propel their status aspirations. Only by exposing the dreadful reality of death will the socio-cultural usefulness of embalmers be appreciated. This however, does seem unlikely. The work of Foucault (1977) suggests that the regulation of the corpse is for the state a significant issue. The acknowledged bureaucracy that accompanies the corpse through the 'death system' (Howarth 1992) highlights how its passage is organised. Difficult deaths, perhaps following murder or other violence, highlight the controlling actions of the state, where embalmers play a key role in disguising the investigative procedures inflicted upon the dead. So it becomes problematic for embalmers to treat and manage what contemporary society is trying hard not to overtly acknowledge.

Powerful discourses within the state, such as legal, medical and to some extent religious definitions, produce dissonance as competing definitions produce problems for the funeral industry which attempts to mediate between the cultural constructions of mourners and the regulating actions of state agencies. State definitions of what constitutes a body have evolved, examples being the emergence of the still-born child in 1926 (when these deaths were regarded as 'non-events') and the non-viable foetus in 1992 from a shadowy non-existence to its semi-legal definition today as 'proto human' with commensurate right to an authentic funeral. Post-modern emphases suggest that multiple interpretations of events now co-exist together, which could be detected in project 1 (pages 166-170), where mourners' interpretations varied widely, from complete disbelief at the awful (or wonderful) images to fantastic expectations that had very little prospect of satisfaction.

## 6.7 Final points

This thesis has highlighted the growth in significance of corpse appearance in contemporary England. This is in contrast to the work of writers such as Gorer (1965) or Aries (1981) who have assumed that as the corpse was hidden, it was therefore insignificant. Highlighting the role of the embalming process which makes the corpse 'normal', has enabled me to expose part of the socio-cultural process that now transforms the natural corpse into the culturally acceptable one. The embalming process illustrates the mass of beliefs and activities grafted onto the organic event of death. By this process the body in death appears to be constructed in a state of sacred, normless, liminal, processual transition (Gluckman (1962). Bauman (1987) suggests that the transience of contemporary society has allowed dominant discourses to become fragmented, which has enabled a powerful consumer culture to project 'comfortable' death images for mourners. This has encouraged the growth of the covert embalming process, as the presented 'comfortable' images need to be constructed. Embalming therefore appears an integral, but camouflaged, part of the social construction of the corpse in contemporary appearance oriented society. Paradoxically the efforts to produce the appropriate image are hidden, as is the corpse itself, for the most part. This concealment is part of the crucial issue, since to reveal the processes would destroy the illusion which is produced. In a manner similar to forgers or art restorers, the undetected effort creates the finished product which appears totally convincing because it is assumed to be the real thing. If, as in the process of 'invisible' mending, the craft is detected, this destroys the illusion of perfection and the finished article is perceived with the blemishes revealed. So it is only when there is no suspicion of any restorative activity that the finished embalming process appears totally convincing. This does, however, consign embalmers to the 'back stage' area (Smale 1985).

American embalming has been criticised (Phipps 1987) as producing an idealised, youthful, unreal image of death where Americans have appeared to cheat the ageing process. Evidence suggests that mourners in England are also coming to expect this, which is likely to become problematic. Although images produced by embalmers are more appealing than the stark, pre-embalming death images, they do not conform to the 'disneyfied' and unchanging media images that have now superceded authentic

death knowledge. This is because death is now estranged (Jupp 1990) from the popular context, so awareness of 'real' death has diminished. This appears due to the fragmentation of discourses (Giddens 1996), which has produced a 'patchwork quilt' of beliefs through which mourners, embalmers and others in contemporary culture negotiate meanings. Among other writers, Smale (1985) has already referred to the significance of the presentation of the dead in funeral premises for the now full-time funereal custodians (project 2). However as other writers, including Naylor (1989) had made very little of this significance, I feel entitled to highlight this issue which for a growing proportion of mourners appears now to be of critical significance, due to the growth of therapeutic 'self help' issues (Rose 1999). The corpse, however, although significant, is still as hidden from society in English culture today as Gorer pointed out in 1965, although more mourners now visit the privately presented dead. However as the corpse has become distanced, this has led to some contradictions which funeral companies attempt to conceal. The maintenance of the corpse in a liminal, threshold, limbo is a taken-for-granted element of funeral practice where only embalmers truly appreciate the challenges inherent in this maintenance. A major reason for the existence of the embalming process is because the decomposed body is regarded by European culture as the body's most polluted condition (Bronfen 1992). So embalming is a crucial but covert factor in the mainly private and family oriented reactions to contemporary death. Although visiting the dead is becoming common-place, as experience of the corpse was for 90% of my sample in project 1, this is still an experience submerged within socially hidden areas. However it is likely that the significance of the physical reminder of the dead will increase as mourners attempt to gain therapeutic comfort (Rose 1999) from confrontation with the corpse. This will underline the hidden significance of embalmers, who have been probing for official recognition and higher status since 1927, but who remain submerged at the margins of English society.

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