Landscapes of Laughter and Forgetting

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Rituals of death vary widely with culture, geography, religion, or historical context. Yet, issues of time, transition, threshold, and transformation consistently emerge within the study of rituals of death, mirroring, as it were, cultural attitudes toward life. This loop, whereby death rituals inform life attitudes, which in turn impact practices of death, formed the basis for a graduate design studio focused on landscape, ritual, and the ever-transitioning urban environment.

This first part of the paper will focus primarily on the research foregrounding the studio, specifically that which explores the physical and metaphysical relationships of death to space. This will be presented relative to two parallel themes: firstly that of *human death* and the cultural rituals guiding death practices at the scales of the body, the family, the public realm, and architectural or landscape space. These themes focus on issues of memory, narrative, cycles, and time, and seek to negotiate the immaterial ritualistic beliefs with material, architectural practices. Indeed all of the practices which take place at death, from treatment of the body to the design of landscapes, are fundamentally dictated by beliefs in other-worldly phenomena, practiced through material processes and acts.

The second part of the paper looks not at death relative to a body, but at multiple bodies, indeed at the scale of the *city*. This perspective views death as a transition in a long chain of transitions, rather than as a precise, biological threshold. The city is explored for its cultural transformations, shifting political tides, and collective social behavior. The urban landscape of the post-industrial city of Detroit presents an alternative way of considering the relationship between death and space - as sequence of change, obsolescence and reinvention.

These two parallel lines of research - that of individual, human death, and as experienced at the scale of the city, comprised the first portion of the coursework and consequently provided an armature for design proposals in the second part of the semester. The initial research allowed students to propose program and formulate a thesis statement positioned at an intersection between these parallel studies - the scale of human death and the phenomena of the site, Detroit. Projects did not attempt to propose 'solutions', verify generalizations, or state universal claims, but rather sought to project a very specific set of ideas forward to an architectural or landscape proposal.

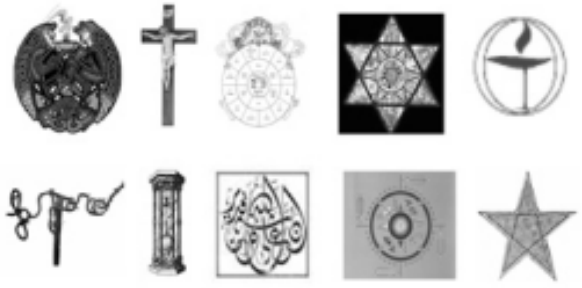
The paper will outline research findings at each of the four scales (body, family, public and space), present the issues at work within the site, and then highlight three projects that interestingly synthesized the two. Ultimately a single project will conclude the paper describing a project realized in a cemetery in Virginia, USA. This project binds eastern and western cultural practices as well as pedagogical and professional intentions.

NOTES ON PEDAGOGICAL PROCESS:

The Ritual Landscapes studio engaged issues surrounding death and dying at scales and in contexts varying from the physical body to the urban landscape. Student research was divided into four sections corresponding with each of the scales mentioned earlier. Students were asked to choose either a religion or a geographical location and filter their research through this topic. The topics chosen included Buddhism, Catholicism, African

religions, Athesim, Navajo culture, Victorian England traditions, Wicca, Islam, Judaism, Slave Christianity and others, and ranged geographically from Europe to Africa, North America to Asia. Research was conducted in a series of one-week charettes and formalized in digital, verbal, and book formats.

The relationship between this research and the project proposal was not usually a direct extension, but more often a non-literal translation of issues which surfaced in the process. The emphasis of students' process was on looking deeply and critically at the information they were uncovering for common threads, complicated situations, or unlikely intersections. They followed leads and formulated positions; a thesis statement was required mid-semester. At this point their process came into clearer focus often taking the form of either a *loop*- revisiting an idea uncovered early on but now with greater intelligence; a *spiral* - continually looking back at previous work to re-position it towards a new purpose; or a *spline*, which moved generally forward throughout, but took full advantage of digressions or tangents seemingly irrelevant at the time.



The goal of this process as the first studio of the graduate curriculum was to foster the benefits of curiosity, a self-critical process, and to introduce a rigorous but experimental mode of working that would only intensify as they move toward a final graduate thesis.

2.0 STUDENT RESEARCH : 4-SCALES OF DEATH AND LIFE

What could be more universal than death? Yet what an incredible variety of responses it evokes. Corpses are burned or buried, with or without human sacrifice; they are preserved by smoking, embalming, or pickling; the are eaten – raw, cooked or rotten; they are ritually exposed as carrion or simply abandoned; or they are dismembered and treated in a variety of those ways. Funerals are the occasion for avoiding people or holding parties, for fighting or having sexual orgies, for weeping or laughing, in a thousand different combinations. The diversity of cultural reaction is a measure of the universal impact of death. But it is not a random reaction; always it is meaningful and expressive."[1]

The rites and rituals associated with death describe the notion of a body at several scales: the physical body of the deceased: the *corpse*, which is treated in accordance with cultural rituals, the *familial* body of people closest to the deceased, and the *public* body of people who were peripherally associated with the deceased or those institutions who organize the event of a death. The ritual landscape is the space of death – the landscape or architectural space upon which death rituals are played out.

At every scale, death rituals exist solely for the purposes of the living, allowing the diversity of cultures and religions to deal with death as a rite of passage of life. Belief in death as a transition among other forms of change such as birth, puberty, marriage, and parenthood is common in many traditions, and denies an understanding of death as terminal.

Scale 1_THE BODY: trace, memory, biography

Though this general assessment suggests links the variety of cultural traditions, distinctions arise in the treatment of the corpse which have to do with the relationships of body to soul. Preparations of the corpse following death illustrate these ideological differences. Across many traditions, cultures, and geographical locations there are rigorous processes for preparation and disposal of the body at the time of death. In almost every case there is a process of cleansing and dressing – though the type and procedure of dress is highly specific to both climate and spiritual beliefs.

For examples, procedures of bathing, dressing, and wrapping are evident in Buddhist traditions, as is the process of blocking facial openings for prevention of evil spirits interfering in the transitional phases of death. In Thailand the body is wrapped

in white cloth with three strings: one at the neck symbolizing the descendants, one at the hands symbolizing the spouse, and another at the feet symbolizing assets and money. These knots represent one's worries in life and are cut before the soul is released, just before the cremation process.

Water is another common element in preparations: for cleansing, purification, and as a symbolic indicator of life. In Tibet, phases of bodily death are equated with elements of nature and stages of mental consciousness. They are as follows:

Cosmological orientation of the body is highly specific. Navajo rituals place the body facing east, the direction of blessings. Similarly, Buddhist traditions in Thailand arrange the ashes of the deceased in a figure facing west, representing death, initially after cremation, and then immediately scatter and reform them into a figure facing east, representing re-birth.

The body in all cases is understood relative to forces, communities, and spatial structures existing far beyond the immediate individual or geographical location, and the impact on landscape (discussed later) materializes these broader associations. The rituals undertaken at death thereby materialize latent social, familial and spatial relationships previously understated or invisible.

Scale 2_THE FAMILY: Liminal space

" During mourning, the living mourners and the deceased constitute a special group, situated between the world of the living and the world of the dead, and how soon living individuals leave that group depends on the closeness of their relationship with the dead person. Mourning requirements are based on degrees of kinship and are systematized according to the special way of calculating that kinship (patrilineally, matrilineally, bilaterally, etc.) It seems that widowers and widows should belong to the special world for the longest time. ...The rites which lift all the regulations (such as special dress) and prohibitions of mourning should be considered rites of reintegration into the life of society..."[2]

Stage	Body	Mind
1. Earth to Water	body becomes weak, images become cloudy	energy of delusion fades
2. Water to Fire	dehydration, numbness, hearing loss	energy of attachment fades
3. Fire to Wind	feeling of cold, smell is lost	energy of desire fades
4. Wind to Consciousness	breathing stops, taste and texture are lost energy of competitiveness fades	
5. Consciousness to Luminance	sensation of whiteness	
6. Luminance to Radiance	sensation of redness	
7. Radiance to Imminence	sensations of darkness	
8. Imminence to Translucency	sensation of clear light translucency	

Mourning practices vary with faith and with levels of kinship. The events organized for mourning are either manifest as dark, solemn, contemplative hours, or boisterous celebrations of feasting and drinking honoring of the power of life. Indeed the simultaneous confrontation with loss and emptiness as well as hope and livelihood defines the conflicting status of events whose goal it is to negotiate the transitional, ineffable and liminal space created at the threshold of one's death.

Common themes emerging within the student research included rigorous practices of dress, a hierarchical structure to mourning rituals, specified durations of grieving, collective feasting, fasting or drinking, and practices of offering made to the family. The changing of one's clothes after a death is common practice generally, as a form of formal appropriateness and also, as in the Navajo traditions, to avoid contamination from the dead (spiritual and biological). Many western funeral traditions wear black as the appropriate mourning attire, while in Korea, white hemp clothing is traditional and red should be avoided. Masks are used to ward away evil spirits (Korea), as is body paint (Africa).

Duration of mourning periods for family varies, but in many cases there are certain thresholds after which a shift of behavior is deemed appropriate. In Thailand mourning and chanting takes place for the first 7 days, with offering services being conducted at the 49th day and 100th day. In Islamic cultures there are gatherings at 3 days and 40 days following a death. Often the designation of mourning stages is calculated in accordance with how close a family was to the deceased in terms of kinship.

Scale 3_THE PUBLIC : Collective Death

Death in the public realm deals simultaneously with two 'faces', the mass of people with whom death comes in contact *personally*, and the *institutions* which manage, profit from, and regulate the industry death. The peripheral ring of public participants are more distant from the deceased in terms of hereditary connections, and the meaning of the connections to the deceased are as diverse as the numbers of people who participate. This collective is more aptly described as by-standers or spectators, than emotionally bereaved. Their connection is one of mutual support and respect more often than personal emotion or response. The network of people moved to participate, whether it be through attendance, offering, or voyeurism, constitutes a support structure held together not by emotional necessity, but through collective social emergence.

In addition to the social support structure, the public space of death also consists of those institutions operating 'behind the scenes''and necessary to the organization of death rituals at every scale. These industries, which include hospitals, cemeteries, crematories, morticians, florists, musicians, groundskeepers etc., transform individual bodily death into a collective, public event.

As part of the studio we visited various public and commercial organizations and spoke with morticians, funeral directors, cemetery managers, casket manufacturers, cemetery maintenance staff, and other funerary professionals. These field-trips comprised a necessary 'stepping back' from the particulars of the religious and cultural traditions to gain perspective on the institutional and commercial forces at work in death rituals. Although these experiences within the studio were particular to American funeral customs, students proceeded from the understanding that information gleaned through these discussions was applicable at some level across those traditions similarly practicing burial and cremation.

Scale 4_LANDSCAPE : Ritual Space

Once funerary events have passed, and the body of the deceased is gone, multiple and diverse forms of memorialization extend death rituals into the practices of everyday life. While attending funeral services indicates some degree of personal connection, even if tenuous, visiting a cemetery presumes no direct or personal connection at all. Cemeteries function as much for funerary rituals as for sites of leisure and tourism, which is especially true of the larger, urban cemetery-as-city park. Indeed, at the macro-scale the public face of death enables necro-tourism in cemeteries such as Pere-Lachaise in Paris (which is visited by two million tourists each year), Mt. Auburn in Cambridge or the necropolises of Pompeii, Herculaneum and Rome. The relationship between life and death in these cases is not one of opposition, but renders unclear the historic distinctions between metropolis and necropolis, museum and mausoleum.

Research into the landscapes of death was focused on extending ideas generated from the first three phases of work to understand how death affects a terrain beyond that of the social or spiritual. This is not to deny the presence of metaphysical beliefs existing at the scale of landscape, indeed these concerns dictate most decisions regarding placement of corporeal remains (back) within the earth. Rather, this was an opportunity to explore discrete and tangible factors impacting space and landscape such as climate, vegetation, orientation, time, erosion, and topography.

Within the landscape of death it is common for broader cosmological factors to become aligned

Korean burial mounds

with religious or cultural beliefs. Issues of orientation, transformation, and elevation dominate exterior spaces of death rituals. Practices conceived at the scale of the treatment of the body, or behavior of the family, are extended to landscape space. Similarly, social values are often reflected in landscapes of death - mirroring attitudes toward wealth, family, or individuality. This is commonly visible in layout of cemeteries (plot real estate values), status of grave-markers (monuments and degrees of permanence) and also in the means by which the deceased are transported to their final location (automobiles, funerary biers).

In the burial landscape of Korea for example, (top image) a distinction is evident between those burial practices that dig into the earth and those that elevate toward the skies. In this case the corpse is placed into a hollow in the ground, and covered with a mound of soil and sod. A tablet with the name of the deceased is placed at the foot of the mound for identification. The mound transforms in color and shape with the change of season and temperature, eventually germinating to prairie grass and then physically eroding until neither the head nor the foot (of the mound) is legible. Gradually, over a period of about 100 years, the mound will recede back into the earth. The result is a landscape wherein the history of the community is immediately legible: new, sodded mounds protrude sharply against older, subtle bumps indicating the location of ancestors. In this landscape death, too, dies. One lives 100 years, and dies 100 years. For this reason it is often said that a Korean dies twice, one in life and once in death.

3.0 DETROIT : DEATH AND URBANISM

> *"Forget what you think you know about this place. Detroit is the most relevant city in the United States for the simple reason that it is the most unequivocally modern and therefore distinctive of our national culture: in other words, a total success."*[3]

> *"If Detroit is to be called "The Capital of the Twentieth"Century," it is not because of its architecture, monuments, or great cultural achievements. Detroit is the Capital because of its singular devotion to the idea of industrial production, investing all of its resources into a technology and product that has transformed the face of every modern city. In the process, Detroit has allowed itself to be reinvented time and again; recasting its space culture, and architecture in the form of the latest production idea."*[4]

Detroit, once the 4th largest city in the country, lost half of its population in the last half of twentieth century. Currently estimated at over 970,000 people, Detroit's population is scattered throughout 'the discontinuous city fabric'– some residential units strangely in tact and many others isolated by blocks and blocks of vegetally-reclaimed former housing sites. Dedicated almost exclusively to the automobile industry, Detroit's own form of production ironically also produced the evacuated condition plaguing the city to this day. Add to this condition several mega-entertainment complexes in the heart of downtown (Tiger's Comerica Park, Lion's Ford Field, and the Greektown and MGM Grand Casinos, all completed within the last five years) and the result is a city of hyper-boundaries and stark contrasts between old and new, dense and sparse, black and white, big and small.

The urban blight, neglect, and depopulation in Detroit are more than just social and industrial problems. As a result the city is forced to dedicate millions of dollars to the removal of abandoned houses, upkeep of obsolete infrastructure, and policing of under-populated neighborhoods. In 1990, after spending $25 million to raze abandoned structures and deter "Devil's Night" arsonists (setting vacant houses on fire in the days around Halloween), the city of Detroit proposed a program to discontinue services from the most abandoned portions of the city and relocate residents. The proposal, had it been accepted, would have worked to merely institutionalize the post-industrial process already naturally taking place within the city, and would have accelerated the evolutionary cycle of re-invention described by Hoffman above.

The studio's site, the former location of the Jeffries Homes West, presented issues which paralleled those presented in initial research. The Jeffries Homes, 13 residential towers with 2,170 housing units on 47 acres, were constructed in 1955 as part of many housing projects built to accommo-

date the rush of southern immigrants migrating to Detroit following WWII. Beginning in the 1970s and 1980s, the complex was plagued with management problems, crime and illegal drug traffic. In 1996 Mayor Dennis Archer announced a 5-year plan to raze the Jeffries Homes and, as part of the Hope IV project, make way for a $100 million development to include single-family homes, apartments, lofts, towers and stores. Its identity was to pay homage to Detroit's historical roots, naming streets after famous Motown stars. In 1991, 5 of the 13 towers were imploded, and in 1997 went 4 more. The 4 that remain will either be renovated or imploded.

In its currently evacuated condition this site suggests an archaeological attitude towards design and the opportunities for an architectural palimpsest. At the same time, the future for such a charged site is one of the clearest examples of Detroit's "renaissance," the forward-looking and optimistic new urban future. As such, the work in this studio challenged the *program* of death (and of landscape) by engaging the physical site's cultural, historical and architectural potential, and resulted in projects that dealt with death physically and/or socially in the urban realm. Death was not understood solely as a point of finality or absence, but equally as an occasion for leisure, learning and remembrance. The implications of these traditions for landscape and architecture were framed relative to these four scales, (body, family, public, and landscape space) and fostered a broader discussion of the relationships between ritual and public space.

4.0 STUDENT WORK : INTERSECTIONS AND PROPOSITIONS

#1: Memorialization in Life

This project looked at the relationship between death and life in terms of landscape and program. Landscapes of death are often quiet places of solitude that are visited momentarily and sporadically. Over time, as friends and family of the deceased move on or pass away, or as memory recedes, the burial markers become anonymous and are eventually reclaimed by the ground. This project rethinks contemporary forms of memorialization by infusing a landscape of death with activities of life.

An occupiable "dividing line" runs through the site to separate the space of burial from that of recreation. Playing fields for local sports teams and residents lie to one side of this line and places of burial to the other; the two realms are connected only visually and aurally. This memorial landscape reminds mourners of the continuation of life, while those who visit the site for recreation or leisure are reminded of the inevitability of death. The juxtaposition of these two programs facilitates an open interaction between life and death.

#2 : Oral Gardens

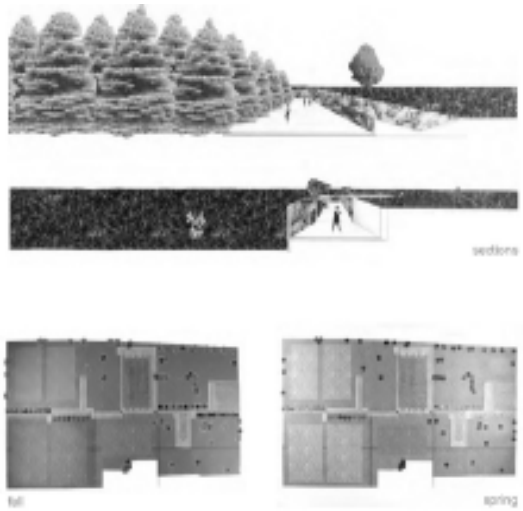
This project stemmed from research into African religions. Two themes guided the project, firstly that doctrines in the religions she studied are often handed down verbally rather than originating from a single authority or holy book. Secondly, from the understanding that these traditions and emerge through experience and in direct relationship to the geographical place in which they are practiced, rather than being fixed through history

The project proposal began by looking closely at the site in Detroit. The first implosion of the Jeffries Towers took place in 1997, and demolition has been carried out sporadically ever since. Although remnants of these historic structures remain on the site, their erasure contributed to the depletion of the rich oral history of this locally famous housing development. The evacuation of these buildings brought an eerie silence to the site, through which only an occasional visitor now passes. Oral history passed down from generation to generation is possible only through the presence of people, a presence the site does not currently offer.

This project proposes to both reveal the site's oral history and activate its future histories through the design of an urban park. The park contains parking for the adjoining church, community and allotment gardens and neighborhood recreation space. The garden commemorates the site by recording its oral histories on semi-transparent garden walls. The presence of the community gardens encourages neighbors to lavish attention on this otherwise forgotten landscape, and in so doing suggests reactivation of the site's ongoing history through the increased presence of residents, visitors and ever-emerging narratives.

#3 : Grave Marker

Instigated to design a more personal grave marker for her recently departed father, this project be-

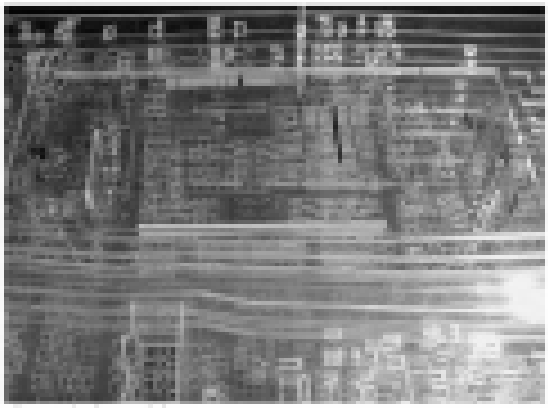


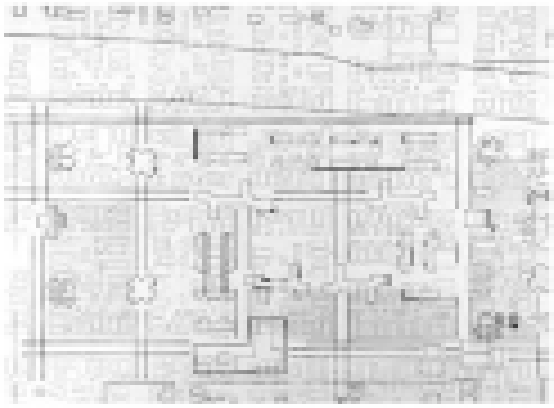
came an independent study to design and fabricate a permanent installation in a cemetery in Arlington Virginia. The study began with an exploration of materials readily available in the landscape and geology where she lives. Exhaustive samples, experiments and material tests guided the student toward the use of a system of marked stones. Each stone was drilled to form a small, concave hollow and filled with luminescent resin. The resin absorbs sun during the day and glows yellow at night. Following completion of the markers, the hundreds of rocks were transported to Arlington and placed over the entire grave site.

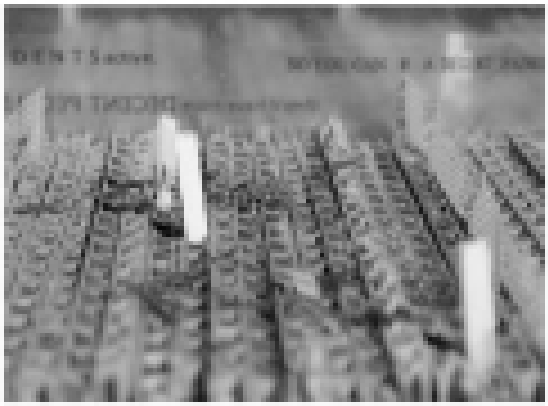
The project thus resulted in an installation operating at three levels. The collection of uniquely and attentively produced markers created a geographical connection between the student's father and her place of residence. As well they became a contemplative and tactile means by which to pass time visiting her father, providing something to subtly and unconsciously occupy one's mind and hands while spending time at the site. And lastly the hand-scaled stones are continually transforming: with light from day to night, through interaction by visitors and as transformed over time by the environment.

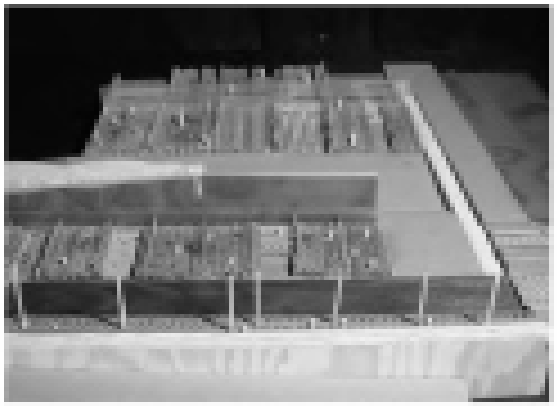
5.0 CONCLUSION : INFLECTION POINTS

The work produced in the studio sought to stake a









position relative to a series of internal conflicts within the process of the work. These conflicts, or contradictions had to do both with the subjects of the studio framework (ritual and landscape, eastern and western cultural values, research and practice) but also arose within the process of each individual project. Ultimately the work swung between these various concerns and it was at points of inflection within the work that the greatest insights and progressions were made. These points marked a transformation of the idea into a material construct, or vice versa, and *looping*, *spiraling*, or *splining* processes were strongly encouraged within the process of this body of work. The goal was to foster modes of working that are both individually and collectively driven, and to stake ground, or a thesis, within this working process.

NOTES

[1] P. Metcalf, R. Huntington, Celebrations of Death: The Anthology of Mortuary Ritual, (Cambridge:Cambridge University Press, 1979), p24

[2] Metcalf, 63-64

[3] Jerry Herron in "Three Meditations on the Ruins of Detroit," in *Stalking Detroit*, Georgia Daskalakis, Charles Waldheim and Jason Young, Eds., (Barcelona: Actar, 2001),p33.

[4] Dan Hoffman, "The Best the World Has to Offer," in *Stalking Detroit*, Georgia Daskalakis, Charles Waldheim and Jason Young, Eds., (Barcelona: Actar, 2001),p42.

IMAGE CREDITS:

All images are by author with the exception of the Grave Marker project, for which the images are by the author of the project.

Detroit figure ground drawings from *Stalking Detroit*, Georgia Daskalakis, Charles Waldheim and Jason Young, Eds., (Barcelona: Actar, 2001).