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Magnetism of strangeness: Silenced histories of landscapes

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ABSTRACT



Why do certain parts of landscape become places for waste disposal? This simple question seems to be easy to answer given the existence of sophisticated tools for formal modelling of a range of environmental, economic, social, and political variables which are supposed to minimize risk, cost, and disequity. There are, however, more subtle factors that shape waste disposal and its inscription in landscape. Using examples of two Czech landfills and drawing upon my ethnographic research of wastescapes, I examine how history, economic interests, social practices, events, material indeterminacies, and multispecies encounters took part in the transformation of these places into loci of ‘strangeness’. Using a metaphor of magnetism I refocus our attention to a capacity of strange entities such as garbage, rubble, military waste, dead bodies, animal farms, and shooting ranges to attract each other along a spatiotemporal continuum. I argue that strangeness sticks to places and tends to perpetuate itself through a series of ‘magnetic’ relations over time. This magnetism stems from the human propensity to classify and dispose of entities whose open-endedness is dangerous and must be controlled through placement. While this process of placement is often imagined as a management of absence, I point to a dialectical relationship to the opposite category of presence as a critical source of magnetism. Waste management, then, becomes envisioned as part of a more general social process that keeps the world meaningful.

KEYWORDS

Absence; classification; disposal; military waste; rubble

Introduction

It is autumn 2014, my first trip to a large landfill called Vrch.¹ I am walking through a dense spruce forest and the branches along with various bushes create a barely penetrable barrier. It is hard to resist thoughts about the Sleeping beauty protected by the thorny rose bushes. My journey, however, is quite different. I am trying to get closer to, arguably, one of the ugliest places in Bohemia. I decided to explore and experience landfill including its surrounding and placement in the landscape because walking and sensing may be a way ‘to reinvigorate and redirect the study of landscape’ (Tilley and Cameron–Daum 2017, 5). When I crawl through the last bushes, the enormousness of the hill emerging

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in front of me simply takes my breath. One cannot believe that this one kilometre long, half a kilometre wide and 40 metres high structure has not only been created by humans but also hidden so skilfully that most people have not been aware of its existence despite passing it on a busy main road located just 300 metres away. When I continue my exploration around the landfill, a pristine forest reminiscent of those from the Czech national parks raises a pressing question: Why here? What brought people to alter this part of landscape via dumping their garbage?

Waste disposal sites occur in various parts of landscape. Marshes, deserts, woods, former mines, or quarries represent just the most obvious examples. In applied research, formal approaches have been developed to identify the places that would minimize the negative environmental, economic, social, and political consequences of waste disposal. The main objectives were classified into the minimization of risk, cost, and disequity (Eiselt 2007, 1041) and formal tools such as Geographic Information Systems and multi-criteria modelling were applied to formalize the process and yield reliable materials for the decision makers (Abujayyab et al. 2016; Osra and Kajjumba 2020). The formalization of the process is supposed to cover a range of variables and increase an overall credibility of the selection process. The selection of waste disposal sites, however, rarely can be reduced to a mere application of the recommendations produced by research. There are more subtle factors, which are difficult to account for in formal models. These factors include covert interests of stakeholders, informal negotiations, and, most importantly, classificatory logic tied to historical processes that pulled together certain entities to share a common destiny.

Classification enables us to draw boundaries and put together events, things, places, and beings that are alike and differentiate them from those which are not. As Douglas ([1966] 2005, 196) argues, avoidance is closely related to any structure of ideas. Avoidance of the strange and polluting, including waste, reduces the danger that the world will fall apart. Elaborating on Douglas, Baviskar and Gidwani suggest that the negative charge of waste '... lies not only in its intrinsic physical or chemical properties, but is inseparable from where it is located in the spatial flows that form the social ecology of production and consumption' (2019). While most followers of Douglas – although not always in good agreement with Douglas' original intentions (Liboiron 2019) – emphasize that all that threatens is, in a certain time of its representational life, out of place, I am rather interested in *where all that threatens should be placed to be separated from the rest*. It means to explore where the already recognized category of impure, dangerous, or anomalous, which I prefer to label collectively as strange,² finds its place. For example, mass waste in the landfills is exactly *in place* because it is supposed to be there, unless one prefers other means of waste disposal. It is a way to limit the sphere of the possible. As Reno, building upon Bateson's and Deacon's ideas about entropy, says: '... mass waste disposal allows us to actively avoid alternative possibilities we would rather not experience or imagine ...' (2016, 10–11). The same holds for other kinds of strangeness such as military areas, mine fields, industrial plants, animal farms, or virological labs that have a potential to increase the range of possibilities beyond the limits of expectation or even imagination. Spatial separation and avoidance of the entities with capacity for indeterminacy (see Alexander and Sanchez 2018) is therefore part of the quest to live meaningful life. Indeterminacy provides a potent vehicle for the elucidation of historical configurations emerging

from human interactions with landscapes (Henig 2019). In this perspective, indeterminacy includes also experiential and affective registers that guide avoidance.

Avoidance encourages disposal of the strange through management of presence and absence. As Hetherington says: 'In engaging in such acts [that is disposal], members of a society can be seen to get rid of unwanted things and thereby to stabilize social categories of membership and belonging around their removal' (2004, 161). For him, disposal enables placement of absences, which are, however, never fully gotten rid of and their indeterminacy lurks around. Reno (2016, 161) extends the attention paid to absence to the concept of emptiness which may invite waste dumping. However, places that seem to be empty from a specific angle of view, might have rich history that attracts various kinds of strangeness to join in the quest to become absent. Some places can be quite full, imbued with potentialities that serve as a magnet for making associations (Henig 2020). They follow the logic of a Czech proverb that 'a crow sits next to another crow' (*vrána k vráně sedá*). In other words, a logic of placement, or displacement, of absences in Hetherington's sense is often contingent upon presence of strangeness that attracts its various peers like a magnet. This seemingly paradoxical logic uncovers that presence and absence are intimately tied. To make something strange absent simultaneously means to make it present in a different regime of representation, place, or time.

Understanding the placement of waste disposal sites receives a new spin when one pays attention to their history. Millar (2012, 170) describes that the garbage dump near Rio de Janeiro was established in an area that was originally perceived as uncivilized, violent, and poor. Large-scale industrialization, destruction of the forests, and immigration from the poorer Brazilian states built upon this history and made the area absent from the social geography of the city (Millar 2018, 19). Reno's (2016, 54, 141) research in Michigan showed the association between swamps, which were historically believed to cause diseases, presence of poor and stigmatized people, and waste disposal. Famous Fresh Kills landfill established in Staten Island's marshes was preceded by a marine hospital and a waste reduction plant that set precedents for the landfill (Melosi 2016, 61). The landfill near Košice in Slovakia was placed near stigmatized Roma communities (Filčák and Ficeri 2021) and the association between waste and Roma developed at Pata-Rât landfill in Romania as well (Dohotaru 2013, 194). This link between waste and marginalized people is part of a larger process of racialization of labour in contemporary capitalism responding to environmental challenges (Resnick 2021). For the purpose of this paper, however, I will focus on a spatiotemporal nature of these varied associations.

Using examples of two Czech landfills, I examine why certain parts of landscape became places for waste disposal. I pay special attention to history to understand how long-term practices, economic interests, specific events, material indeterminacies, multi-species encounters, and classificatory exercises took part in a transformation of these places into loci of strangeness. Using a metaphor of magnetism, I refocus our attention to a capacity of strange entities and activities to attract each other along a spatiotemporal continuum. As Gordillo (2014, 37) suggests, magnetism can be used as a metaphor for capturing a capacity of spatially situated material references to the past to attract new relations. By analysing these relations, new histories, which contrast with the official accounts and history, may be unearthed. I will elaborate on the metaphor of magnetism in three senses. First, magnetism is not only about attracting but also repulsion. Magnetism keeps certain things away and encourages avoidance. Second, magnetism accounts

for a certain regularity (attraction among strange entities in this case) but the pattern is not entirely predictable. In other words, there is space for attracting unexpected combinations of entities and activities that may erode an official version of history and create effects that are rather uncanny (cf. Stewart 2017). Third, magnetism itself is invisible but its consequences can be sensed. It is reminiscent of other invisible agencies such as witchcraft (Evans-Pritchard 1937) or radiation (Jackson 2011; Hecht 2014) that cannot be seen but their effects can be serious. Using two case studies, I argue that strangeness sticks to places and tends to perpetuate itself through a series of 'magnetic' relations over time. The logic stems from the human propensity to classify and dispose of entities whose open-endedness is dangerous and have to be placed away as well as continuities of historical processes. While disposal is often imagined as a management of absence, I point to a dialectical relationship to the opposite category of presence as a critical source of magnetism.

Earthworks of forgetting

The history of the area where the Vrch landfill was established in 1996 can be traced to eighteenth century. According to a local historian,³ Austro-Hungarian army established military crew in the nearby town of Rybíz in 1729. After a significant growth of the military presence in town where the barracks for the dragoons and their horses were built, it was necessary to find a place for exercising. Therefore, sixty hectares of the land in the woods were assigned to the army to be used as a training ground. This military area is clearly visible on the map of the Second military mapping in mid-nineteenth century. When Czechoslovakia was founded in 1918, the area continued to serve the military purposes. After the Second World War, it was used as a firing range and impact area for air bombs and missiles. In early 1990s, after the Velvet Revolution and the dissolution of Czechoslovakia, the Czech army returned the land to the town of Rybíz which was supposed to find a meaningful future for the disturbed landscape in the middle of the woods. There were two entrepreneurs who saw an opportunity to mediate the relationship between the representatives of the army and the Rybíz town council. There was another former military area in the region, which was polluted and more visible because of its close proximity to a nearby large city, and the army was supposed to clean it. As Pavel, a regional expert on environmental impact of infrastructural projects including landfills, says: 'It was smart. They helped one group of soldiers to move their waste to another group of soldiers'. The entrepreneurs found a solution in mediating the move of military waste to Vrch where various remainders of military presence were already present. They had to, however, turn the area of Vrch into a sanitary landfill to abide by a new waste act, which was passed in 1994.

The chronicle of Rybíz describes that in 1995 the town council approved a contract about the future contract with a private company ORI concerning the construction of a landfill for municipal solid waste in the former military area of Vrch. The contract was signed despite a strong disagreement among the inhabitants of the town who expressed their concerns in a questionnaire survey, which seems to be a common pattern during the constructions of waste disposal sites (see Reno 2016, 159). Multiple indicia suggest that there was a pressure from the top to transform the problematic part of the landscape into a commercial landfill. The CEO of the waste company started publishing articles in

the town newspaper in 1995 and 'waste-promoting' texts kept appearing till 1998 when the process of the transformation of the former military area finished. The quality of these articles clearly surpasses others in the local newspaper. The author, an engineer by education, describes the evolution of waste management since prehistory and carefully crafts his argument for the necessity to build a new landfill near Rybíz. His playful linguistic style and creative use of examples and comparisons (for example 'Middle Ages are ending right now!') makes his texts both amusing and persuasive. He emphasizes the strict rules in waste management and modern technologies that prevent any harmful environmental impact. His articles were followed by a series of shorter texts by other authors who promoted the idea of the new landfill as well. These were invitations to visit another landfill run by ORI to see its quality and safety, descriptions of the unacceptable nature of Rybíz's current non-sanitary landfill that should be closed as soon as possible, and an article of a pupil from the elementary school who pointed at the dangers of non-sanitary landfills. The pressing need for change is embodied in the calls, sometimes even dramatic, for collective responsibility to avoid informal waste disposal and, therefore, support the new landfill ('We are all sitting on the same branch and some of us have saws in their hands'.) All these messages promoting the change in the perception of the proposed landfill in Vrch were supported by special collection days when ORI waste lorries arrived at Rybíz and offered a collection of 'the problematic kinds of waste' such as batteries, fluorescent lamps, oils etc. to everybody for free.

ORI was slowly building its reputation and dulling the signs of aversion to the landfill. In June 1997, the new landfill at Vrch was officially opened to invite the first loads of its assumed capacity four million cubic metres of solid waste. Interestingly, two months before the official opening of the landfill, a local newspaper published a brief article about the prime minister Václav Klaus buying a summer villa in Rybíz from the mayor and accompanied the text with a photo of this top politician. This news turned the life in Rybíz upside down. It drove an exceptional interest and excitement among the local inhabitants who started bombarding the newspaper with their reactions. Once the landfill was opened, the inhabitants learned from the newspaper that the info about Václav Klaus was a joke. The mayor himself claimed that he wore a plastic mask of the prime minister and fabricated the story to amuse the people in the town. The timing of this event, however, raises suspicion. The debate completely diverted public attention from the official opening of the landfill to the topic that seemed much more exciting. When ORI bought the land beneath the landfill in 1998, the old military era finished and the landfill started building its reputation as a place with voracious appetite for new waste and surprising tolerance for its origin or nature.⁴

Today, the remains of military activities are still visible in the landscape. Massive earthworks with its top reinforced with rotten wooden planks and iron posts (Figure 1) remain as silent witnesses of the times when Vrch experienced shooting and explosions. Surprisingly few people including local woodmen know anything about these earthworks hidden in a dense forest next to the landfill. It was a combination of patience and luck that allowed me to meet a 72-year-old man on a dusty forest road next to the landfill. This fairy-tale-like bandit wearing wellingtons and a funny felt hat, holding a stick with a sword-like handle turned out to be a person who used to shepherd cows in the military area of Vrch during his childhood. He remembered not only the earthworks but also the changes during the last half a century



Figure 1. Military earthworks in Vrch.

Not only the earthworks but there was also a bunker there. You cannot see it anymore though ... Soldiers used to train shooting from tanks' machine guns into the moving targets. They had the metal carts and tracks over there and let the carts go downhill while they were shooting. Also, they were training how to throw the grenades. But they were not here all the time. So, during the calm periods, we, the kids, could use the carts for fun. We were removing bullets from the unused cartridges and used slingshots (*šibry*) to shoot on the targets. That was fun. ... But when the army left, I don't know 25 years ago or so, people stole everything ... all the tracks and carts, even metal stairs and chimney from the building. One guy still has a shelter for the tanks in his backyard. Remaining military rubbish (*bordel*) and various debris that nobody wanted were simply left here ... During early 1990s somebody even tried to grow cabbage here for one or two seasons. But at the end, they made this landfill here ... Oh man, don't forget, the iron posts on the earthworks are waiting there for you!⁵

The old-timer suggests that strangeness, while often having negative connotations, has another side as well. It is like an unexpected case of insects and crabs floating on the plastic debris in the Pacific Ocean taking advantage of the strange accumulations of plastic waste to thrive (Strain 2012). The former military area was not just a dangerous and polluted place, but it generated positive kinds of engagement and affect as well. The people living near the military area were not only disturbed by noise and explosions but they also used the place for grazing animals, searching for mushrooms, and were even able to collect and sell or reuse various kinds of unwanted military stuff once the army left. For children, it was a place of games and collection of various military remains, which could be dangerous but may substantially shape the social worlds of children (Moshenska 2008). Military waste offers a potential for value creation and transformation along various registers (Henig 2019, 2012; Kim 2016; Reno 2020; Zani 2019). It can be harvested and sold for its exchange value (Kim 2016, 178), enable generation of surplus value through rentiership or can be displayed in museums to show its value as a material carrier of identity and authenticity (Reno 2020, 55, 99). Moreover, it can be just the presence of military waste

that enables new engagements in its surrounding via the activities that generate value (Henig 2019, 106; Reno 2020, 102) or imbue places in the landscape with ecological value (Kim 2016, 167). In Vrch, value was emerging through the activities of the domesticated animals fed on the meadows and people collecting mushrooms and berries in the area, which was not officially accessible. Various kinds of army equipment and weapons were re-valued in child games as a source of adventure and fun. The collection and subsequent sale or reuse of material objects left in the military area after its abandonment was well comparable to the activities of bootleg miners vividly described by Rakowski (2016, 125–126). The miners were extracting various materials from the former mines within the grey zone of confusion about the nature of property rights. The same was true when the army retreated from Vrch. The discordance between the formal property rights and the obvious lack of care and starting ruination at Vrch led local inhabitants to collect and transport away whatever seemed valuable.

I would, however, extend Henig's (2019) argument about the capacity of military presence to generate unexpected engagements and meaning further. Here, it is a wider range of abandoned material remnants of military presence such as rods, rails, bunkers (see Galaty et al. 2009 for a discussion on the dynamics of signification tied to bunkers), concrete blocks, and earthworks that mobilize relations and action including those that grow from indeterminacy of the place. Moreover, it is not only materiality of military waste *per se* but also various consequences of military action that contributed to indeterminacy of Vrch. Indeed, regular explosions producing depressions on the ground, forest clearing that changed conditions of light or humidity, and seemingly destructive movement of the military equipment created environmental conditions suitable for rare forms of life such as endemic plants or insects (see below). As Tsing (2015, 160) argues, building upon the work of ecologists, disturbances are not always bad. Their nature is contested. 'Disturbance is never a matter of "yes" or "no"; disturbance refers to an open-ended range of unsettling phenomena' (Tsing 2015, 161; see also Henig 2020). While disturbances could pose a problem for the foresters, the municipal officers, or shy mammals, it certainly was not a problem for rare orchids and tadpole shrimps thriving because of the periodic explosions creating temporary water pools and marshes. Therefore, strangeness of Vrch entangled with its indeterminate nature was contingent upon the wider range of factors than materiality of military waste only.

Despite apparently rich life of the former military area, its official history is largely silenced. There are no information panels or trails that would tell the visitor about the history of the place, although similar heritage-related projects have been mushrooming with the support from the state and EU during the last decade (see Woitsch and Pauknerová 2019). There are at least three such trails in the landscape cared for by Rybíz. Only the earthworks and a few concrete blocks in the deep woods suggest that there was something other than the landfill before. The strangeness of the place is evidenced in a tendency to make it absent and forget its history. Although there are some people who still remember the pre-landfill times, notes about Vrch in the chronicle and two official historical books about the town of Rybíz and its surrounding are surprisingly scarce. My questions related to the history of the place were responded either with silence or shrugging shoulders among the municipal officers. The historian who wrote an entire book about the town and worked for the municipality for thirty years told me that he knew so little about the Vrch area that it was not worth a meeting unless I would

change the topic of my interest.⁶ The place has become absent not only from a social geography in Millar's (2018, 19) sense, which relates to spatial ordering both imagined and reproduced in language, but also from official history and collective memory. All the available information suggests that history of Vrch should be forgotten. It can be done through making it absent and avoided. Douglas argues that avoidance is a form of public recognition of the boundaries that delimit a structure of ideas ([1966] 2005, 196). The strangeness of Vrch reminds everybody that some things and processes should be kept aside to keep the world meaningful. This categorical avoidance, nonetheless, creates interesting economic opportunities for informality at different hierarchical levels ranging from top managers to workers at the bottom (Mašek 2020). As Ledeneva puts it 'They are [that is informal practices] often invisible, resist articulation and measurement, and hide behind paradoxes, unwritten rules and open secrets' (2018, 7). An inability to see the processes at the landfill gives the managers and workers space for dumping inappropriate materials, covering leaks of landfill leachate and its inappropriate treatment, altering statistics, and informal collection and transport of materials out of the landfill.⁷ People from the region do not visit the area much, which makes the surrounding of the current landfill a wonderful place for 'nature' to thrive. Wildlife flourishes in the woods because its most lethal enemy, human, does not cast her step there much. Magnetic repulsion based on the assumed aesthetic inferiority of the place with its decaying heaps and bad odours kept most people away. It has been only the specialists such as soldiers, landfill workers, lorry drivers, and foresters who were officially able to cross the border and engage with the strangeness dwelling inside. Children, mushroom pickers, or scrap collectors were entering only when they transgressed the rules. These groups of actors indicate that magnetism is not entirely predictable but pulls together beings and practices that may subvert the dominant sense of strangeness and participate in alternative histories.

Military activities that transformed Vrch into a strange place, nonetheless, were not the only source of magnetism for the construction of the landfill. It was another usual suspect of pollution and avoidance known from anthropological theorizing: the pig (Douglas [1966] 2005; Harris [1984] 2001). About half a kilometre from the future landfill was already a large-scale pig farm whose history went back to socialist times. In 1992 a new company was founded and created a massive farm for 29 thousand pigs. Such a farm inevitably generates an odour despite the existence of a sophisticated digester that turns animal faeces into electricity. As a local librarian from Rybíz told me: 'You don't wanna be around when they release gas from the digester. Who knows why they do it every now and then, but it is really terrible. We must close the windows to escape it'. Regardless of these periodic releases from the digester, bad odour tends to surround Vrch. It is not only when one walks around. The odour is present every time one drives on a busy road that goes between the pig farm and the landfill. For local inhabitants, olfactory experience is part of space ordering when a smellscape consists of specific odours related indexically to specific places (Jackson 2011). Interestingly, the quality of odour being dynamic and 'neither a thing of earth nor of sky' (Keil 2021, 9) may create ambiguity. In Rybíz region, one never knows whether the odour comes from the farm or the landfill. In fact, this olfactory ambiguity serves as a tool to impede a potential critique from the people living not far away or just passing by. Anyway, the pig farm served

as another magnetic attractor for the landfill to join the mutual quest of keeping the continuity of the strange place.

In 2019 my suspicion about the magnetic properties of strangeness received an unexpected proof. Pavel, the regional expert on construction projects mentioned that there is a plan to build a new shooting range for the police, army, and athletes right next to the landfill. This time, however, there was a problem with the endangered species of plants such as Siberian iris (*Iris sibirica*) and lesser-butterfly orchid (*Platanthera bifolia*) that grew in the clearings close to the landfill. Pavel took part in the preparation of the report concerning the environmental impact and was uneasy about it. He wanted to protect the plants but was well aware of facing a powerful group of people from the county council, Czech Olympic Council, the mayor, representatives of the regional police and army, as well as heavy hitters from the construction and waste business. At Spring 2020, when I saw the bulldozers clearing the forest next to the landfill, I knew that the permission was granted. The cunning entrepreneurs killed three birds with one stone. They had to dispose massive amounts of soil and debris from the construction of a new expressway that would cut the woods between the landfill and the pig farm and, at the same time, use the unwanted soil and debris for the construction of earthworks that would isolate the firing range from its surrounding. The company, which runs the Vrch landfill, would be allowed to contribute to the construction of the earthworks with their 'soil' from the landfill to empty it and increase its capacity for deposition. It was extremely difficult to stop this lucrative project where the multiple companies, which build the firing range, expressway, and run the landfill, would benefit from it. At the same time, Rybíz would receive payments for the deposition of 'construction waste' on its land, the athletes, police and army officers would have a place for training. Indeed, the facility is supposed to host prestigious events such as international shooting championships.⁸ It does not get any better for the actors promoting the project and few 'flowers' or noise from shooting cannot change it. Moreover, based on my long-term experience with waste management in other landfills, there is a great potential for both formal and informal altering the size of the earthworks and the material that can be deposited there. The idea of a new shooting range is so great for so many powerful actors that the unwillingness of the official representatives to talk about the history of Vrch is therefore not surprising.

I argue, however, that none of the projects that have been transforming landscape at Vrch since 1990s would have had happened if Vrch had not been already perceived as a strange place. Training and shooting of Austrian-Hungarian dragoons, Czechoslovak tank crews and pilots dropping the bombs on targets, abandoned ruins after the withdrawal of the army, pigs including their smell in the nearby farm, all this created an aura of strangeness which served as a magnetic attractor for the more recent use of the place for landfilling and shooting. Reno (2016, 161) argues that emptiness can function as a prerequisite for waste disposal and creation of wastescape. While there was certainly a sense of emptiness, imagined as an opportunity for value creation through training of persons and generation of profit or prestige, Vrch was never really empty. It was the presence of strangeness deeply ingrained in the images of the place, which enabled its various kinds to stick together and create a continuity of the weird place that has been fading from the official registers of representation despite its occasional appearance in times of rapid change.

Hirsch (1995) suggests that landscape is best understood as an interplay between the 'foreground' and 'background' of social life. For him, landscape offers a view of '... an ordinary, workaday life and an ideal imagined existence vaguely connected to, but still separate from, that of the everyday' (Hirsch 1995, 3). Viewing Vrčh through this perspective reveals forgetting and a lack of reflection on one hand and indeterminacy of imagination on the other. The everyday dimension was hidden from the sight for a long time when the military area and later the landfill were separated from its surrounding by a dense forest allowing to perform activities and manipulate with materials that might make external actors feel uneasy. The foreground remained largely unreflected and silenced despite being quite obvious in terms of the everyday rush, noise, and smell. At the same time, the background dimension of Vrčh lent it an aura of long-term strangeness. It could be a place of unfortunate injuries from combats; environmental disturbance and pollution; strange smell produced by unknown substances; disappearance of anything imaginable; treasures brought to the landfill by garbage lorries; exceptional mushroom rooms for their pickers or animal trophies for the hunters waiting in ambush for the animals breaking the fences to feed themselves on trashed food; or a place where one can generate unexpected profit. The background was more critical for the long-term continuity of the place because it always has conveyed the feel of strangeness that lured its followers to 'inhabit' the place. An explicit link to death or dying, however, has never been articulated. It will be the following case from Mýtina that will show that waste and death can go hand in hand.

The dead and the waste

We are sitting in a garden and Mr. Smrk describes a story from the end of the Second World War in Bohemia which indicates again that different kinds of strangeness attract each other. The story is so intriguing that I present its excerpt here:

It was May 1945 and Germans tried to escape the punishment. There was a demarcation line here and our town was divided into two halves. You know, the Russians were over there where the current town hall is and the Americans were on the other side, if you know where the pub is these days. And there was a no man's land in the middle, which dissected the town ... [I omit the part describing Russian and American soldiers] ... I do not know how everything started but my uncle Pepa told me that they caught them [that is the Germans] in Nová Paseka in the woods. There were five of them and when they brought them on a cart to this little square in front of the church [showing the location of the square with his hand], they were heavily beaten ... actually mostly unconscious. On the way, people were beating them again and again ... even women were using hoes to hurt the poor guys. They were still alive but really trashed. People put them on the ground and the local broadcast was inviting everybody in town to come and see the humiliated SS men (*esesáky*) and have an opportunity to kick them (*kopnout si do nich*). One of the Germans looked like a 16-year-old soldier but who knows who these people really were. The farmer Vlasák lead the group and the local policeman Hrom participated as well. When the public beating by local townspeople finished, the group loaded the cart with the Germans and took them to the SS woods (*esesácký lesík*), which was situated exactly on the demarcation line. I do not know how they finished them, but I heard that Hrom, because he had a rifle, shot all of them and people, who were there, buried them in the SS woods, which is right next to the current landfill as I showed you. Interestingly, candles kept appearing there since that time.

I first heard a small fragment of the story about ‘the Germans buried beneath the landfill’ in 2016 from a historian who had heard some rumours and encouraged me to explore the topic. It took a long time to find people who would know anything about the event and, most importantly, were willing to talk about it. Although the event had to be experienced by many inhabitants of the town, it happened more than 70 years ago. Most witnesses already died and those who witnessed or heard about it from their older relatives were not particularly proud of this part of their history. The reluctance to talk about this sensitive topic seems to be part of a larger project of silencing the memories related to the Germans who lived in Czechoslovakia before 1945 (see Spalová 2016). There is little interest to bring the uncanny and ‘pollute’ presence via inappropriate ‘temporal placement’ (cf. Stewart 2017, 135). In addition, remembering can be painful (Palmié and Stewart 2016, 220), especially when it relates to close persons and moral values associated with an intentional termination of life. There is no entry about the event in town’s chronicle. Indeed, most people that I met and talked to in the town had no idea what *esesácký lesík* or *u esmanů* (another version of the place name) meant. It was a local enthusiast and doctor of natural sciences who helped me at the beginning because he had created an educational trail in the woods and examined historical sources. Although he himself was really surprised to hear the story,⁹ he directed me to a local registrar who might know something. The registrar heard a short story from one of her older relatives who already died but directed me to Mr. Smrk. The registrar presented the story as a narration that had to be understood with caution but confirmed that she saw the candles in *esesácký lesík* when she was young. Interestingly, she remembered a detail from the narration of her relative that caught my attention. She heard that during the lynch, somebody cut the hair braid from the head of a German girl. This little detail suggests that the labelling of the place of burial as related to the SS members and the entire framing of the story as a revenge to the most evil members of the Nazi regime is a reflection of the need to legitimize the murder rather than the reflection of victims’ identity.¹⁰ Since place names can be used to convey moral messages (Basso 1996, 24), the reference to SS members can be understood as a way to emphasize the moral justification of the revenge. As Mr. Smrk’s wife suggested: ‘They were not SS members but regular soldiers’. The notes about a 16-year-old soldier and a young girl fits the picture of omnipresent uncertainty, anger, and eagerness for revenge at the end of the war regardless of guild. As Spalová (2016) demonstrated, similar events were not uncommon and later resulted in conflicting interpretations and fights over ‘rewriting of history’. Recent popular accounts such as Josef Urban’s novel ‘Habermann’s Mill’, Kateřina Tučková’s novel ‘The Expulsion of Gerta Schnirch’, or a movie by Bohdan Sláma ‘Shadow Country’ show the complexities of the Expulsion of Germans at the end of the war and the wave of hate that hit various people regardless of their real collaboration with the Nazi regime.

Despite the lack of detailed information about the victims, few more people from the town confirmed that the story had a real basis and candles were appearing repeatedly over the decades in the place of the assumed burial of the ‘Germans’. One may speculate who was bringing the candles, whether the girl was a Czech lover of a German soldier, or whether these ‘Germans’ were even soldiers or mere civilians who just wanted to escape from the Russian sphere of influence and cross the demarcation line to become prisoners of war on the American side. The more important point for my argument, however, is the spatial dimension of the story. The victims were brought from a tiny village in the middle

of the woods where killing and burying would be much easier. Instead of that, they were exposed to public lynch and later killed and buried in the demarcation line. In fact, the demarcation line was not a line but a liminal zone between the two military powers. Such zones can be formally treated to abide by the rule of 'no touch' but, at the same time, could be places of various activities as Kim (2016) shows at the Korean Demilitarized Zone. In Mýtina, local inhabitants apparently could enter the zone and took advantage of its special status. Murdering people in that zone meant that neither Russian nor American laws would operate there, or at least they could be contested.

The demarcation zone, nonetheless, was not the only source of strangeness in a categorical sense. The region became the centre of coal mining in mid-nineteenth century and some surface mines were already abandoned or close to their shut down. The mine in the vicinity of *esesácký lesík* was closed in 1935. It means that this recently abandoned industrial landscape consisted of various slag heaps, depressions, and ruins. It was in the process of transformation from an industrial place into the abandoned place inviting various forms of life, among which my interlocutors emphasized bushes and coniferous trees, to colonize it (cf. Tsing 2015). Rubble and remnants of mining did not turn the place into a worthless part of the landscape. In contrast, they served as attractors of future possibilities. As Gordillo argues: 'Rubble exerts positive pressure on human practice and is constitutive of the spatiality of living places' (2014, 11). I understand his call to turn our attention from a fetishization of ruins to multi-layered potentiality of rubble as a way to recognize and acknowledge that rubble invites new relations and engagements, which are not reflected in the official accounts. It fits well the metaphor of magnetism that challenges the official history via pulling together unexpected components. Abandonment of the mines in Mýtina resulted in such new engagements including the killing and burring the 'Germans' there. Strangeness of the place served as a magnet to attract the vendetta on the defeated enemies. It might be useful to note a striking similarity in the treatment of the enemies by the Nazis. During the war, Gestapo set a regional execution ground in a former quarry in one of the villages in the region.

The history received a new spin when the abandoned mine with the burial of murdered 'Germans' became the dump site for the disposal of old industrial cables from the nearby engineering works. During socialism (1948–1989) the place served for large scale dumping of industrial waste which was dangerous because of frequent spontaneous fires. Indeed, the place claimed another victim when a local fireman died after being overcome by toxic fumes during one of these fires on the dump. The place was also used for the informal disposal of household waste, tree stumps, and debris associated with the construction of a new highway. In 1993, it started functioning as an official sanitary landfill for the disposal of municipal solid waste. While there are several former mines in the area, it was the one in *esesácký lesík* that was selected for waste disposal. The landfill operated till 2019 and it is currently being recultivated. During my regular visits since 2016, I have noticed what I call 'associative waste' in the vicinity of the landfill. This kind of waste sticks to places because of its association with the official disposal. People who are not willing to pay for the disposal of their garbage simply dispose it of near the fences that delimit the landfills.¹¹ While it is common in many landfills, the case of the Mýtina is special (Figure 2). It was not just the landfill itself that attracted the associative waste but also the irregular terrain full of depressions and heaps of former industrial rubbish covered with trees and bushes that created opportunities for



Figure 2. Associative waste near the Mýtina landfill. Photo courtesy of O.B.

waste dumping. A degree of informal dumping has been exceptionally high, which has been not only my impression based on movement in the landscape, but it appeared in the discussions with my interlocutors who have been aware and often terrified by the amount of junk in the woods. Again, a mutual magnetism between different kinds of strangeness has produced a place which is difficult to classify and which continues being strange despite various changes during the last century.

The history of Mýtina supports the view that humans and things are part of a general project of disposal despite their differences (Hetherington 2004).¹² While acknowledging cultural diversity, Hetherington finds similarities in a two-stage process of getting rid of both humans and things including the spatial management of their absence (2004, 168–170). Although his use of Hertz's (1907 [1960]) theory of funeral rites downplays the problematic assumption about secondary mortuary practices taken as a general model of funerary rites, it demonstrates that there are striking similarities in the disposal of things and humans. This finding resonates with the studies pointing at a shared capacity of things and humans to be disposed (Bauman 2004), sometimes disappearing and being forgotten in the dumps as 'society's discards' (Millar 2018, 62). Also, it refers to the similarities between recycling and ideas about death and regeneration of life (Graeber 2012). The most important point, nonetheless, is Hetherington's view of disposal as a mediation between the presence and absence of the dead bodies and waste, which has social consequences. The history of Mýtina might be seen as a reversed version of Reno's (2016, 217–219) call for resocialization and repersonalization of landfills that might be reached via burying the dead there. Reno searches for the '... ways to get closer to our sites of final disposal, to resist and reimagine their separation from our lives' (2016, 223) regardless of how absurd this suggestion might sound to anybody outside the sphere of high-brow academic theorizing. As Reno says, landfills were originally designed to foreclose social relations between the waste producers and waste sites. The case of Mýtina demonstrates that the effort of foreclosing social relations via

separation involves a wider range of phenomena than just mass waste. It was the strangeness that co-produced the place where mining disrupted the landscape, the victims of war were killed and buried, and various kinds of rubble and garbage were deposited over decades. The burial prior the emergence of the landfill served as a vehicle of foreclosure and separation rather than resocialization in Reno's sense. It is not only because of the reversed order when death and burial preceded the landfill but, more importantly, because of the nature of the death. From ethnography we know that strange death such as drowning, murder, suicide, or being stroke by lightning often requires different treatment at burial (Ucko 1969). Such an abnormal death contributes to the strangeness of places that tend to be kept aside. Regardless whether we once reach the model of burials in the landfills or not, there might be still burials that will require different treatment and placement to reflect human capacity for differentiation and avoidance of entities that simply do not fit.

The spatial separation of the strange is not just an act of classification but it has an economic dimension. Keeping strangeness out of sight enables to generate value as a joined venture of formal and informal practices, plasticity as Millar (2018, 15) might call it. Waste management is a silent engine of national economies. Even in small countries such as Czech Republic, it is a flourishing industry that generates billions of EUR every year and attracts international investors. Being powerful and out of sight enables also various kinds of informality such as manipulation with statistics, control sampling, capacity of deposition, shifts in classification, acceptance of problematic waste, and informal scavenging of the waste workers and waste pickers. It is of no interest to anybody in the business to resocialize and engage with the public. Indeed, when the new waste laws have been recently negotiated in the parliament, it initially started in the secret regime before the public pressure forced the politicians to change it. In addition, it is not only waste management, which prefers to be hidden. The other kinds of strangeness described in the two stories in this paper such as military areas, pig farms, mines, and quarries tend to be kept aside and intimately tied with economic interests. A controversial case of Lety u Písku where a concentration camp from the Second World War was turned into a pig farm can serve as an instructive example (Polansky 2014). During the war, the camp served for the separation of Roma and Sinti and exploitation of their labour before their extermination in Auschwitz II-Birkenau. In early 1970s, a large pig farm was built there to continue with the separation of impure beings despite the attempts of Gypsy (Roma) association to create a memorial there. Since the late 1990s multiple actors tried to stop the piggery and establish the memorial but it was not until 2018 when the government finally bought the farm from the prosperous commercial company to enable the creation of the memorial. It was an incredible period of two decades when the economic interests kept defending the strangeness of the place and drawing upon the mutual magnetism of 'impure' people and animals despite intensive discussions and publicity. Strangeness simply stick to places and has power to perpetuate its existence in various forms. It embraces diverse kinds of strangeness that may include material objects (Henig 2019; Gordillo 2014; Pétursdóttir and Olsen 2014), human beings (Baviskar and Gidwani 2019; Dohotaru 2013), or strange animals attracted to disposal sites (Reno 2016, 164). Their mutual entanglements perpetuate long-term categorical distinction of certain places as being accumulations of whatever communities need to make absent. Historical process reinforces these magnetic associations through inertia that takes force from the past and extends it to the future.

It, however, still leaves space for less expected magnetic encounters and associated histories.

Conclusions

When I carefully suggested the idea about the potential association between different kinds of strangeness to Pavel, my interlocutor and expert on the environmental impact of large-scale infrastructural projects, he found it amusing. He was too friendly and nice to burst in an overt laugh, but it was clear that his training in natural sciences and long-term experience in applied research made him suspicious to humanistic interrogations of a self-evident sphere of practical reason. The magnetism I talked about was as invisible and absurd as witchcraft. For him, everything was obvious: waste disposal was determined by economic opportunities and interests of the actors who recognized these opportunities. In this logic, any place can be turned into a landfill, firing-range, or pig farm. Although I respect a power of calculative reason (*sensu* Gudeman 2016) and tried to acknowledge the economic dimension in the management of strangeness in this paper, I insist that Pavel's straightforward explanation is sufficient to neither explain why certain parts of landscape became what they are nor understand what it means that they become what they are and what futures are waiting out there. Landfills, firing-ranges, or pig farms do not tend to grow next to shopping malls, vineyards, or memorial sites. I will turn to a classic wisdom of Sahlins who insists that man (*sic*) '... must live in a material world, circumstances he shares with all organisms, but that he does so according to a meaningful scheme of his own devising ...' (1976, viii). Although his critique of practical reason got rusty and one might critique him for being andro- and anthropocentric, totalizing the concept of culture, or not leaving space for agency, the core of his argument that practical reason is simply not sufficient still holds.

This paper builds upon Douglas' ([1966] 2005) idea that humans tend to avoid the strange and this avoidance relates to the ideas about the nature of the world and its perpetuation. Although one might critique Douglas for being too rigid, anthropocentric, or misunderstanding the nature of contemporary mass waste that does not loose its capacity to bite back, the gist of her argument provides a fruitful background for examining the relations between different kinds of strangeness because their effects can be sensed in landscape. When Hetherington (2004) and Reno (2016) engage with the concept of absence and develop the discussion about its spatial management, it creates space for further thinking. I demonstrated that avoidance of the strange – regardless whether it is former mines with rubble, forests disturbed by military activities, dead bodies of war victims, pig farms with their specific aroma, dumps of industrial waste, or sanitary landfills – unfolded along the spatiotemporal continuum where both presence and absence were mobilized. While the strange is supposed to become absent, it never really disappears. Its indeterminacy may lead to its presence in a different place, time, or regime of representation. I argued that strangeness stuck to places and tended to perpetuate itself through a series of magnetic relations between the entities and activities, which are in a certain sense alike, over time. Strangeness sticks to places like a used chewing gum put into a back pocket of my red socialist shorts when my teacher wanted to punish me for forbidden chewing at an elementary school while saying 'Say

hello to your mom!' He knew well a storm it would cause at home because it was almost impossible to remove the gum. The magnetism between different kinds of strangeness, which operates in space and creates temporal continuity, has more strength than the people, who engage with the strange, are usually aware or willing to acknowledge. The 'invisibility' of this magnetism is reminiscent of magnetism in devices with electric engines. The effects of the magnetic field are obvious when the engines transform electrical energy into the mechanical one and do the work they were designed for. The magnetic agency, however, is generally unrecognized or even unknown by the users of these devices. The same is true for the people who live within the magnetic fields of strangeness without noticing it.

This paper is not intended to uncritically accept structuralist thought but to acknowledge that one of the ways humans apprehend the world is to classify it and organize action accordingly. This includes the acts of placement of entities and activities that make people feel uneasy because of their indeterminate nature. This unsettling openness may cause troubles because there are always possibilities humans would rather not experience or imagine. The case of *Lety u Písku*, however, suggests that even the sticky strangeness can be eroded when an extreme energy and patience is devoted to a transformation of place from being space of multispecies exploitation and forgetting into space of reflection and remembering. It shows that the kind of magnetism described in this paper always leaves space for the unexpected that may subvert the dominant magnetic attractions and change not only historical narratives but also the place itself.

Notes

1. I use pseudonyms for the names of places and persons throughout the paper.
2. Although I follow the core of Douglas' argument, I consider her selection of the words dirt and purity unfortunate. Her argument about the danger that threatens order seems to be more general and going beyond the connotations associated with dirt and cleaning. Hence, I prefer to use the word strangeness which accounts for anything that is difficult to know, understand, classify, approach, or present.
3. I cannot cite the book of this historian because it would directly identify the town and landfill.
4. Several people including lorry drivers and one of my long-term interlocutors, a manager of another landfill, told me that they were shocked with the amount of construction debris and soil deposited in the Vrčh landfill as a 'technical material' for the construction of landfill's structure. There is a strict limit for the proportion of this material at landfills, which was clearly ignored at Vrčh.
5. The old-timer suggested that I could take advantage of the fact that I knew about the forgotten earthworks. He encouraged me to collect the heavy iron posts and gain money for taking them to a scrap yard.
6. This retired historian was in his eighties and was not willing to talk about Vrčh. It was clear that he knew something but was afraid to share it with me. His entries about the life in the Rybíž region in the chronicle were incredibly meticulous and contrasted with a complete disregard with Vrčh. I can only speculate about the reasons for this neglect but he has been clearly avoiding the theme both in his writing and personal interaction.
7. This is a huge topic for which I do not have enough space here to explore. I wrote two texts that describe various informal tactics in waste management, which will be hopefully published soon. They are 'Saving and Wasting: the Paradox of Thrift in a Czech Landfill' in a volume entitled 'Thrift and its Paradoxes: From Domestic to Political Economy', which will

come out in 2022 in Berghahn and 'Waste and the Dark Side: Moral Conundrums in the World of Discard' for a special issue on moral economy in the journal *East European Politics and Societies*.

8. An avalanche of superlatives include the support from a Czech golden Olympic medalist in shooting, interest in training of 'foreign intelligence agencies', and great logistical position near the highway.
9. The doctor moved to the town a decade ago and this story was hidden from him despite his projects to explore local history and raise awareness of the past among the local people. Interestingly, the local chronical did not know about the story either. Their surprise indicates how sensitive this issue was in the town.
10. The anger is not difficult to understand given the fact that just in the small region including Mýtina and three other small towns, 110 people were executed by Gestapo for insurgency during the war. The information comes from the official book published by a regional historian.
11. I emphasize that this kind of waste is distinct from the plastic and paper bags that fly out of the landfills or various food containers that animals transport to landfills' surrounding.
12. Humans and things might even become a single social being facing its death as a whole (see Mašek 2020).

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