

# Haunted profiles; social networking sites and the crisis of death.

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## ABSTRACT

How do perceptions of death shift or alter in relation to newly emerging technologies?

In this paper I look at examples of mourning rituals, namely online memorials using social networking sites, through the looking-glass of media theories such as 'Reflections on photography' in Roland Barthes' *La chambre Claire* and the spectral archive in Jacques Derrida's *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*. I locate these new conceptions in the context of the history of human perceptions of death as described by Philippe Ariès in *Essais sur l'histoire de la mort en Occident*. I look at these histories and conceptualizations, as expressed in changing media, as a way into the question of whether contemporary mourning rituals begin to insinuate a new tradition of mourning, and as a means to elucidate how the online applications these rituals are based upon and their uses enhance/flatten/affect our perceptions of death.

## KEYWORDS

Spectre, social networking sites, archive, death, media

How is our mourning experience influenced by the alteration of human temporal experience by 'machinic' processes?<sup>1</sup> How do contemporary mourning rituals and media such as online memorials reflect the disjunction between computational and lived time? And more, do they serve to enhance our understanding of these time rifts?

As cemeteries moved from city centres to suburbs, burials to crematoriums, gravestones to anonymous forest and sea ash-dispersing ceremonies, and halls of memory from monuments to websites, memory itself migrated. Sándor Márai states in *Tagebücher 1984-1989* that there is no particular moment at which a person dies; rather, it happens in stages (quoted in Kunstmuseum Bern 2006, 41). We cannot still affirm that memory or even death is tied to a 'place', or a 'time'. Our movements, changing lifestyles and the speed of machinic processes affect the way in which we 'remember', mourn, perceive and represent the dead. We are consequently constantly developing a new system of symbols/rituals that reflect the changes in our perception and experience of death. How are these symbols and rituals represented in contemporary Western mourning culture and how do they fit into the tradition of mourning? In this paper I will contextualise these questions by looking at certain examples of the widespread use of online memorial sites such as Legacy.com and social networking sites such as MySpace as sites of mourning and memory.

## The business of mourning

Historically, in the West, mourning has often been an economic affair; whether by the church, private funeral homes, or professional mourners, our emotions of loss have been capitalized upon in one form or another.<sup>2</sup> Therefore it makes sense to look at innovations in the capitalization of mourning for examples of what people accept/allow/need/want in order to mourn.<sup>3</sup> One such example is the online memorial site: Legacy.com. It is one of the largest, and it collaborates with big American newspapers to publish and update online guest books related to obituaries on a daily basis (Legacy.com). The small print that lies in the footer of the Legacy.com site states:

Legacy.com and its newspaper affiliates publish obituaries for 2 of 3 people who die in the U.S. – updated continuously throughout each day – as well as government records for all U.S. deaths. Find an obituary, sign a Guest Book or build an interactive memorial. Get directions to a funeral home, order flowers or donate to charity. Read advice from experts or participate in online discussions. Thanks for visiting Legacy.com – Where life stories live on. We welcome your feedback.

For the mourner, the range of services is astounding. It is a portal linking to all possible mourning desires. The name of the company itself: Legacy.com, corresponds exactly to its URL, strongly indicating that

American mourners have already largely adopted the use of online memorial services and that the connotation of .com in relation to death is not a disturbing one. More interesting is perhaps the company slogan: 'Legacy.com – Where life stories live on'. The emphasis is on life, its continuation, and the seemingly 'eternal' affordances of the online medium. Though the Internet is inextricably linked to physical servers, cables, towers and satellite infrastructures, much of the popular discourse revolves around the idea of the 'ethereal' properties of the Internet.<sup>4</sup> Is the body-less idea of an eternal soul after death suited to the Internet medium? Is the Internet becoming a portal to the afterlife? The comfort appears to lie in the idea that the dead continue living online, or that they are always accessible there (as long as the user has online access). The notion of 'live-ness' is twofold on Legacy.com. Both the guestbook, which is constantly updated with new comments about the deceased, and the interactive memorial, suggest a dialogue with the deceased (though it is of course unidirectional). The possibility of that conversation is directly related to the user's accessibility to the Internet. Theoretically, it is possible at all times. The notion of death and finality does not appear to be included in such a business model.

*Dans la vie de tous les jours, la mort, jadis si bavarde, si souvent représentée, a perdu toute positivité, elle n'est que le contraire ou l'envers de ce qui est réellement vu, connu, parlé.* (Ariès 1975, 196)

(Death, which was in the past so talkative and so often represented in everyday life, has lost all positivity. It is but the contrary or the inverse of what is really seen, known, spoken off.) [author's translation]

## History of the taboo

The individualization of the grave that has led to such innovations as the interactive memorial is a relatively modern concept. Philippe Ariès' research in *Essais sur l'histoire de la mort en Occident*<sup>5</sup> shows that during the better part of the Middle Ages, destiny was understood as a collective end: we all went to paradise at the end of time (Ariès 1975, 34). As such, individual graves were not known. Instead, bodies were lowered and then piled onto countless rotting bodies in collective burials (Ariès 1975, 25). Ariès explains that as the Last Judgment became an individual judgment (rather than a collective one) and that this judgment occurred at the moment of one's death (rather than at the end of time) the seeds of the individualization of 'death' were sown. Not only this, but the individuality of the Last Judgment is linked to the idea of an individual biography which unravels upon death, to be judged in terms of 'good' or 'bad'. The attitude of the soul being weighed is believed to be decisive in the outcome of the judgment, which confers death its 'dramatic' character (Ariès 1975, 37).<sup>6</sup> The dramatic nature of death is therefore in itself a modern concept linked to the individualisation of the Last Judgment. It becomes interesting to examine how the use of technology in everyday life might reflect this taboo of death as well as how these technologies can become a potential platform for judgment.

## The role of social networking sites

Interesting and unforeseen examples have emerged from the so-called 'Web 2.0'. Such as the use of profile pages (in the case of MySpace) or group pages (in the case of Facebook) as online memorials for deceased individuals. Both MySpace and Facebook are now widely used as sites of mourning/memory.

It has, for example, become common that parents or friends of a deceased loved one will make a MySpace memorial profile page or setup a Facebook group in memoriam.<sup>7</sup> Some parents visit the memorial profile/page daily and report that it has helped them cope with the death (St. John 2006). An example of such a page is: Remember KrunkKindle (Figure 1).

Typically the site carries a profile picture of the deceased (usually depicting a typical characteristic of the person whether that is an action, a context or a facial expression). The site usually notes the time of the death (similarly to a gravestone), how the deceased died, and sometimes offers links to petition sites in cases involving disputed manslaughter, for instance. The personal details are filled in according to the preferences of the deceased (such as, Status: Single; Zodiac Sign: Gemini, etc). Photos are usually uploaded to the profile (those are mostly available to public view). The comments section is typically uploaded regularly during the weeks/months after the person has died. Thereafter, posts are made yearly around the time of

death and/or the person's birthday. These sites can receive comments by friends, family and even strangers up to three or four years after the person's death.<sup>8</sup>

In some cases, parents of friends who knew (or figured out) the password of the child's profile will access the existing profile. They may add the date of passage, a small R.I.P note to friends and family, use it as a central information dispatcher for funeral details, and even to access their child's mail between 'online friends'. Ironically, some parents have reported enjoying getting to know their deceased child better through the online network that she/he had built. The following testimony is compelling:

We didn't understand the breadth and scope of the network she had built as an individual, and we got to see that through MySpace. It helped us to understand the impact she's had on other people (St. John 2006).

One's online network appears to signify the 'essence' of one's social being. Theorists such as Roland Barthes have associated 'Media' in these terms (as a sort of displaced interpretation of an event, emotion or even person that has occurred in the past), to the establishment of a desire to unravel its 'essence'. How does a collection of profiles lend itself to this desire? To assess whether social networking tools such as Facebook and MySpace are inscribed within this concept of Media, it is useful to apply Barthes's idea of the 'essence' of 'Photography' to online social networking sites.

### **The Essence**

In *La chambre Claire*, Barthes attempts to discover the 'essence' of Photography by analysing various types of photos that touch (or 'punctuate') him personally. Interestingly enough, it is a photo of his dead mother depicted in her youth that comes the closest to exemplifying (for him) what he believes to be one of the two avenues now available/present in Photography, which he describes as 'the awakening of an ineffable reality' (Barthes 1980, 183).<sup>9</sup> Photography is 'pose', quite literally the light emanation of the referent (Barthes 1980, 126), the proof of a moment. It *is* what it represents, yet to develop a picture is to develop the 'un-developable', an essence which cannot be transformed, but can only repeat itself by the insisting *regard* (gaze) (Barthes 1980, 81). Barthes believes that Photography, by its very nature, lends itself to the disturbing search for the essence, without ever being able to afford its contemplation (since there is no essence in a photo, only pure referent) (Barthes 1980, 104).

An online network of 'friends' created through a social networking tool might be similar in that the collection of profiles suggests 'meaning', but it can only bear meaning through the collector him/herself and therefore cannot be contemplated as such. One can compare the parents daily sifting through their deceased daughter's profile comments and contacts to Barthes' insisting gaze onto his dead mother's photos.

### ***Le Soldat Inconnu***

Interestingly, not only do parents or friends setup memorial sites for their deceased loved ones but also complete strangers. Typically these will be created about a person who was killed or has disappeared, and the case is exceptional (and horrible) enough to have been widely circulated in the American media.<sup>10</sup> For example, at the time of writing this paper there were at least six MySpace memorial pages setup for Taylor Behl (MySpace).<sup>11</sup> Taylor Behl's mysterious disappearance was highly publicised, and apart from the many MySpace profiles dedicated to her there are also websites, and YouTube videos. Perhaps what is most interesting for this study is the text on one of the MySpace profiles dedicated to Taylor Behl called 'Beautiful Stranger'. It describes why the person decided to make a memorial page for her.

The following is an excerpt of the text under 'Info about myself':

I made this myspace in honor of Taylor Behl's memory. I was very touched by her story and I understand how her friends and family feel. I was in a similar situation, and I sympathize. I prefer to stay anonymous because it doesn't really matter who I am because this is dedicated to her. I want everyone to post comments and write stuff to her on here. I'm gonna make this myspace similar to hers.

And I know this site says she's in Chico and she's an aquarius, but she's not. I'm in Chico, and I'm an aquarius, and I just wanted to show, that I live all the way across the country, and i was so touched by her story that i would do this for her! I also graduated high school and went off to college when I was 17. I can relate to her in so many ways it's scary. But like I said, this site is not about me, it's about Taylor Behl! (MySpace Beautiful Stranger)

The testimony speaks of sympathy and more compellingly of identification with Taylor Behl's situation. The stranger's personal information is mixed in with Taylor's, such as the city and zodiac sign. The Beautiful Stranger profile comments section is loaded with spam and sporadic comments from friends (in real life?) and self-proclaimed strangers. There was a considerable amount of effort by 'the stranger' to customize the site and add presumably self-made 'in memoriam' artwork. The stranger alludes to his/her own situation without giving away the crucial information. Spam in the comments section denotes the site has long since been desisted (which is also shown by the Last login: 11-4-2007 mention). The sparse messages from presumably 'real' friends commenting amongst this spam on a page desisted by its owner, brings an eerie feeling to the visitor. In this case not only is Taylor Behl (the subject of the profile) dead but we are left to wonder if the stranger might be as well. Friends and supporters of Taylor continue to comment on this page as if the stranger who built the page was as insignificant as he/she declares in the 'Info about myself' section. A spectre of a spectre?

### **The spectral archive**

Derrida's notion of the spectral archive can also be useful to address the previous question. In 'Archive Fever' a seminal text addressing the function of memory in relation to techniques of reproduction, Derrida explains that the truth is spectral (Derrida 1995, 87). In visiting the Beautiful Stranger profile we are not only being haunted by the spectre of the repressed truth (the mystery surrounding Taylor's death) but also by the spectre of the 'stranger' and the secrecy surrounding him/her/it. Though the site seems desisted by its creator, we are haunted by the stranger's possible return. This possibility created in our minds resists explanation like the spectral truth of delusion described by Derrida (Derrida 1995, 87).<sup>12</sup> To some extent any MySpace profile of a dead person could constitute a spectral archive, as it is 'a trace always referring to another whose eyes can never be met' (Derrida 1995, 84). However, profile pages remain the graphical representation (and to a certain extent the interface) of a database. It would be interesting to explore what possible notions of 'spectrality' could be defined in relation to a digital database and how this might be thought of in terms of profiles such as Beautiful Stranger. This prompts a further question: what do we call the ghost of a ghost?

*"La mesure de la mesure nous manque"* (Derrida 1993, 129)

### **Hallucination folle**

In many cases the deceased person's friends or family do not access the MySpace or Facebook account (particularly if the username/password were not known by anyone else). In these instances, the profile itself looms like a ghost, unchanged, and will remain as such.<sup>13</sup> However 'friends' can still add to the comments section (it can also be hacked by spam bots of course). One such example is Dallas' profile (MySpace Dallas). His profile page acts like a kind of digital tombstone. It shows the profile name, Dallas, with a picture of him on a motorcycle and the following info:

Hello! I'm Dallas!  
Man  
27 years old  
ORANGE, CALIFORNIA  
United States  
Last login: 17-10-2005 (MySpace Dallas)

The last login is usually exactly or very close to the time of death.<sup>14</sup> The age however keeps changing year after year because the MySpace account 'cannot compute' death as it works with the initially entered date of birth of the user and there is no 'time of death' entry possible. Dallas' profile shows a combination of

a ‘frozen moment in time’ (the profile as it was left at the moment of the last login) and Dallas’ ‘spectral aging’. Do ghosts age? What is this ‘27 years old’ but an attestation of his continuity, both in the memory of those who knew him and also in the digital memory of the MySpace servers. Ironically Dallas’ digital spectre is infinitely bound to the physical. If the server containing his data were to be destroyed, not only would the aging process stop, but the profile altogether would disappear and one would find: 404 Error File not Found.<sup>15</sup> If we may indeed refer to such profile pages as spectres, it is interesting to note that their spectral qualities are bound to the physical data storage device and the functionalities of the database in which they are stored.

The only other aspect of the profile that accumulates new data is, as mentioned, the comments section. Below is a screenshot showing comments made to Dallas on his birthday (three years after his death).

Remarkably, the comments on his profile are mostly addressed *to* him, rather than talking *about* him in the fashion of a eulogy. The comments, full of messages addressed to his ‘dead self’ make an eerie combination reminiscent of Barthes’ description of Photography as a form of hallucination, confusing the real and the living.<sup>16</sup> Could these profiles be a form of digital *hallucination folle* that rather confuse the living and the archive? The real in this case is substituted by an archive of instances (comments, photos), which can no longer necessarily even be linked to the ‘real’. It is common for example that people create several profiles acting under several aliases deliberately never referring to their identity ‘in real life’ or that actual bots (computer programs) create profiles. The fictional identities or those created by an automated script constitute fragments of an archive that cannot be reconciled under the notion of ‘the real’. Not only is the archive confused with the living but also with elements that are programmed by humans and put into effect by code. Thus the functionalities of automation partially determine our hallucination.

### **The Confessional**

It is interesting to note that this *hallucination folle* manifests itself differently in publicly accessible platforms such as mydeadspace.com and Legacy.com.<sup>17</sup> As we saw in the example of Dallas, comments are addressed *to* the dead person (rather than talking *about* them which is much more common on publicly accessible platforms). In some cases the comments addressing the dead person resemble a confession. The MySpace profile page becomes reminiscent of the catholic confession booth. A few such examples are depicted in Figure 4.

The profile is usually public (viewable by ‘all’), yet the tone of the confession is secretive, uncertain and perhaps even guilt ridden. Though the perceived anonymity in which the person is typing his/her comment might facilitate the ‘public’ confession, the disjunction between the secret tone of the confession and the public nature of platform is unsettling. It seemingly desecrates the sacred by broadcasting what could be an *entretien* with God. As opposed to reality TV actors exposing their deepest darkest secrets to the viewers and bloggers recounting the minute intimate details of their lives in their posts, these confessors do not even appear to address ‘the masses’. They address an entity from beyond the realm of the living, endowed with a divine quality—the power of absolution and omnipresence.

### **The Public Square**

On sites like mydeathspace, a site that post news articles and hosts MySpace member obituaries, the discussion forums related to the articles are reminiscent of the public square. The ‘inhabitants’ judge, accuse, defend and denounce the deceased (and persons which might be involved in the cause of death).

The populist nature of the semantics also facilitates persecution. For example, a person accused of manslaughter could be filed under ‘murderer’.

Forums like those on mydeathspace become a place of judgement and persecution. It would be interesting to survey to what degree common consensus develops throughout the post archives, and how the delayed and dislocated nature of the responses and its users affects this dynamic. Notably, Legacy.com spends at least 30 percent of its budget to filter out inappropriate comments in the guest books (Urbina 2006). The

comments that are screened allude to or directly accuse the deceased of infidelity, neglect, molestation, etc. The following are two examples of such comments:

I sincerely hope the Lord has more mercy on him than he had on me during my years reporting to him at the Welfare Department.

She never took the time to meet me, but I understand she was a wonderful grandmother to her other grandchildren.  
(Urbina 2006)

Though these comments never appear to the public (they are held in a moderation queue till they are approved), it seems to indicate a desire for 'public' persecution in the perceived anonymity of the online forum.

## Conclusion

The widespread and various uses of web based social networking services as sites of mourning and memory show that the Internet is an accepted and adopted space of mourning. It therefore becomes a crucial point of interest in the study of contemporary mourning practices and the cultural acceptance of death (or lack thereof) in relation to media practices. Such uses as have been discussed in this essay suggest the Internet as medium to the afterlife; its roaming souls are channelled through profiles and guestbooks. Commercially available 'interactive memorials' suggest a possibility of a dialogue with the deceased similar to that of the comment sections in MySpace and Facebook memorial profiles. Have we reached a crisis of death? Both Barthes (1980) and Ariès (1975) refer to *la crise de la mort* (the crisis of death) when referring to the contemporary situation regarding society's perception of death, thus drawing an anthropological link between Death and the 'new image'. What kind of perspective codes do social networking tools such as Facebook or MySpace define? Online networks such as those built through MySpace lend themselves to the search of an 'essence' that becomes an insisting gaze upon and related to the represented profile identity, though, as in the case of Barthes' mother's photos, the essence can never be uncovered. Has the search however now shifted from the person essence to that of its ghost? Memorial profiles such as that of Dallas and Remember KrunkKindle present themselves as spectral archives but how can this notion be expanded to include cases like Beautiful Stranger and its layers of self-referring spectres? The eerie atmosphere of memorial sites is not only due to haunted spectres and the modern taboo of death but also the confrontation with a sort of *hallucination folle*: in this case the confusion lies between the archive and the living. Interestingly, the technical and physical capabilities of the archive (database) shape our *hallucination*. How it is programmed and how long the data physically exists determines the aging spectre of Dallas, for example. Our digital ghosts seem more bound to physicality than our 'pre-digital' ghosts ever were. The living eventually migrate to a mode of existence bound to database archives to which the word 'dead' is not even associated.<sup>18</sup> Mydeathspace.com, afterlife for the deceased's MySpace profile, symbolises the 'shift to the afterlife' by a metaphorical database data transfer, as well as providing a space of persecution and consensus similar to that of the public square. In addition, the confessional nature of some of the comments on these forums is blurring the boundaries of the public and the divine domains. Is the afterlife transgressing the physicality and space of the living online and/or does media and its uses slowly efface notions of finality altogether?

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### **Endnotes**

1. I am referring to the definition of machinic processes in Mark B.N. Hansen's discussion about Stephanie Strickland's analysis of Web-based hypermedia in *New Philosophy for New Media*.
2. Ariès gives many examples occurring (at different moments) during the Middle Ages: the Church charging for the bodies disposed in collective burial grounds within the Church grounds, later for the ceremonies and for the binding of the testament (to ensure a place in heaven).
3. It is not the place here to enter into the discussion of what is imposed onto society and what is actually developed as a direct relation to its needs (rather than cultivated desires).
4. For examples of such discourse (and critique of it), see John Perry Barlow's 'A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace', Fred Turner's 'From Counterculture to Cyberculture', Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron's 'The Californian Ideology'.
5. The scope is limited to Western graveyards belonging to the Christian faith.
6. This occurs primarily in the XIV<sup>th</sup> and XV<sup>th</sup> century.
7. The deceased usually had a MySpace or Facebook profile but not always such as in the case of young infants that would have been too young to have an account. Though one can easily imagine a new Facebook 'pregnancy' function that would automatically create a profile for the eventual newborn. Also, if the parents and friends of the deceased commonly use Facebook for example, though the deceased might not have, they will set up a Facebook group for this person.
8. MySpace was launched in August 2003. The amount of years the sites are visited and commented on will undoubtedly increase as years go by.
9. The other is the 'civilized codification of perfect illusions', and refers to a domestication and vulgarization of the 'photo', or Photography as an object for consumption, a vein which is not useful to elaborate upon here (Barthes 1980: 180).
10. My research into the use of MySpace memorial profiles has been narrowed to the U.S. as most of its users are American.

11. Profile pages devoted to Taylor Behl:

<http://profile.myspace.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=user.viewProfile&friendID=59351944>

<http://profile.myspace.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=user.viewProfile&friendID=34137127>

<http://profile.myspace.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=user.viewProfile&friendID=33325432>

<http://profile.myspace.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=user.viewProfile&friendID=32689410>

<http://profile.myspace.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=user.viewProfile&friendID=32478215>

<http://profile.myspace.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=user.viewProfile&friendID=29758104>

12 Derrida is elaborating upon Freud's notion of *truth of delusion*.

13 This is all the more true since MySpace accounts are never deleted, even when an account is specifically deleted, or said to be deleted.

14 Dallas died on October 19<sup>th</sup> 2005, two days after the last login.

15 Of course if the HTML file (of Dallas' profile) was copied and saved locally, that instance could be reproduced. However the functionality (such as aging and adding comments) linked to the databases is lost and it becomes another 'frozen moment in time'.

16 I specifically feel that the comparison with a hallucination is appropriate since, thus far, it has been considered 'crazy' or of the paranormal to speak *to* the dead publicly.

17 MySpace profiles can only be commented on by 'friends' (which must be accepted by the profile author) and Facebook groups can be made private. However anyone can comment on mydeathspace.com discussions and Legacy.com guest books.

18 It was not possible in the scope of the essay to address issues such as Terms of Agreements relating to social networking sites which tellingly have no explicit policy to deal with death but have strict archiving policies (that is, 'all your data belong to us').