MyDeathSpace and Cinema: Reconfiguring Life Through Memorials
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In this presentation I will compare MyDeathSpace – a website archive of deceased MySpace users –to representations of death in early cinema between 1895 and 1906. [1] In the process, I will explore the trope of death within media, and will conclude by proposing that the new media of MySpace does not signify the "death of cinema," but, in many ways, mirrors the new media of film circa 1900.

In case you have been in a cave for the past few years, MySpace [2] is a social networking website which premiered in 2003. MySpace is the 5th most popular website in the world, above eBay, Amazon, CNN, and Wikipedia. [3] MySpace has over 100 million registered users; most fall between the ages of 16 and 28. In July 2005, Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation – holder of The New York Post, TV Guide, DirecTV, and FOX – bought MySpace for $580 million. [4] Over the course of less than 5 years, MySpace has become a pop culture staple and major market player.

MySpace is a social networking platform which allows users to create profiles to represent themselves and interact with other users. I created this profile [http://www.myspace.com/ameliaguimarin] to use as an example. A few of the salient features of MySpace profiles are personal information indicators, blog, list of friends, and comments. The personal information indicators [pics, videos, headline, interests, blurbs, schools, companies] provide basic details about the individual, while the blog serves as a journal. The list of friends, or "Friend Space," displays all of the individual's friends with pictures and links to their profiles. [5] The comments feature of MySpace allows users to post comments on their friends' profiles. MySpace permits a user hack through which html code can be added when editing the "About me:" blurb to modify the profile layout. MySpace users need not be familiar with html as code can be copied and pasted from others' profiles or websites offering prefabricated layouts. MySpace offers music, film and comedy accounts which allow those users to host songs and videos on their profile. General users can incorporate this audio and video content into their profiles through designated functions. Users can also incorporate other audio and video into their profile by using html to embed content hosted elsewhere. As a result of these modifications, profiles are mashed up,

with images, animations, audio, and video playing over each other, not loading properly, and often looking layered, gaudy, and illegible.

MyDeathSpace[6] is a website, launched in January 2006, which archives deceased MySpace users in conjunction with newspaper obituaries and stories submitted by friends and family; posts include links to users' MySpace profiles. MyDeathSpace is not a social networking website like MySpace, it simply archives deceased MySpace users through articles about those individuals. The site receives around 20,000 unique visitors per day and currently has 5986 registered users who participate in the forum and chat features. Since its inception, MyDeathSpace has chronicled 1948 deaths. MyDeathSpace has received attention from both traditional news outlets and blogs, sometimes praised for its cautionary and memorial tendencies, other times accused of being inherently and/or stylistically crass and disrespectful to the deceased and their families and friends.

The main component of MyDeathSpace is the "Latest Articles" page which serves as the archive of deceased MySpace users. The deaths are listed in order of their submission which is not always the chronological order of the date of death. Each article features a short description of the individual and their death along with a picture taken from and a link to their MySpace profile. In this example [http://www.mydeathspace.com/article/2007/03/15/Amanda_Sparaco_(17)_was_killed_when_her_friend_s_Su burban_was_struck_by_a_tractor_trailer], a newspaper article is used to document the death of 17 year old Amanda Sparaco. Amanda died in a car accident. From information taken from the article and her MySpace profile, I believe the driver, Zachary Lewis, who was critically injured in the accident, was her boyfriend. This type of reasoned deduction is common among MyDeathSpace users who will often read an article, view the individual's MySpace profile, then post a comment to the MyDeathSpace forum in regards to the individual and their death. These comments range from respectfully mournful to obscene, but typically involve some attempt to be witty and impart moral judgment. The first comment left on the thread for Sid Skibinski-Gonzalez, who was "found dead the morning after chugging an entire bottle of Bacardi 151," simply stated, "RIP dumbass."[7]

Most of the individuals listed on MyDeathSpace have public MySpace profiles so anyone may view them. Some of these profiles are taken over by family or friends of the deceased, sometimes the profiles are

changed to appear as memorials while others are left as they were, still others are not taken over but continue on autonomously. By examining comments left by users on these profiles, you can observe a difference in comments posted before and after the individual's death. The comments left before and after the March 8th death of Tiffany Nealon [http://www.myspace.com/artygirl78] are distinctly different. In this way, the profile clearly presents the living person and the dead person, while the dying person is obscured. However, it is inferred that the dying person exists somewhere between the two points of alive and dead, thus the moment of death is represented by the absence of the dying person.

Before I compare these representations of death in MySpace and MyDeathSpace to those in early cinema, I will outline a few characteristics of film between 1895 and 1906. During these years, films were primarily what Tom Gunning calls "the cinema of attractions."[8] Many of the first films ever made featured everyday events, for example Auguste and Louis Lumiere's 1895 *Workers Leaving the Lumiere Factory*. Conversely, other films recorded special events, for example Thomas Edison's *Young Griffo v. Battling Charles Barnett* of the same year. These documentary, yet non-narrative films were termed actualities, and whether the events depicted were common or rare, the films were spectacular for their ability to portray those events through moving images. Gunning considers this cinema "less as a way of telling stories than as a way of presenting a series of views to an audience, fascinating because of their illusory power . . . and exoticism."[9]

This notion of "the spectacle" of early film can be applied to "the spectacle" of MySpace and MyDeathSpace. The "newness" of the technology through which information is displayed creates a spectacle of everything presented. The ability to effortlessly, instantly and repeatedly view and engage in dialogue with such representations furthers their status as spectacle. Events that themselves could be considered spectacle, such as the Griffo-Barnett fight, are further spectacularized when represented through technology, which along with fighting, animals and death is itself a common instance, or subject, of spectacle, any of which, when combined with another, produce a even more spectacular spectacle. For example, Edison's *Cock Fight* of 1894 depicts two fighting roosters, as well as two on-looking, wagering men; it is a spectacle of a spectacle. Likewise, one of the grandest spectacles, combining technology, animals and death, Edison's *Electrocuting an Elephant* of 1903, had an original live audience of 1500.

In an attempt to tarnish the reputation of alternating current (AC) to promote his own financial interest in direct current (DC), Edison staged public events in which he used direct current to kill stray dogs and cats at The Black Maria, his West Orange, New Jersey studio. These electrocutions took place throughout 1887 and were so popular and persuasive in presenting electricity as an efficient means of death, that in 1888 New York adopted into law the use of the electric chair for capital punishment. The animal featured in *Electrocuting an Elephant* was a Coney Island circus elephant named Topsy who was put to death for killing three people.[10] Whatever tendency film has to anthropomorphize its non-human subjects – in *Cock Fight* the positioning of the men mirrors the positioning of the roosters, which themselves are displayed on a stage – was in this case exasperated by the circumstance of the elephant's life and death: she was a circus elephant, given a familiar name, trained by humans to perform for and work with and as human, and finally, treated as would be a human criminal.

In *Electrocuting an Elephant* the audience is presented, in sequence, with a live elephant, a dying elephant, and a dead elephant. Akira Mizuta Lippit argues that in recording this moment of death on film, the animal lives on,

> The dying animal in Edison's film is survived by the film; Topsy lives on and survives as the film, which transfers the anima of the animal, its life, into a phantom archive, preserving the moment that leaves the elephant in the technology of animation. *Electrocuting an Elephant* signals, early in the history of film, an uncanny transference of life from the animal to film, illuminating in the exchange a spectacular metaphysic of technology.[11]

MyDeathSpace is a "phantom archive." Through the catalog of deceased individuals' MySpace profiles and through the profiles themselves, those individuals are preserved "in the technology of animation." Though the dying body is not visible in MySpace and MyDeathSpace as it is in *Electrocuting an Elephant*, the sequential progression from life to death is still presented, thus capturing the moment of death through new media. MySpace users live as their profiles – they represent themselves online through images, sounds, and text – when they die, they "live on and survive" as their profiles. In life, through "a spectacular metaphysic of technology,"

the body is transferred from person to profile, death only makes this transference more concrete as the body can no longer exist outside of the profile, but will exist forever in the media of MySpace.

MySpace and MyDeathSpace have more in common with early cinema than just the popularity of representations of death and the creation of "phantom archives." MySpace and MyDeathSpace are also much like actuality films in their portrayal of real or simulated events. And, returning to Gunning, MySpace can be viewed as operating similarly to "the cinema of attractions." Gunning describes "the cinema of attractions" as exhibitionist as opposed to voyeuristic, actors look at the camera and the films "directly solicit spectator attention, inciting visual curiosity, and supplying pleasure through an exciting spectacle – a unique event, whether fictional or documentary, that is of interest in itself."[12] The function of MySpace is to appear for others. Examining both the individual pieces of a profile, as well as its make up as a whole, these exhibitionist tendencies are evident, and the cacophonous blends of images, sounds, and text on MySpace profiles are certainly spectacular. Indeed it seems as though Gunning must be speaking of MySpace not early cinema when he describes a vaudeville film screening as "surrounded by a mass of unrelated acts in a non-narrative and even nearly illogical succession of performances . . . stimulating a unhealthy nervousness."[13] Though actualities and "the cinema of attractions" existed before narrative film, they were not replaced by it. They survive in chase scenes, avant-garde film, reality television, and MySpace.[14]

To say that any media is absolutely "dead" is historically ill-informed. As Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin argue, "Although transparent technologies try to improve on media by erasing them, they are still compelled to define themselves by the standards of the media they are trying to erase."[15] All "new media" operates within the social and cultural framework of "old media," the old resurfaces and gets played out in the new, and in this way the old never dies, it never goes away. Technologies and formats fall out of the favor of the general public; while diehard devotees cling to the dying platform – trying to keep it alive and arguing for its continued use – and nostalgic fans exploit its camp factor, the rest of the world moves on, taking with them what they learned from, what they liked about and what they connected with in the technology and format. This dynamic plays out just the same in early film. I quote Jonathan Auerbach:

It is important to realize that early cinema was a profoundly intermedial mode that emerged as a new sort of visual representation by drawing heavily and conservatively on a wide range of established nineteenth-century cultural forms such as still photography, vaudeville routines, staged amusements and spectacles, popular magazine illustrations, and comic strips. We therefore must resist the temptation to regard the introduction of cinema strictly as a teleological innovation carrying its own self-evident and self-contained meanings for audiences then as well as now.[16]

By studying new media while looking over our shoulder at the old and realizing that no media ever really dies, we stand to gain more insight into these emerging forms.[17] Just as the lives of the deceased live on through MySpace and MyDeathSpace, so does the life of cinema.

[1] To view examples of the media discussed in this presentation, please visit http://www.conceptlab.com/amelia/2007march24-guimarin-usc.html.
[2] http://www.myspace.com
[3] Alexa Internet, "Top Sites," http://www.alexa.com/site/ds/top_sites?ts_mode=global&lang=none (accessed March 23, 2007).
[4] Patricia Sellers, "MySpace Cowboys," The Business Life, *FORTUNE Magazine*, September 4, 2006, as published on CNNMoney.com, http://money.cnn.com/magazines/fortune/fortune_archive/2006/09/04/8384727/index.htm (accessed March 23, 2007).
[5] Danah Boyd explores this conspicuous collecting of friends in her article, "Friends, Friendsters, and MySpace Top 8: Writing Community Into Being on Social Network Sites."
[6] http://www.mydeathspace.com
[7] MyDeathSpace, Latest Articles, "Sid Skibinski-Gonzales (19) was found dead the morning after chugging an entire bottle of Bacardi 151," http://www.mydeathspace.com/article/2007/03/14/Sid_Skibinski_Gonzales_(19)_was_found_dead_the_morning_after_chugging_an_entire_bottle_of_Bacardi_151 (accessed March 23, 2007).
[8] Tom Gunning, "The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde," in *Early Cinema: Space, Frame, Narrative*, ed. Thomas Elsaesser (London: British Film Institute, 1990). 56-62. p. 57.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Akira Mizuta Lippit, "The Death of an Animal," *Film Quarterly* 56:1(Autumn, 2002):9-22.
[11] Ibid. p. 13.
[12] Tom Gunning, "The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde," in *Early Cinema: Space, Frame, Narrative*, ed. Thomas Elsaesser (London: British Film Institute, 1990). 56-62. p. 58.
[13] Ibid. p.60.
[14] Ibid. p. 60-61.
[15] Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2000). p. 54.
[16] Jonathan Auerbach, "McKinley at Home: How Early American Cinema Made News," *American Quarterly* 51:4 (1999): 797-832. p. 798.
[17] Garnet Hertz is currently researching this concept of new media change in his dissertation, "Theories of Media Change: Understanding New Media."