

**MyDeathSpace and the Revival/Immortalization of Early Cinematic Architecture**  
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**“On the Whole, I’d Rather Be in Philadelphia:” The Death Panel**  
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Hi! Thanks to audience for coming. Thanks to Greg for chairing the panel. In this presentation, I will explore changing and persistent structural representations of death in real life (IRL) and online.

Since this presentation, like most of the others in this conference, focuses on a specific piece of media, I will begin by introducing you to that media, MyDeathSpace. And, since MyDeathSpace is an archive of deceased MySpace users, I will also introduce you to MySpace. You probably all have some knowledge of MySpace.

MySpace is a social networking website which launched in 2003. It is the 5th most popular website in the world, above eBay, Amazon, CNN, and Wikipedia.<sup>i</sup> 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.<sup>ii</sup> Over the course of only 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.<sup>iii</sup> 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<sup>iv</sup> 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 16,276 registered users who participate in the forum and chat features – this figure is up from 5986 last year. Since its inception, MyDeathSpace has chronicled nearly 3000 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\\_Suburban\\_was\\_struck\\_by\\_a\\_tractor\\_trailer](http://www.mydeathspace.com/article/2007/03/15/Amanda_Sparaco_(17)_was_killed_when_her_friend_s_Suburban_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, many 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.”<sup>v</sup>

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 8<sup>th</sup> 2007 death of Tiffany Nealon [<http://www.myspace.com/artygir178>] are distinctly different.

Now, here in Philadelphia, a grand architectural city, and the birthplace of W.C. Fields, as referenced in the title of this, “The Death Panel,” I will argue that MyDeathSpace represents a revival of early cinematic architecture which serves to immortalize both that architecture and the individuals memorialized on the Internet. By early cinematic architecture, I mean the forms and subjects common to film at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, such as spectacle and death.

In preparation to present in Philadelphia, I gathered some information about the architecture of the city. In the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, Palladian architecture, a style derived from the 16<sup>th</sup> Century Italian architect, Andrea Palladio, was quite popular. “One of the most ambitious” examples of this imitative style is the Christ Church, upon the grounds of which Benjamin Franklin was laid to rest. Next came the beginning of Greek Revival in the US with Benjamin Latrobe's Bank of Pennsylvania in 1801. Latrobe also designed the capitol building in Washington, D.C. in the same style. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, a monument was erected in the style of the Pantheon, the Benjamin Franklin National Memorial, which houses an enormous sculpture in honor of Philadelphia's most famous founding father.<sup>vi</sup>

Before I comment further on this use of revival styles in memorial architecture, I would like to compare representations of death in MySpace and MyDeathSpace to those of film between 1895 and 1906. During these years, films were primarily what Tom Gunning calls “the cinema of attractions.”<sup>vii</sup> 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 Griffio v. Battling Charles Barnett* of the same year. These 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.”<sup>viii</sup>

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 Griffio-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 *Electrocuting an Elephant* of 1903.

The animal featured in *Electrocuting an Elephant* was a Coney Island circus elephant named Topsy who was put to death for killing three people. The spectacle had an original live audience of 1500 people and was staged by Edison to promote his financial interest in the new technology of direct current (DC) by tarnishing the reputation of his competition, alternating current (AC).<sup>ix</sup>

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.<sup>x</sup>

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 live on 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."<sup>xi</sup> 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.”<sup>xii</sup> 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.<sup>xiii</sup>

To relate the architecture of MySpace and MyDeathSpace to physical architecture, I draw on the work of art, architecture, and history scholars. It has been argued by Peggy McDowell and Richard E. Meyer that revival styles of architecture possess inherent tendencies to memorialize the deceased. Indeed, McDowell and Meyer could be referring to the architecture of film or MySpace, not physical architecture when they say, “revival styles . . . capture and perpetuate time through the use of motifs inspired by the past to immortalize contemporary individuals and to preserve their memory for future generations.” Memorials are sometimes started long before death. In the case of MySpace and MyDeathSpace, users are aware that they may live on online and so represent themselves accordingly. Much of the spectacular art of the ancient societies upon which revival architecture relied was memorial art, making these styles “particularly adaptable and applicable to the commemorative arts.” Other reasons for the rise in revival architecture in 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century memorial art include social changes that brought about the middle class sense of the individual through the material – the idea that people could be represented through things, as they are through MySpace.<sup>xiv</sup> The style of early film is well-suited to revival through new media like MyDeathSpace because, as in *Electrocuting and Elephant*, much of it was based on memorial and spectacle.

Memorial, spectacle, architecture, and death are often linked together. A significant number of works exist on the subject, such as James Stevens Curl’s *Death and Architecture*<sup>xv</sup> and Michel Ragon’s *The Space of Death* which includes chapters entitled, “Death as Urban Spectacle” and “The Funeral as Spectacle.” Ragon introduces his book by describing the human body as “an architecture . . . like that of . . . any other building,” only inhabited by a soul that survives after its death. To reconcile what happens

to this soul upon the decomposition of the body, Rogan provides chapters on “The Tomb-House,” “Villages and Cities of the Dead,” “The Spaces of the ‘Crossing,’” and “The Cemetery as Museum,” all of which could have been titles for this presentation. “The Cemetery as Museum” evokes my previous use of Lippit’s “phantom archive,” “The Spaces of the ‘Crossing’” can be seen in the disparity between pre and post mortem MySpace profile comments, and MySpace and MyDeathSpace are both “Tomb-Homes” and “Villages and Cities of the Dead.”<sup>xvi</sup> I do not argue that those who visit MyDeathSpace believe that the spirits of the deceased are preserved in a webpage, nor do other mourners believe spirits are preserved in gravestones, however these structures symbolically represent the architecture of the soul after the death of the body.

As headings in the “Recombinant Architecture” chapter of his 1996 book, *City of Bits*, William J. Mitchell sets up binaries such as “Bookstores/Bitstores,” “Theaters/Entertainment Infrastructure,” and “Banking Chambers/ATMs.” Had it been around at the time, Mitchell could have included, “Cemeteries/MyDeathSpace.” Though a bit futuristic, Mitchell still presents a relevant point,

Not so long ago, when the world seemed simpler, buildings corresponded one-to-one with institutions and rendered those institutions visible. Architecture played an indispensable representational role...But now, increasingly, software beats hardware...And, the digital, electronic, virtual side is increasingly taking over from the physical. In many contexts, storage of bits is displacing storage of physical artifacts...so that the need for built space is reduced. Electronic linkage is substituting for physical accessibility and for convenient connection by the internal circulation systems of buildings, so that access imperatives no longer play such powerful roles in clustering and organizing architectural spaces.<sup>xvii</sup>

Memorial architecture ‘renders the institution of death visible’ – ‘it represents death.’ But now, in addition to marble, we have MyDeathSpace. The need for physical space to mourn the deceased may be diminishing as these practices go online, however the need for physical space to store the deceased will never minimize. As this memorial space moves from the ordered, decorous spaces of the physical world

– static, gated cemeteries and silent, exclusive temples – into the virtual world, though with its own hegemonic conventions, access may become more open and fluid.

This notion of accessibility provides another explanation for the use of revival architecture in memorial art. As McDowell and Meyer argue, the popularization of old styles “combined education with pleasure.” The combination of styles of architecture “with creative eclecticism...were not...acceptable to pedants...[but] extraordinarily influential on the popular level...[the combinations] encouraged a common language of styles and forms, and this vocabulary of design types and styles, which defies regionalism, made a considerable and lasting impact upon funerary design.”<sup>xviii</sup> Just as ancient architecture lives on through the language of revival architecture, early film lives on through the language of “the cinema of attractions.” Though perhaps considered inferior to other forms, this language is easily written, easily read and easily translatable – it is popular and it serves its purpose. Just as the marble, columns and steps of the Benjamin Franklin National Memorial evoke the great civilizations of ancient Greece and Rome for the thousands of tourists that visit it to remember America’s great leader, so too does the jumbled mess of MySpace provide a familiar space to pay tribute to lost users. And, as both Franklin and Greco-Roman architecture are revived and immortalized in their memorial, so too are early cinema and the deceased of MySpace revived and immortalized in theirs.

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<sup>i</sup> Alexa Internet, “Top Sites,” [http://www.alexa.com/site/ds/top\\_sites?ts\\_mode=global&lang=none](http://www.alexa.com/site/ds/top_sites?ts_mode=global&lang=none) (accessed March 23, 2007).

<sup>ii</sup> 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](http://money.cnn.com/magazines/fortune/fortune_archive/2006/09/04/8384727/index.htm) (accessed March 23, 2007).

<sup>iii</sup> 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.”

<sup>iv</sup> <http://www.mydeathspace.com>

<sup>v</sup> 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](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).

<sup>vi</sup> Wikipedia

<sup>vii</sup> 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.

<sup>viii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>ix</sup> Akira Mizuta Lippit, “The Death of an Animal,” *Film Quarterly* 56:1(Autumn, 2002):9-22.

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<sup>x</sup> Ibid. p. 13.

<sup>xi</sup> 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.

<sup>xii</sup> Ibid. p.60.

<sup>xiii</sup> Ibid. p. 60-61.

<sup>xiv</sup> Peggy McDowell and Richard E. Meyer, *The Revival Styles in American Memorial Art* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1994).

<sup>xv</sup> James Stevens Curl, *Death and Architecture* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 1980).

<sup>xvi</sup> Michel Rogan, *The Space of Death* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1983).

<sup>xvii</sup> William J. Mitchell, *City of Bits* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1996).

<sup>xviii</sup> McDowell and Meyer