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The Ghost in the Machine: Image-ing Beyond Death

“Even if one gives me death to the extent that it means killing me, that death will still have been mine and as long as it is irreducibly mine I will not have received it from anyone else. Thus dying can never be taken, borrowed, transferred, delivered, promised, or transmitted. And just as it can't be given to me, so it can't be taken away from me” (44).

--Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*

In today's virtually enhanced world of “tweets,” “instant messages,” and “viral” videos, it almost seems redundant to comment on the ways that the digital revolution continues to alter our culture in simple matters of day to day life. In addition to enumerating the aforementioned technological trends that new media has introduced to society, I might also (again—without surprising anyone) comment on how the internet has changed a host of other aspects of day to day life...online banking, virtual counseling, e-diets, cyber class on the virtual college campus—indeed, I would be hard-pressed to name a discipline or field that has not been in some way re-imagined in terms of the digital revolution. I think we are all familiar with these transformations and I will not be discussing them further in this essay.

What I will interrogate here, however, is not the manifold uses of new media in our lives, but how social networking is reconfiguring *death*. Since approximately the end of the second world war, there has been a notable cultural move that distances Americans from death and dying. In an attempt to purify our culture from the horror of death, we have certainly moved away from more traditional forms of mourning<sup>1</sup>, yet some argue that the use of various social networking

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<sup>1</sup> In pre-World War Two funeral ritual, many families would allow the body of a loved one to stay in their home in order for friends and families to connect with the deceased and reflect upon their lives. Today, this practice would

applications, allows the dead a presence in our online world that indicates a return to older forms of mourning. Could this inclusion of the dead in our cyber world be an attempt to regain our connection to the mourning process—or, does the inclusion of the dead in our online world simply re-inscribe the distance between living and dead? Because this project will be comprised of several theoretical considerations, this essay will be relying on a series of suppositions from image theory in order to suggest that in the world of new media, the oft-quoted theorem from Martin Luther is quickly changing. While Luther posits “every one must fight his own battle with death by himself, alone,” it is arguable that the images of the dying and deceased on social networking sites present a new way of “fighting death”—but are we still alone?

Since I will be using image theory throughout this paper to interrogate the websites mentioned above, I think it wise to first demonstrate that a website or weblog can be accurately described as an image. Here, the phenomenological approach that Lambert Wiesing offers in his text *Artificial Presence: Philosophical Studies in Image Theory* will assist me to establish websites as weblogs as “images” and not some other thing. An early point made in Wiesing’s philosophical reading of images is that “the idea of an artificial presence produced by images is like a thread running through phenomenological image theory and can be regarded as its main idea” (19)—hence the title of the book—but also an appropriate stopping point for my own suppositions. Artificial presence is not only central to imaging, but central to *being* online. Being active online allows one to simultaneously step in two worlds—or more—depending on how many windows are opened on the desktop. We are –when online—an artificial presence.

Whether chatting, instant messaging, Skype-ing, shopping, or posting, our presence is artificial—

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seem uncouth. Likewise, the elderly typically lived in their own dwelling or with a family member up until their death. Today, of course, we find the elderly herded into the “nursing home,” out of sight, and out of mind, until they meet their demise.

a marker of who we are in an immaterial space—not really so different than director Andy Wachowski’s series of *Matrix* films. Besides being literally able to fashion animated avatars to put on profiles, our online self essentially is an avatar, existing (possibly) in a non-physical universe of packets and protocols, binary codes, domain names, and servers. Being online is the ultimate simulacra (note how commonplace the term avatar has become!) The idea of artificial presence will be discussed further in my conversation about how websites allow users to transcend death. While this description of the image as “artificial presence” designates social networking pages (both blogs and sites) as images, Wiesing also makes several other points that align web pages and blogs as the same stuff of images. Here, he writes that “the production of an image” is “disembodied,” “isolating,” and “dissociating” (20). These three signifiers can and are used in tandem with our thoughts about being online—a process that indeed allows users to undergo a type of *disembodiment*—much like the production of other images.

Besides these connections that I have made between Wiesing’s work on image and that of what happens online, Wiesing actually *specifically* connects cyberspace to image theory, spending a final portion of the book connecting images to windows, and these image/windows and virtual realities—both of which applications (obviously) have clear implications in the world of cyber space. In his chapter titled “Windows, TVs, and Windows again,” Wiesing begins a fairly short section by referencing Leon Batista’s description of images as *De Pictura* (80), stating “we see an image object in an imaginary space” (80), which is essentially the same construct or model of what happens to computer users when they see an image object in the imaginary space of cyberspace. Though Wiesing suggests that this “image as window” metaphor falls short in describing how images work and what they do (he suggests telescope as perhaps a better metaphor) —he eventually brings up the metaphor’s rather obvious connection to the

world of computers: Microsoft Windows. “It resembles the older *Apple Mac OS* like an identical twin. Yet in one point the knockoff is extraordinarily inventive: in its choice of name, Windows. The name refers to the idea that the user of the system sees what he or she wants to see on the screen always within an available area that is called, precisely a window” (85). Certainly, the resonance of this name choice is novel and well thought out, for according to Wiesing, Microsoft’s windows are “that of a pictorial medium for producing and presenting things that are in attendance. A screen is a display for the presentation of things—yet not for the presentation of real things but rather for that of virtual things”(85). Like paintings, photographs, film and television, the computer screen also offers the presentation of virtual things—hence their designation as image. In Wiesing’s book, “images present things as exclusively visible, released from the laws of physics.” This is certainly the case with the work of the cyber-world. Here, the images exist in a sort limbo—freed from the laws of physics the essence of a human may linger on a profile page or website—perhaps somehow, evading the laws of a physical death. It is important to note here that near the end of his book, Wiesing launches into a lengthy discussion of whether “new media” has really produced “images of a new kind” (89). There are, by Wiesing’s count, two separate modes of understanding the images of new media. One view is to count that new media represents a “discontinuity,” that “digital media marks the beginning of an age of images of a new kind” (90). On the other side, however, theoretical that new media is simply a “continuation,” a “virtual reality” that “is not really anything new at all,” but simply an “optimization of immersion” (89). Here, I must side with the theory of discontinuity—that these virtual images do offer something new. Wiesing accounts for the new images by providing a schema of four different types of image objects, the final of which is “the interactive image object of simulation” (100). These are the images to be discussed here. “What is decisive about

them,” writes Wiesing, “is that they are conditioned by image medium used” (100) which is in this case, cyberspace. So, finally, we can say, the profiles are indeed images, but a new kind of image.

So by following Wiesing’s model, I have established that web sites and weblogs are images. Next, I will demonstrate the enduring theoretical and material relationship of images to death. Here, I will not only establish how images stand in for the deceased, but how much of what has been written about older forms of images such as painting, photography is paralleled by images of “new media.” This will help to determine whether social networking is reintroducing the dead back into our culture, or in fact, again, re-inscribing the distance between living and dead as described earlier. In fact, images and death have a long and well-established connection to one another that has been noted and reflected upon in current theories of image. German art historian and image theorist Hans Belting writes frequently on the image, and his article titled: “Image, Medium, Body: A New Approach to Iconology,” is a good place to begin describing how images and death intertwine. Here, Belting provides a brief history of the material presence of death in human life, explaining how “archaic societies” reintegrated the dead back “into the community of living” (307) by fashioning avatars from corpses; even reanimating them with shells in place of eyes. While modern media enthusiasts may shudder at the thought of a reanimated corpse sitting side by side with the living, today’s cyber generation often times opts to keep one’s online profile posted long after the person has passed away, and in fact, even creates online memorials to honor the dead. Considering the sociological implications of such memorials, Jonathan Fast recounts the centrality of web presence in the mourning process after the Columbine tragedy. Fast cites several types of memorials that are constructed after these tragic events, but notes the fluidity of the web model: “Within weeks of the shooting, each victim

had his or her own Web site, the sites being interlinked as a ‘web-ring’ so that visitors could more easily from one to the next, as though walking from room to room in a gallery,” (487) writes Fast. Though Fast describes this model like a gallery, I would suggest it is closer to a virtual cemetery, connecting the victims to one another in a virtual space (which might not be the case in the material world). Arguably, the web presence of the victims here is an attempt to reintegrate the dead back into the community of living. Post-Columbine, Post-911 and Post-Virginia Tech, the massive use of the web to create “artificial presences” for the deceased is tacit in almost all forms of social networking sites, including one of the web’s most populous nations: Facebook.

While Facebook is mostly comprised of the living, even *Forbes*—not necessarily known to mince words, or shall we say, ponder the more philosophical aspects of life—reported what it calls the social network’s “existential crisis,” or more crudely, its “death problem.” According to a report from early 2011, “about a million Facebook users passed away last year by one estimate, a number that could soar if Facebook’s growth continues unabated. The problem: When a Facebook member dies, friends flock to his or her profile to share photos and stories—until the site kicks the account into memorial status and unplugs the profile.” While this report suggests that the profile is “unplugged” once a user dies, it can often be a matter of months or years before this happens, (if ever), as the impetus for changing is left to the friends and family of the deceased, and as per explained in Facebook’s own verbiage:

It is our policy to memorialize all deceased users’ accounts on the site.

Memorializing the account sets privacy so that only confirmed friends can see the profile (timeline) or locate it in Search. The profile (timeline) will also no longer

appear in the Suggestions section of the Home page. Friends and family can leave posts in remembrance. In order to protect the privacy of the deceased user, we cannot provide login information for the account to anyone. However, once an account has been memorialized, it is completely secure and cannot be accessed or altered by anyone.

This “memorializing” feature<sup>2</sup> though, is contingent on the fact that some one actually wants to “unplug” the profile. In many cases, the living Facebook user will opt out of this function, preserving the dead user’s profile for the foreseeable future. So while Belting writes that the primitives’ inclusion of the corpse/being was in response to the fact that the community felt “threatened by the gap caused by the death of one of its members” (307), it seems we still suffer from the sense of peril. As archaic as the process of reanimation sounds, are our attempts to reincorporate our dead into our lives that different from the primitive societies’? While the Facebook profile page is in cyberspace, it is a reincarnation of the attempt to reconcile this gap between the living and the dead. By writing to and conversing with the dead through an image of the person on Facebook and other pages, are we trying to reintegrate them into our community of the living?

As Belting notes the image’s work in reconnecting the dead to the living, W.J.T. Mitchell, renowned image theorist, in makes a similar claim about the image—though in this case, it happens to be the photograph that Mitchell is discussing specifically. And though

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<sup>2</sup> Only a verified family member can report a user’s death, and the proper form may be completed “Under penalty of perjury.” One must attach an obituary or form of evidence to prove the person is indeed deceased, but it is unclear from Facebook’s Help Center how these forms are processed, how long it takes for them to be processed, or if in fact, all deceased members of Facebook will eventually be deleted or memorialized.

Mitchell is not (here at least) suggesting that the photograph is a substitute for the dead, he notes that images take on a life of their own; or at least treated as such. “Art historians may ‘know’ that the pictures they study are only material objects that have been marked with colors and shapes, but they frequently talk and act as if pictures had will, consciousness, agency, and desire” writes Mitchell (72-3). “Everyone knows that a photograph of their mother is not alive,” he continues, “but they will still be reluctant to deface or to destroy it” (73). Indeed, we know that online profiles are only representations of people (either living or dead), but are these profiles always treated as such? It might be safe to argue that all images that social networking presents are dead—for certainly they are not living beings. Mitchell writes “no modern, rational, secular person thinks that pictures are to be treated like persons, but we always seem to be willing to make exceptions for special cases” (73). Rational people also realize that a page on a social networking site is not an actual person, only a representation of that person, yet we are reluctant to destroy or deface that page. While the person has gone, their friends and family continue to converse with their avatar via Facebook as demonstrated in the following string of comments made on two separate pages of the deceased’s Facebook pages. Note the ongoing conversation with the deceased, as if, perhaps, they are able and in fact are, not only checking the Facebook page—but they now *are* the Facebook page:

**“I am a firm believer that we do not leave, we simply change form. Energy is always there. Yours, along with your bright light, lives on with the many friends with whom you shared your life.”**

**“Goodbye husband.”**

**“When they ask you what you need, don't ask to go back, don't ask to see us again. This place sucks, and we'll be with you soon enough.”**

**“heard a new song today with a great bass line and thought of you and how you'd hum your new inventions to me.”**

**“How we miss thee...♥”**

**“ Listening to Tenacious D in your honor today!”**

And in this second case, notice that friends and family are celebrating the deceased birthday and other marker's of life:

**“Happy bday bro! Thinking about you on this day and many other days. We are going to do it up big in your honor in two weeks when we throw a tailgate in your honor as our Spartans take on the Badgers in EL. Sparty on for Shorty! Tipping a few for you tonight.”**

**“Call me already---**

**“Oh baby- you still checking facebook these days? Prolly something much cooler there- high tech heaven stuff.... Please know your anniversary gift is the same thing I got u last year...just my love :)”**

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“No modern, rational, secular person thinks that pictures [or Facebook profiles] are to be treated like persons, but we always seem to be willing to make exceptions for special cases” (73). But why—and why is the image a special case?

I would be ill advised to continue this project about online presence and death without referencing Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida*, which carries the subtitle *Reflections on Photography*. Here, like the Mitchell essay referenced above, Barthes focalizes his discussion of the image round photography, however, this to book's call, like an umbilical cord the death of his mother. Though this discussion is on the photographic image—his reflections also enhance

our thoughts about online images—specifically the profile/images of the dead. One of Barthes’ syllogisms in this reflection is that the photo is a “presence of an absence.” While this idea is certainly indicative of photography, it can aptly be transposed to the medium of online expression. For all of us, everywhere, living or dead, the online profile—whether posted on Facebook, Twitter, Linked In, etc—is likewise, the presence of an absence; and arguably this is one of the appeals of the medium. The screen creates representations of friends and acquaintances from across the globe. In spite of the fact that these avatars represent a person, these cyber representations, like photographic images always fall short as Barthes laments: “That’s almost the way she was!” The *almost*: love’s dreadful regime, but also the dream’s disappointing status—which is why I hate dreams...and confronted with the photograph, as in the dream, it is the same effort, the same Sisyphean labor: to reascend, straining toward the essence, to climb back down without having seen it, and to begin all over again” (66). This is, then, the labor or re-encountering the dead in the photograph, as well as re-encountering the dead image online. When engaging with the cyber image, we strain towards that person, only grasping at residue of the (dead) person, sifting through the fragments of their net “persona”— their likes, dislikes, affiliations, occupations, political stances, musical tastes, and of course, photos and video images—in order to imagine the person. This signifies our grasping toward a cyber presence of an absence.

Because of photography’s particular position in the world of vision, Barthes’ stakes that “photography’s noeme will therefore be: ‘That-has-been,’ or again: the Intractable” (77). Our virtual world is also “that-has-been,” because it cannot be described as that which is—the internet world is pure simulacrum and representation. “For the photograph’s immobility is somehow the result of a perverse confusion between two concepts: the Real and the Live: by

attesting that the object has been real, the photograph surreptitiously induces belief that it is alive, because of that delusion which makes us attribute to Reality and absolute superior, somehow external value; but by shifting this reality to the past ('this has been') the photograph suggests that it is already dead" (78-9). Here, we might also posit that photography's "immobility" and the subsequent confusion between the "Real" and the "Live" is paralleled by that which occurs online. On Facebook, for example, user A can set up her profile to automatically "like" user B's posts. Each time user B posts a video clip, status update, etc, user A is noted as "liking" this. The concept seems simple enough—except if user A is no longer alive. This type of continuing dialog between a "live" user and "dead" user likewise constitutes Barthes' assertion about confusing the Live and Real, for don't we momentarily forget that the person is gone?

I would like to conclude by shifting my attention now to the philosophical questions that the inclusion of the dead in our many social networks represents. Belting argues that "though our image consumption today has increased by an unprecedented degree, our experience with images of the dead has lost its former importance altogether" (307). At first gloss, this idea may seem counterintuitive to everything I have described above. After describing how the web allows us to continue our relationships with the dead giving them status and presence within our everyday world, Belting's claim seems difficult to negotiate. Journalists and other laypeople claim that these profiles cannot be designated as a simple surface. Lisa Miller in *Newsweek* states: "One might imagine such virtual mourning is shallow, but it's not. Here is a real gathering place, where friends can grieve together-and where the deceased continues, in some sense, to exist." In order to support her claims, Miller cites Brian McLaren, a leader in the emerging church movement and author of *A New Kind of Christianity*, who claims the cyber grieving creates

“something like a tombstone, but people can visit that tombstone anytime, anyplace, as long as they have Internet access,” says, and that, “seems to me to be a great gain.” But is it really?

These comments lead me back to my original question: does the online images of the dead bring us closer to them or lend more distance? By now, most of us log on several times a day, checking emails, making posts on social networking sites, updating our virtual CV—so it might be easy to take the route of Miller and other laypeople who claim the web allows us to connect with the dead more so than before—but is that what these images really do? First, we consider as I posited earlier—that these profiles are indeed images, and what is an image but a two-dimensional pictorial surface—freed from the laws of physics, as Wiesing suggests, but two-dimensional nonetheless. There is a paradox here between surface and depth—the material and the fleeting essence or aura. These images in cyberspace cannot be connected to any sense of materiality. While the avatar of the dead is an online presence—it is still just an avatar—freed from the physical. Cyber representation is still just representation. We can visit the online profile to see the person as they were when they were alive—we are not forced to look at the harsh truth of their corporeal death.

And while as indicated earlier, the images and profiles of the dead are increasing online at exponential speed, a concern about this type of memorializing is the quickness of which memorials are developed (or posted). Fast quotes Linenthal as stating that developing these memorials might mislead people into thinking that they might be able to resolve the horror of a tragic and untimely death (490) in a quick way, and that the creation of the profile automatically releases us from grief because the person’s presence is preserved online. But here is one philosophical problem with this manner of preservation. Put simply, we can turn off our computer. We can “unplug” the profile of the dead. We can choose to ignore these images. And

also, these images are transmitted through several layers of mediation—computer screen to window, to website to the image—which serves as a buffer between viewer and image of the dead, thus shielding the viewer from the “real” of the death. So despite the idea that this form of mourning is a “real mourning place,” as Miller suggests—we must remind ourselves of what images really are—two dimensional representations.

To circle back to the beginning of this essay, let us look to Jacques Derrida, once more, who writes: “In order to put oneself to death, to give oneself death in the sense that every relation to death is an interpretative apprehension and a representative approach to death, death must be taken upon oneself. One has to give it to oneself by taking it upon oneself, for it can only be mine alone, irreplaceably. That is so even if, as we just said, death can neither be taken nor given” (45). Though these profiles attempt to represent the dead, one’s death can neither be taken nor given—neither online, nor elsewhere.

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