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Death, lives, and video streams

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ABSTRACT *This paper discusses two topics. First, it presents an analysis of the canonical funerary corpse prepared by morticians and discusses how this corpse serves two functions. It tames death by reappropriating the corpse for culture, and it serves as a focus for two kinds of memories: the individual/psychological and the essential/Platonic. However, the mortuary corpse has limits; it can only help us to remember and is static, artificial, and short-lived. American culture has supplemented this corpse with new forms of representing death, one of which is the video representations of the dead offered by Forever Enterprises. There one can "live" on forever in a professionally produced filmed biography that is always available as streaming online video. This new option offers a supplement to the corpse because the filmed individual has the possibility for a post-mortem career as a video entity that overcomes the static character, artificiality, and short life of the funerary corpse. At the same time, the new video representations of the dead, which are long lasting, mobile, and "real," and which will almost certainly replace the embalmed corpse, risk reducing the afterlife, and the soul's transcendence, to a version of life on earth.*

KEYWORDS: death; cemetery; Internet; popular culture

> In the long run, metaphysics does itself no good in scorning its own physics (Debray, 2004).

Introduction

The American corpse has a fixed look and a stable identity. It is an icon created by the funeral industry with the complicity of a public that wants its dead to assume a canonical, consoling form. This iconic corpse appears timeless and at peace. It rests without moving in its perfectly fitted casket. It lays face up, hands folded on the lower abdomen. Catholic corpses often have rosary beads twined around their fingers. Protestants sometimes "hold" Bibles. Each corpse is dressed up. Its hair is

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combed meticulously and its face carefully composed. The eyes are sealed shut, the cheeks built out with special lifts, the lips sewn closed, the rictus of death flattened into a noncommittal line. The face is tilted up slightly so the skin of the neck does not wrinkle or gather, and inside the casket there is a slight elevation up and to the right so that the corpse presents itself more clearly, not sunk too far into the plush fabric that lines the casket. The corpse's face is made up using special cosmetics. The casket is open in such a way that the corpse's legs below the waist are not visible.

If the casket is closed, everyone present knows how it would look if it were open. We know that the corpse is clothed in a suit or dress and is embalmed and properly arranged. Were we to open the casket we would see the expected object looking its expected way.

Increasing numbers of Americans are being cremated, but even the corpses that disappear into the furnace, even those whose only "appearance" is at a memorial service, pass under the control of professional morticians. The standard funeral and the mortuary corpse displayed in its casket remain the type that defines all other funeral industry-controlled events (Habenstein & Lamers, 1990; Laderman, 2003).

This iconic corpse preparation is a response to a fact that is a challenge: human beings die, and when they die they leave behind corpses. Aries (1980) argues that death presents a challenge to human culture. Death is a "natural kind" (Quine, 1969). The dead body occurs without reference to cultural encoding. Death happens whether we want it to or not, and we are compelled to provide a meaning for it. It erupts into ordered life and takes whomever it "chooses," whenever it chooses. Because of this transgressive and disruptive quality, death must be tamed. Death is wild (Aries, 1980); this is a major source of the impulse to create civilizations, city walls, and laws. Death must be contained, its lack of meaning remade into significance.

Taming death takes many forms. One form is the honorific regard most cultures give to corpses. The American funerary corpse represents such an investment in social order. If the dead body can be transformed into an icon, that is, into a representation of the once-living person that has predictable symbolic features that do not vary from corpse to corpse, some of death's wildness might be tamed.

However, investment in such a crafted corpse was hard won. This American corpse has a history detailed in Aries (1974), McIlwain (2005), and O'Neill (1999). The original American corpse, of the New England Puritans, was treated with scant respect because Calvinists believed that the soul's fate was already decided at death, rendering the remains irrelevant. No clergy accompanied the body to the graveyard, and graveyards themselves were "designed" to be disorderly, unpleasant places, often located, as a grim warning, in the center of New England towns (Stannard, 1974).

This severity waned and other colonies, especially Southern ones peopled by Anglicans, treated corpses more gently. Even in these colonies, burial was informal, on plots on the family farm. Although funerals themselves could be elaborate, the corpse was not treated with special honor.

Greater interest in the dead, and in the corpse especially, developed from two sources. New England Transcendentalism coupled with developing capitalism created a cult of personality. Individuals had souls, rich inner lives, and they had desires for the plethora of good the newly industrialized nation could produce. As the inner life and desires became more important, so did their outer manifestation, the corpse. Further, the adoption of embalming as a common practice during the Civil War (whose awful cost on blood and lives made individuals even more precious), provided a practical way to transform the corpse into a durable representation of an absent but honored personality (O'Neill, 1999; Stannard, 1974). Because embalming could only be done with special equipment in specially designed sites, the funeral industry joined other American businesses, and corpses were now relocated to the more appealing sites of funeral homes, to be displayed and viewed. They were dressed better, made up, and laid out in specially designed caskets (Halttunen, 1986; O'Neill, 1999). All of these changes, coupled with the rise of a nationwide advertising industry that developed the idea of showing off new fashion in department store windows, thereby establishing both a tradition and a standard for how people should be displayed, led to the iconic corpse that we are discussing in this paper.

However, my interests in this essay are not primarily with history but with the present state of the American corpse, and with its possible futures. As my too-brief excursus into history suggests, and as the work of Aries in particular confirms (1980), no representation of death by culture is inherently stable. Changing conditions as well as the emergence of new means of representation put pressure on fixed representations of death. The American corpse, whatever its origins and however well or poorly it has served its ends, is currently under immense pressure. Therefore, I want first to specify, in a philosophical sense, the general sort of taming of death that the iconic American copse represents. Second, I want to note its limitations, detailing the ways it falls short. Third, I present an analysis of a "supplement," the video corpse, which compensates for the iconic corpse's shortcomings in ways that supplement rather than reject the iconic corpse. This re-imagining of the way that the dead should appear exploits the representational techniques offered by film, sound recording, and the Internet, but does so in a way that keeps these representations under the control of funeral professionals and builds a conceptual and emotional bridge between the "old" funerary corpse, also controlled by the funeral industry, and its new replacements. Finally, I speculate on the possible future for representations of death and ask whether the current temporary alliance between the funerary corpse and virtual representations of the dead seems likely to hold into the future.

The iconic corpse and its limitations

Corpses earn respect because they are so "short-lived" yet represent a terrible challenge and unsolvable metaphysical conundrum. In the Western tradition, when corpses disappear into the ground or vault, they take with them some of our deepest hopes and unanswered questions. The person, now dead, was recently

conscious, like us. It possessed agency, intention, motives, memory, the capacity to respond, and the ability to help or harm. It is perhaps the corpse of someone we loved. Now it seems to have none of its former characteristics. Yet, it still looks like the person who it just was.

Almost immediately (Nuland, 1998), we know that this is not our beloved but a dead body. The question is where did all of this, the agency, the intention, the indefinable something more, go? Does it, like the attunement of Simmias' lyre in Phaedo (Plato, 1999), dissipate when death comes?

The difficulty is that the only site where we can look to for whatever is lost is the body from which whatever it is, was lost. Western religious traditions urge us look to another world, but that world is invisible, and we are left with the dead body. Even people of faith are challenged. They believe, simultaneously, that the dead person is in another world, and presumably happy, but they also see that the same person, or some version of that person, remains among the living. This logical tension is only increased for traditional Christians who believe in the resurrection of the body. This belief suggests that the dead body left behind is critically important, and should probably be treated with great care, and be preserved as well as possible. But that body is the last place where we can hope to find what is lost. It is what it is because whatever made it a person has departed, and is deconstructing itself according to well-known physical principles. This body epitomizes Nature's wildness. It is no longer an expression of anything that belongs to human culture and human expectation. Martin Heidegger (1962) captured this frustration when he wrote that a dead person, the corpse, no longer has possibilities. In a culture in which a person's possibilities count for everything, Heidegger's characterization captures our problem: what looks like a person, is not a person at all, but the mere appearance of one.

What do we do with this thing that looks like who the person just was and can do nothing that persons do? We can reclaim the body for culture, and soften the terrible loss we feel, by making it into what it is not, by "remastering" it as an image of what it cannot be, the once living person. This is what the American funeral industry largely exists to do: to create "memory pictures" of the once living in the form of the mortuary corpse (Laderman, 2003).

Transforming the dead body into an apparently stable and timeless mortuary corpse temporarily tames death by reclaiming the corpse from its otherness, in which it is subject to the laws of decay, and turning it into a site for memories and even future expectations. This transformation requires a major cultural intervention in which the corpse is remade from a natural into a cultural object. It has to be turned from what it is, a dead body, into an image of what it once was, of the person, that the corpse no longer is. This is possible because the dead body does look like the missing person it once was.

American funeral practice makes the corpse cultural by embalming it. This treatment insures that even after the corpse is committed to the earth, Nature cannot soon take over. The body in its steel or wood casket, often inserted into a concrete vault, seems impermeable to natural processes. It is as if, in defiance of the reality that the dead body represents, we insert, into the earth, an indigestible

cultural object that still looks like the person and the cultural agent that it can no longer be. The embalmed corpse goes into the ground as a defiant repudiation of the reality of death.

Americans also do more than embalm the dead body. It is prepared for presentation, almost one might say at the risk of sounding ghoulish, like an object for sale, or a mannequin displaying the latest fashion. The body is preserved but it is also dressed up, made up, arranged in its best outfit, and coiffed, making the dead body look as much like a living one as possible, thereby deceptively returning the dead to a strange form of "life" for a few days.

This mortuary corpse, prepared as a performance piece by the funeral director, is intended to accomplish this ontological sleight of hand by serving as a site for memory of two kinds. First, a corpse that looks "just like Helen" implicitly contests the corpse's natural tendency to look less and less like Helen as time goes on. It offers a culturally controlled "portrait" or stable image of Helen inscribed directly on Helen's recalcitrant body. We can then use this fixed image of Helen as she was in life to do what the unreconstructed corpse forbade us to do. We can "find" Helen in the site from which she has departed. The mortician's arts have paradoxically returned the "living" Helen from her lostness, made her available, not as literal presence, but as image. Morticians can reimagine, or literally re-image, the dead on the surface of bodies. In doing this they allow us, who loved or cared for Helen, to know her again as a living presence, at least in image and memory.

In this sense, the American mortuary corpse honors and ritualizes the modern, secular subject (Foltyn, 1996), the very person whose death so many pundits (Heinz, 1999; Mitford, 1997) have dismissed as an empty commercialized show. On this level, the corpse produced by the funeral industry seems to "work." Evidence for this is the fact that this corpse has persisted past the criticisms leveled at it from Mitford's attack to those of the death awareness movement (Kubler-Ross, 1997; Webb, 1999).

It must be granted that the hegemony of the embalmed corpse has been eroded over time. Attacks by Mitford and others have had their effect. Even more telling has been the increasing appropriation of the dead body and its disposition by sophisticated "consumers" who are impatient with the control exercised by the funeral and hospital industries. Kubler-Ross' (1997) work on the stages of grief, the "good death" movement provoked by the AIDS crisis (Webb, 1999) as well as a plethora of alternative models for being dead and dying, manifestations of a growing "spiritual" trend, have exposed the limits of the iconic funerary corpse, which often seems too artificial, static, and remote to bear the weight of meaning of complex individual lives. New representations of the dead individual seem necessary.

On a second level, the funerary corpse provokes a different mode of memory that addresses the metaphysical question of where the "'ghost in the machine' goes" (Ryle, 2000). The funerary corpse is meant to reveal something more than the historical individual, namely that person as an invisible soul, the essential person of whom the body, while living, was merely an envelope. Just as

post-mortem photography in the nineteenth century was touted as a revelation of the true inner person (an idea that Nathaniel Hawthorne used in *The house of the seven gables*, 1981), so the embalming arts purport to manufacture a corpse that mysteriously unmasks who Helen really was (Laderman, 2003). Whatever it is that "passed" or "departed" still lingers with the corpse and can be gestured toward by the right embalming job, which draws this hidden essence out of the body's recesses and makes it visible, just as the soul is visible in the live Helen.

The virtue but also the inherent metaphysical limitation of the funerary art is that it captures Platonic identity, the hidden core of a person, and the individual whom that soul enlivened, but does so only in the register of memory. It allows those left behind to re-call (call back, re-invoke) the soul that is departed, and to re-member (or re-assemble) it, but nothing about the mortuary arts has power to help that soul toward its new life, or to connect the living with that still-living Essence. The representation of the soul remains a representation. Morticians practice a metaphysics of absence or of provisional, representational presence, not one of presence. There is always already a Derridean slippage between the look of a corpse and the absent essence to which that look purports to refer (Derrida, 1974). This limitation is exacerbated in three directions, each of which epitomizes the inherent limitations of the iconic corpse. First, the funerary corpse is a static representation. As a site for memory, its unmoving confinement in its casket runs the risk of replacing living memories of the dead person's life with disconnected, even weird, memories of this unmoving object in a large container. No matter how skillfully the mortician works on the body, he cannot make it move, respond, or speak. No amount of art can mask the truth that this body does not move.

Second, related to this first limitation is the irreducible artificiality of the professionally prepared corpse. The very skills in embalming, making up and dressing that make the corpse lifelike also, perversely, underscore that fact that the corpse is lifelike rather than alive. It is a simulacrum, superimposed on that of which it is a simulacrum in an attempt to revivify the original. However, this can be done only if we engage in willful self-deception. Again, the attempt to create an edifying memory image is compromised by the fact that we cannot help remembering that what we are recalling is an attempt to represent something that probably cannot, in this way, be represented.

Third, even if the static and artificial corpse helps to fix good memories and to salve, if not to heal, the terrible wound involved in being left with a body that both is and is not the one we have lost, this remade corpse has an extraordinarily brief "life." The effort and expense involved in making an iconic corpse lasts for two to three days, then it disappears forever into the ground or the cremation furnace.

Thus, the iconic corpse helps fix memory and blunt loss by re-presenting the dead, but it also fails by being static, artificial, and short-lived. In trying to keep the dead alive among us, the corpse perversely reminds us of the impossibility of doing so. How do the "virtual dead" address these shortcomings?

The virtual dead

"Virtual immortality" is a new way of representing the dead that is a direct extension of the mortuary arts. It is controlled, for the moment, by morticians and offers a virtual immortality that is in some ways entirely new and in other ways a reference to both film history and much earlier traditions of post-mortem photography. It is also, at least for the time being, a new representation of the dead that keeps the new images structurally connected to the funeral industry and therefore to the iconic corpse.

The Cassity brothers purchased Hollywood Memorial Park in 1998. They came to the business of reviving the renamed Hollywood Forever with definite ideas:

> We believe it's time cemeteries offered more than a name and date etched in stone. That is why Hollywood Forever Cemetery is a Library of Lives (n.d.) with thousands of interactive Life Stories made from film clips, photos, and written and spoken words.
>
> We believe everyone has a life story that deserves to be shared and preserved for future generations.
>
> Our professional LifeStory specialists are dedicated to helping you gather photos and film clips, audio recordings and documents, all captured and stored permanently in our unique Life Story Theaters (Cassity, n.d.).

As one navigates the Forevernetwork.com site, of which the Hollywood Forever site is a part, one finds examples of these LifeStories, which include, as the blurb above indicates, film clips, photographs, family trees, and music as well as audio.

This theme of a "second life," or of virtual immortality, is reinforced at Hollywood Forever because their post-mortem offerings go well beyond the relatively haphazard assemblages of sounds and images that characterize most memorial websites that are not directly connected to funeral homes. As McIlwain says, the Forever Enterprises were "born to bring eternal stardom to the masses," to trump Andy Warhol's promise of 15 minutes with an opportunity for fame that will linger in perpetuity. Each Forever cemetery has its own studio on the grounds of the cemetery. This is a separate enterprise called Forever Studios, where Forever "Biographers" work with friends and family to create LifeStories from "photos, spoken descriptions, text, video clips, old film reels, awards, or other memorabilia" (Cassity, n.d.). All of this information is transferred to digital format, put onto hard disks and DVDs, then posted online.

People who purchase the high-end Platinum package receive the services of Forever Enterprise interviewers and hosts as well as the services of a Forever editor, who help "script" and shoot sessions with the families and friends of the deceased and with the deceased themselves before they die. These people also oversee the taping of a remembrance party for the deceased or for the person who will someday be deceased (Cloud, 2000; Forever Studios, n.d.; Hampel, 1998). Since the Forever cemeteries and funeral homes emphasize this sort of service,

they place less emphasis on expensive caskets and other appurtenances and claim that their services cost no more than the average American funeral.

One can watch sample videos and see that the deceased are not simply memorialized after the fact. The Platinum level LifeStories typically contain videos of the now-deceased talking from beyond death, about their lives, and inviting their loved ones to come over when they are ready to join them in the afterlife. Such biographical "documentaries" have been compared to televised A&E biographies (Cloud, 2000; Forever LifeStories, n.d.). Every LifeStory is "preserved as a permanent part of the Forever Memorial Archive ... maintained by the Forever Endowment Care Fund" (Forever LifeStories, n.d.). These LifeStories "live" on optical drives. Like the embalmed corpse, these dead are "preserved," but as a permanent part of an online public record. The dead have become effectively "immortal," not purely on the Internet but anchored to their earthly "homes" in real cemeteries where real corpses, the familiar mortuary corpses, along with the equally familiar urns filled with ashes, serve as stable referent and necessary ground for this new immortality (Alm, 1999; Barol, 2004; Cloud, 2000).

The most modest as well as the most elaborate of the LifeStories are always playing at the "Forever Theaters," which are both virtual theaters found on the website and also "real" theaters spotted around the grounds of the Forever cemeteries. One writer describes them as looking like ATM machines (Seay, 1998). They are touch screen computer outlets that permit visitors to access videos of any of the dead interred at a Forever cemetery anywhere in the country. One can watch the videos as one visits the gravesite, thereby combining traditional reverence for the buried corpse with access to its new virtual appearance online.

Forever Enterprises have branched out from creating streaming video of the dead to offering immortality to the living as well. The Studios will track a child through her education, recording each year from kindergarten to college (Forever on Campus, n.d.). They create no cost video packages that can be sent overseas to loved ones serving in combat zones (Forever Veteran Stories, n.d.). They have even initiated a program at the University of Missouri to memorialize alumni (Association News, 2004).

This pre-mortem footage can be integrated into a post-mortem LifeStory at the proper time. Self-consciously tracking one's whole life in video, from cradle to grave, will create more coherent material for the post-mortem biography than could possibly be generated from random digital photos and minicam clips. The American penchant for recording every life event in some electronic form gets refocused as an occasion to produce material for the post-mortem biography. One's life can then become an occasion to produce images for one's death.

Here we get a glimpse of a new sense of life, one lived as a kind of performance in order for it to look good on film; a life lived as a series of "photo opportunities" rather than as a series of spontaneous events. We approach Baudrillard's notion of the hyperreal: "real" life will be that which appears on video, and the best life will be that lived repeatedly on the Moebius strip of a streaming video loop

(Baudrillard, 1995). Shades of Nietzsche's Eternal Return (Nietzsche, 1999; Sontag, 1977).

The reappropriation of the dead into biopics and photomontages rescues them from the immobility and transience and artificiality of the funeral scene and from the above-mentioned limitations of the iconic American corpse. No matter how well laid out the corpse might be all that will be left is the internal memory and the nagging sense that the corpse one saw was not really an adequate representation, or stand-in, for the lost person. In the Forever biopics, the images are externalized and objectified, and arranged in sequences that overwrite the memories of those left behind and replace them with representations of the "real" dead person, captured in moving and still images and in sound, living a life that looks more coherent and consequential than that left in individual memories. The dead return and relive a new, narratively shapelier life in their biographical films.

A powerful and subtle redemption goes on in the production of the biopic. Individuals remembered in snapshots and home movies are surrounded with that sense of isolation and melancholy that both Roland Barthes (1982) and Susan Sontag (1977) find in all photographs. Photographs are intensely private and intensely ephemeral. Few artifacts suggest the contingency of an individual life in the way that photographs do. They reek of loss and impermanence. All of the concrete details of fashion, hairstyle, cars, and the ways in which people hold themselves, refer to a specific time and place and to nothing else save the fact that this time and place are irretrievably lost.

One reason why individual photographs are so poignant and heartbreaking is that they occur in no context other than their sweet Otherness. What is missing is a meta-narrative, the sense of the photo as one moment in a stream of other moments that, taken together, make up a consequential narrative. Photographs ordered in a series that tell a story lose much of their poignancy because now we see where this or that isolated scene is leading. We understand that this moment is not self-contained. This sense of consequentiality, of moving forward from one image to the next, is precisely what happens in the Forever biopics.

An individual life, which might really be a series of discontinuous images that taken together do not add up to a compelling story, is assimilated to the strong narrative convention of the biographical film. Such films, unlike life, have a profound internal order; a beginning, middle, and an end in which the earlier stages lead up to the final stage, and in which the final stage fulfills and completes the earlier ones. Making a film of a life presupposes that that life had a story in it that was worth filming, a strong, consequential narrative, just as a nineteenth century oil portrait presupposed that its subject had a presence worth painting.

This relocation of the dead from the grave and urn to the Internet as moving images opens possibilities that have not yet been exploited. The dead will soon be able to be remastered as holograms and might someday engage in "live" conversations with the living, giving responses consistent with their in-life personalities (Seay, 1998). There is even discussion of depositing samples of DNA at the Forever sites so that descendants have the option to produce clones in the future (Seay, 1998).

These possibilities raise questions about the identity of the dead. Who lives on in the biopic? Do the dead become quasi-fictional characters whose identities are produced by the editorial "spin" they or their loved ones put on their biographies? Obituaries and, increasingly, self-created online records like Facebook and YouTube already do this. How much more powerful it is when images and film clips are skillfully edited to produce the effect. If the dead become characters in biopics, do they then develop new virtual identities as characters in such online events? Further, do these new manufactured identities then effectively replace inconsistent, fading, and fragmentary memory? Are the online videos creating a new "species," the changeless, fictionally produced dead with whom we the living can interact, thereby changing both their identities, and ours?

If all of this comes true, won't the dead, to use media theorist Thomas de Zengotita's provocative term, be mediated beings, creations of the media but who assume "lives" of their own on-screen, lives for which new chapters can be written as they interact with the living and "star" in post-mortem SIMS games? Might the edited biopics, and the simulated afterlives, be even better than the real lives, so that, fulfilling a Western Christian hope, the afterlife really will be better than earthly life, but in ways no Christian Father ever dreamed (de Zengotita, 2005)?

Conclusion

The video dead created by Forever Enterprises supplement the iconic corpse while addressing and surmounting some of its inherent limitations. Corpses never move. If they serve to fix and preserve the memory of the one who is lost, they do so by focusing the gaze on an unmoving icon, and they do so for a very short time before they disappear. However, online video representations move. In them we see dead people in life talking, laughing, and playing games, not as they appear in a casket but as they appeared when we knew them. It is even possible that these new online representations will become more like figures in computer games, with the ability to interact with the living and even to develop new interests and new biographies in new virtual worlds online. Furthermore, such representations last far beyond our lifetimes into an incalculable future. The corpse lasts, too, but only hidden underground, away from our gaze, absent in its unseeable presence.

Finally, video representations of the dead seem less artificial because, rather than superimposing the appearance of a life lost onto a corpse where that life once was, video representations have the immediacy of photographs, especially since the people represented are not professional actors working from a script. While the video representations of the dead seem to address and even resolve the limitations of the embalmed corpse, Forever Enterprises have not replaced the traditional corpse but used video representations to supplement it, thereby reaffirming the continued importance of that cultural product.

There are two ways to read this continued loyalty to the corpse. One can make the principled argument that whatever the virtues of video representations they cannot ever replace the solid presence of the dead body, in all its impenetrable otherness and disconcerting likeness to the departed individual. For all its

limitations, the iconic funerary corpse does act as a fixed site for memory, and for representing, while softening, the radical loss that death represents. On this read, we might need the corpse as a supplement to video representations.

A second more skeptical read is that the iconic corpse, unlike the video representations, is something that only funeral industry professionals can produce. The value of the corpse under this interpretation is purely economic. Once technology exists that can represent the dead without the intervention of funeral professions, such representations of death slip from the direct control of funeral professionals and become the property of individuals. By appropriating these technologies of representation and integrating them with the preservation and inhumation of the corpse, Forever Enterprises attempt to retain control of the representation of death. Practically anyone can set up a website and produce representations of the dead. Control of the cultural meanings of death is passing inexorably from the hands of funeral professionals as Everyman gets control, not of the literal corpse but of images of the person that corpse once was, and can deploy these images online.

The "taming" of death, the establishment and maintenance of its meaning as a cultural event, has been democratized and passed into the care of anyone who has the wherewithal to have access to a personal computer. The dead have migrated from the casket and the embalming table to streaming video feeds, and now, as they might have been in the distant past, they are always with us. The limitations of the funerary corpse have been transcended by media that now belong to everyone, and the corpse prepared by the funeral industry is in danger of disappearing altogether, despite Forever Enterprises attempts to link embalmed corpses and video representations of the dead.

This means, of course, that memory of the dead also passes into our control. Even though our reproduction of the lives of the dead might not be as well crafted as the LifeStories shaped by professionals, we can offer plausible representations of their lives. What might be at risk, in the case of video representations crafted by amateurs, is the Platonic reference to an inner soul that the carefully arranged fixity of the corpse, or the narrative shapeliness of the professionally produced LifeStory, might do better at representing. It is this soul, which is also the one that religious believers believe goes to Heaven, that might be threatened or compromised by the democratization of representations of the dead. Might a new understanding of the afterlife and immortality emerge, in which "Heaven" is co-extensive, not with a realm removed in space and time from earth, and populated with purified souls, but with the exact limits of our virtual memories of the dead? In this case, the democratization of the meaning of death might also lead to the domestication of immortality, which would make immortality a version of life here on earth, and would obviate the need for producing and honoring specially prepared representations of the dead, because there is nothing deeper than the everyday to represent.

The iconic corpse is at risk. The future of representations of the dead might lie in video representations, and in the hands of ordinary people rather than of experts. We must wait to see what will be lost, and what gained, in this

transformation of who controls the dead and the ways they are represented to the living.

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