

**Stories in Stone, Stories on Screen:
An Examination of Increased Personalization of Cemetery Memorials¹**

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Abstract

New developments in the realms of computer technology, video screens, and laser technology, are changing the ways Americans commemorate the dearly departed. This paper investigates the potential implications these new memorial technologies hold for our conceptions of death and immortality. Using the approaches of McLuhan and Innis, the authors suggest that new gravestone technologies continue the age-old human project of extending the body through space and time, resulting in an "imaginative re-embodiment" of the deceased. With new memorial technologies, we can imagine a kind of life after death as never before.

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Introduction: Changing Trends in American Memorials

In the 18th and 19th centuries, a stroll through any American cemetery would reveal a traditional tombstone formula: a name, dates and birth of death, an inscription, and choice carved figures and symbols. As the 20th century progressed, however, the forms of American memorials began to change: "With the exception of wars, which invite memorials and searches for graves, the 20th century moved death into hospitals and away from daily life. Public displays of mourning, such as black armbands, which were as common as graveside visits were being replaced by other methods of remembering the deceased" (Rotella, et. al., 2003, pg. 65). Many cemetery monuments of the 1930's and 1940's, for example, are devoid of any ornamentation. According to Jennifer Wolcott (1999), the end of the 20th century found the funeral business facing a trend towards highly personalized memorial services and grave markers:

How Americans honor those who have passed on is becoming increasingly creative and participatory.... Families are carefully choreographing these occasions to reflect the individual's life, tossing aside rituals or symbols with little or not relevance. As a result, participants often leave with feelings of having commemorated a life rather than mourned a death. (¶ 2-3)

Examples of common practices include not only pictures of loved ones placed on or in the coffin, but other objects representing ones life's pursuits: a favorite golf club or other sports-related item, pictures of a boat, a favorite piece of music playing in the background, and whatever else reminds mourners of the life of the deceased.

Today, technological developments, especially in the realms of computer technology, video screens, and laser technology, are changing the ways Americans commemorate the dearly departed. The story of a person's life is not only told in stone (cemetery art), but it can also be told on screen, further facilitating personalization and prompting new approaches to thinking about life after death. To understand this phenomenon, Kelly Smith, of the National Funeral Directors Association, looks to changes that have occurred in American culture, noting that "During the first half of this century, ours was a relatively sedentary society.... People were born, raised, and buried in the same community. In the last 40 or 50 years, we have become a more mobile, faster-paced, highly technical society.... So, funerals have had to take on a different look and meaning" (quoted in Wolcott, 1999, ¶ 10).

Berger and Mohr (1982) link such developments to a social anxiety about the passing of time, which has its roots in the Industrial Revolution. According to Berger and Mohr, prior to the Industrial Revolution, things changed little over the course of a lifetime (or several); in other words, the rate of historical change was slow enough for an individual's awareness of time passing to remain quite distinct from his or her awareness of historical change. With the changes in transportation, communication, and manufacturing brought by the Industrial Revolution, the rate of historical change began to accelerate, causing a deep violence to subjective experience. Time suddenly seemed to be passing too quickly, so that "Today what surrounds the individual life can change more quickly than the brief sequences of the life itself. The timeless has been abolished.... There is no longer any generally acknowledged value longer than that of a life" (Berger & Mohr, 1982, pp. 107-108). Accordingly, argues Tony Walter (1996), the concept of "bereavement" was invented, shifting the focus from the soul of the deceased to the feelings of the survivors. The forms assumed by memorials and grave markers can serve as rich sources of

insight into how Americans think about this problem of time, the passing from life to death, and the desire to somehow be remembered on this earth.

The American attitude toward death and the manner in which a deceased party is remembered has traditionally been viewed through cultural, psychological and religious perspectives (Laderman, 2003). This analysis alternatively combines the framework of medium theory, exemplified in the works of Harold Innis (1951/1995) and Marshall McLuhan (1964/1994) with marketing perspectives to explore some of the most recent developments in personalized memorial technologies--computer engravings, video gravestones, and digital memory devices--and the implications these media hold for our relationship to the deceased, our understanding of life after death, and the ongoing human quest to conquer time and space. Harold Innis (1951/1995), in his sweeping examination of the history of communication and civilization, contended that communication forms were significant indicators of cultural traits. In other words, by looking at the dominant forms through which a culture communicates, we can understand the habits and thought patterns of that culture. Further, argues Innis, a technology will be biased towards either time or space, rendering manageable the obstacles imposed by either. McLuhan (1964/1994) builds on Innis' communicational approach to history to reflect on more recent times, observing that "after more than a century of electric technology, we have extended our central nervous system itself in a global embrace, abolishing both space and time...[and] any extension, whether of skin, hand, or foot, affects the whole psychic and social complex" (pp. 3-4).

It is the extension of the whole body, by means of gravestone technologies, that is our concern here, and the attendant implications this extension holds for the psychic and social complex. Accordingly, we first locate memorial practices in the problem of inevitable death, a

problem which "posits the most terrifying threat to the taken-for-granted realities of everyday life" (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, pg. 101). Then we provide a historical overview of the technological developments shaping these practices and the insight these technologies provide about social attitudes towards death. In the second half of our investigation, we look to contemporary memorial forms and the attitudes of the predominant generation of funeral service consumers in America, the baby boomers. We restrict our investigation to American memorial trends and, more specifically, memorials found in either Christian or non-denominational/secular cemeteries. Personalization in Jewish cemeteries does not exist to the extent found in Catholic and Protestant cemeteries (Schayani, 2003), while Muslim graveyards are completely devoid of monuments (Schayani, 2003). Therefore, the memorial practices of these groups lay outside the scope of the current analysis.

Among the most popular and interesting of new memorial forms are laser engravings and computer etchings on tombstones, LCD video screens, and digital memory devices. These new memorial forms provide new challenges to the funeral business, affecting marketing practices, provision of funeral services, and craftsmen of monumental art. But changes effected by these new memorial forms are not just relegated to such practical, economic realms; potential social and psychic changes are also on the horizon, and we suggest that the most noteworthy of these is the way in which video gravestones in particular enable an "imaginative re-embodiment" of the deceased, freezing the departed in time so that they don't really have to seem departed at all. Essentially, the deceased can always retain the body he or she had when alive (Grigg, 2006). The particular medium forms we are considering (especially video images) are significant here, as "the evidence of the history of images is such that we find responses [to them] are frequently predicated, in high circles and in low, in refined ones and in unrefined, on the perception of dead

images as living and as capable of the extensions and intentionality of beings that breathe" (Freedberg, 1989, pg. 45). With new memorial technologies, we can indeed conceive of a kind of life after death never before imagined.

Historical Overview: Technological Evolution and Life after Death

Throughout the ages, technologies--especially communications technologies--have been a function of humankind's quest to overcome the limitations presented by space and time. The quest for immortality, or the desire to somehow live on after death, is arguably an ultimate goal for achieving this kind of control. According to Berger & Luckmann (1966), the temporal structure of everyday life confronts the individual as a fact. Consequently, our existence in this world is ordered by the experience of time as continuous and finite in everyday reality. It is the knowledge of inevitable death that makes this time finite for an individual, introducing varying degrees of anxiety depending on the extent to which the finitude of time encroaches upon particular endeavors. Therefore, as Berger & Luckmann assert, "Death posits the most terrifying threat to the taken- for-granted realities of everyday life" (pg. 101). Many historical documents relate stories of terror induced over death by the Christian religion; if terror is not evident, there at least exists a profound anxiety, demonstrated in Max Weber's studies of 16th century Puritans (Walter, 1996).

The status of death as both inevitable and terrifying requires that it be integrated within the paramount reality of social existence. Any such legitimizations of death in the symbolic universe "must enable the individual to go on living in society after the death of significant others and to anticipate his own death with, at the very least, terror sufficiently mitigated so as to not paralyze the continued performance of the routines of everyday life" (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, pg. 101). The symbolic universe thus serves to link humankind with its predecessors and

successors in a meaningful totality (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Memorials become part of this symbolic universe, transcending the finitude of individual existence and bestowing meaning upon an individual's death.

Throughout the centuries, memorials have played significant roles in the symbolic universe of cultures. Egyptian culture provides an especially lucid example of the use of memorials in humankind's quest to control and overcome the limits imposed by time. According to Harold Innis (1951/1995), the pyramids, along with the techniques of mummification, were devices for emphasizing the king's power over time. These durable edifices stood as visible manifestations of immortality, thereby strengthening the position of the monarch. Writing and pictorial representation accompanied these devices as important elements of the funerary ritual; hieroglyphics, or "sacred carved letters," were hardly intended as a means for mere mortals to communicate with each other (Fang, 1997). The sarcophagi of ancient Egypt were customized, lavishly inscribed with hieroglyphics. Hieroglyphs bridged this world and the next, serving as the medium by which the deceased could access the spell, charms, passwords, and magical formulas necessary for navigating a path to the underworld (Robinson, 1996). These devices all remain as tributes to Egyptian kings' control over eternity.

While the pyramids and other architectural wonders like the Taj Mahal in India represent the grandeur that monumental art has achieved, they share something very basic with monuments of all styles constructed through the ages: they were created to commemorate the lives of individuals and the respect or love others had for them. The Book of Genesis (35:20) poignantly demonstrates this basic practice: after Rachel died, "Jacob erected a monument on Rachel's grave" (Kadden & Kadden, ¶ 1). We focus at this point in our historical overview on the major

developments in personalized memorials as they appear in Christian Europe and America. The following examples provide an illuminating route to a consideration of contemporary memorials.

Prior to the Christian period, Roman tombstones commonly contained a sculpture of the deceased, demographic information, a list of public offices held and services performed, and dedicatory inscriptions by family members (Imber, n.d.). Christianized Romans continued to incorporate Greco-Roman iconography into their funeral symbolism. Christian tombs at this time combined both religious and social aspects of a person's life, often indicating the deceased's trade (Daly, 2005). However, like in Egyptian civilization, transcending time and the finitude of individual existence remained a privilege of the wealthy in Europe until the early 19th century. Elaborately personalized funeral memorials may have begun with the aristocracy, but with the population explosion and the growth of industrial cities in the 18th century, even the working class gained a foothold in the door of immortality. According to Tony Walter (1996), the churchyards of European cities, which used communal graves, could no longer cope with the higher volume resulting from the population explosion. As a result, graves were being dug long before previous occupants had a chance to decompose. Walter notes that

the upper and middle classes [of 18th-19th century Europe] had already embraced the idea of the individual, inviolate grave for reasons of status; now it was deemed necessary for public health, too. The combination was unbeatable, and before long even the working classes knew that their respectability would be guaranteed at the last by an individual family grave--so they began insuring themselves, sometimes beyond their means, against burial as a pauper in a communal grave. (pg. 99)

Communal graves did not pose a similarly immanent threat in America, for individualism, and therefore individual graves and family plots, were from the start a feature of

settler's lives (Walter, 1996). In Puritan New England, for example, grave markers initially consisted of piles of stones with a small boulder crudely engraved with the name of the deceased, along with the date of death. As stonecutting techniques advanced, slate became a popular material for gravestones; its texture made it a medium well-suited to the advancements in stone cutting, allowing for greater elaboration--and personalization--of symbols that appeared on the face of markers: "Skeletons, winged hourglasses, and shattered urns were gruesome symbols of death. . . [combined with] very often an occupational symbol, an emblem from a fraternal organization, or a portrait of the deceased" (Alirengues, 2003, ¶ 9).

Mourners proceeded to create elaborate cemetery monuments that captured life and the inevitability of mortality, well into the Victorian period: "Victorian cemeteries contain various memorials encrusted with signs and symbols such as creeping vines, sleeping babies, even a scythe-bearing Grim Reaper" (Schwartz, 1992, pg. A1). By this time, the overly gruesome gravestone symbols commonly found in Puritan New England cemeteries gave way to cherubs, wreaths and willows. In fact, "the stylistic evolution from death head to cherub reflects the exact time period in which the Great Awakening (1735-1750) brought about a change in Puritan attitudes toward life, death, and the afterlife" (Eastman, 2002, ¶ 10), connecting gravestone iconography with the larger cultural and religious context.

Marketing Immortality: The Baby Boomer Generation and Technological Advances in Cemetery Memorials

Baby boomer generation and their memorial preferences

In the 20th century, those choosing to remember deceased family members through the display of memorials could select from a number of options. A survey conducted by the Cold Spring Granite Memorial Group (2003) for its parent company, the Cold Spring Granite

Company, one of the nation's oldest manufacturers of memorial products, identified 8 major kinds of memorials: 1) above ground vertical and horizontal granite headstones; 2) bronze markers placed in the ground; 3) a private or family mausoleum; 4) a community mausoleum; 5) a columbarium, an above ground granite structure containing niches that can be placed outside or inside; 6) a garden crypt; 7) an urn containing cremation ashes; and 8) a scattering garden where cremated remains are scattered in a cemetery or consecrated location.

According to the survey (Cold Spring Granite, 2003), monuments, specifically, fall into three general categories: Upright monuments, flat markers and family-owned mausoleums. Upright monuments, those rising above lawn level, have traditionally been the most prevalent. They are often used as memorials for an entire family, providing space for the names of the family members plus room for an inscription or personalization. It is exactly this type of flexibility for personalization that has made upright monuments popular today more than ever. Flat markers, traditionally made of bronze and placed at ground level, are usually designed as burial identification for only one person. In most cases, the memorial's small size limits most, if not all, personalization alternatives. The third category, the family-owned mausoleum, is the largest of the monuments.

To gain a better understanding of memorialization preferences, the Cold Spring Granite Memorial Group's survey (2003) sought to gauge the memorialization preferences of Americans by region, age, income and ethnicity. One thousand consumers, males and females 45-years-old and over, were randomly selected for telephone interviews within four regions (Northeast, Southeast, West, and Central). The results confirmed a strong lack of awareness for memorialization products and options (overall statistical reliability of +/-3.2 percent at the 95 percent confidence level.) In addition, a separate focus group dialogue with 10 people

representing the memorialization market confirmed that people are interested in discussing new memorialization options if they are exposed to them. A typical response was that people don't usually get up in the morning looking to research the market for gravestones (pg. 3).

Yet those surveyed represent the very population for whom memorial decisions are relevant. In 2003, more Americans died than people living in Kuwait. That number, more than 2.2 million deaths, as stated by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, is expected to double to 4.1 million by 2004. The estimated 76.5 million baby boomers, born from 1946 -- 1964, will account for the majority of the deaths in the upcoming decades (cited in Cold Spring Granite, 2003, pg. 4). The National Funeral Directors Association (NFDA), which has been tracking funeral trends and working with funeral directors and consumers for more than 120 years, observes that "With the rise of baby boomers, funeral service consumers are making funeral decisions based on different values than their previous generation" (2003, ¶ 2). One of the more recent developments in this shift in making funeral decisions is in the area of personalization which has ultimately resulted in a dramatic increase in unique and meaningful services, including personalized monuments. Laderman (2003) agrees, finding that the aging baby boom generation "represents the crest of a wave poised to engulf the funeral industry with demands for reasonably priced, often individually tailored celebrations of passage" (pg. 180).

As with many other things in their lives, baby-boomers tend to take a different approach to the matters of dying and memorials. They love technology, and their customized funeral send-offs frequently include DVD tributes. "Boomers are more likely to do their own thing when it comes to death-related issues like burial and memorialization... As a group, they haven't been forced to deal with death like prior generations. Now that their parents are dying and they

are forced with those decisions, they are doing it their own way" says Phil Goodman, of Generation Transitional Marking in San Diego (quoted in *Trendsetters*, 1999, ¶ 2).

New technologies: Engraving, vidstones, and medallions

The 20th century tombstone is undergoing a significant transformation. Computer technology, which has literally changed the face of monuments and gravestones (Hogan-Albach, 2005), enables baby boomers to "do it their own way." Developments in computer technologies, combined with the skills of today's craftsmen, have made it possible for individuals to communicate their emotions through monumental art in ways never before thought possible. Before the availability of high-tech stone cutting equipment, the processes necessary to personalize memorials to the extent now available not only significantly limited personalization options, but also rendered those options prohibitively expensive. The introduction of laser technology, computer-aided design tools, and new diamond wire saws has enabled consumers to select a memorial that more closely fits their personal preferences (www.coldspringgranite.com).

In particular,

the combining of contour cutouts in the granite with etched or sandblasted carvings has enabled craftsmen to produce one complete design. Using this technique, craftsmen are now able to cut out part of a memorial to resemble, among other designs, the back half of a snowmobile, while the remainder of the design is completed by etching it into the face of the selected memorial. (www.coldspringgranite.com)

Tombstones representing religious affiliations or spiritual attitudes are increasingly less common; instead, according to John Horan, spokesman for the National Funeral Directors Association, "We're seeing monuments that reflect more of a person's family and interests and less regarding an individual's religious convictions" (quoted in Hogan-Albach, 2005, ¶ 13).

Tombstones are taking on the personalities of those whose remains they mark, allowing those personalities to "live on" in spite of the finitude of individual existence. Memory Studios, in Albany, New York, estimates that business nearly doubled since they began offering computer-drawn etching in 1992 (Wechsler, 2003).

Another trend finds LCD (liquid crystal display), DLP (digital light processing), and plasma screens are not just for expensive televisions; they are also found in cell phones, the back of car headrests, in subway cars, and even in bathrooms. Why not in tombstones, then? According to American studies scholar Gary Collison (Gosline, 2004), taking personalized memorials to the next level inevitably pointed towards the use of built-in video screens showing slides and videos of the deceased: "video tombstones are a natural progression from outsized monumental stonework. Cemeteries are places where people try to outdo each other, display their wealth and power. This would certainly be a new way to do that" (quoted in Gosline, 2004, ¶ 5-6)

At the time of this writing, three individuals either have patents pending or patents approved for such products. One such entrepreneur is Robert Barrows, of Burlingame, California, who has a patent pending for a weatherproofed, hollow gravestone housing a microchip and fitted with a flat LCD touch screen (or, in more elaborate units, a Plasma screen.) Barrows contends that "There's no business like show business...Imagine how interesting it would be to go to tombstones where you didn't know the person, or historical tombstones to find out what someone had to say" (quoted in Marsh, 2004). Another marketer of video headstones is Scott Mindrum, president of Making Everlasting Memories in Cincinnati, Ohio. Mindrum received a patent on a similar device in 1998 but never actually produced one, fearing that the device would fail.

Finally, there is Sergio Aguire, a Floridian who quit his telecommunications job to work full time on what has become the best known memorial video screen product currently on the market, the Vidstone Serenity Panel manufactured and marketed by Vidstone LLC. This 7-inch, solar-powered LCD screen, installed at someone's final resting place, "lets mourners relive your personal highs and dotcom lows. They just flip open the weatherproof cover and touch a button to start your slide show or movie. Vidstone founder Sergio Aguire got the idea after attending a funeral that ended with jazz music and projected photos, including one of the deceased partying in a top hat and pink boa" (Mitchell, 2005). Joseph Joachim, president of FuneralOne, a funeral consulting firm based in St. Clair, Michigan, is bullish on the Vidstone Serenity Panel; he also sees himself as the Walt Disney of the funeral business. As a company that represents the needs of funeral directors across America and Canada, FuneralOne is continually looking for ways to enhance its clients' services: "What we're trying to do is create the ultimate funeral experience...Funeral directors are realizing it's [the Vidstone] an important service we can offer, and we're happy to offer it" (Joachim, quoted in Sim, 2005, ¶ 4).

The differences between the designs, features and longevity as put forth by Barrows and Aguire are not significant (Gosline, 2004). All offer units consisting of seven, fifteen or twenty-three inch screens secured to the gravestone. Noted differences include the manner in which the unit is powered. In Barrows model, "the tombstone would draw its electricity from the cemetery's lighting system. And to avoid a grave's soundtrack from clashing with the one next door, people can also listen through wireless headphones" (Gosline, 2004, ¶ 3). The Vidstone Serenity Panel includes two standard headphone jacks and is powered by solar panels that protect the screen from sun damage while charging the unit's battery. Four hours of direct sunlight is

able to power the unit for up to 90 minutes. In addition, the Vidstone Serenity Panel can function in temperatures between 32 degrees and 120 degrees Fahrenheit (Pain, 2005, ¶ 13).

Another personalization device option, called the Memory Medallion, is a digital memory device encased in stainless steel, and accessed with an electronic wand attached to a laptop computer or a hand-held PDA type device. One photo and a story of up to 600 words are stored on the Memory Medallion and can be downloaded by visitors. The Memory Medallion is permanently affixed directly to a memorial. Unlike the Vidstone Serenity Panel, the Memory Medallion can be placed in almost any location the family chooses, including monuments, markers, civic memorials, columbariums, and mausoleums. In addition, the Memory Medallion was created with the intention of creating a long lasting memorial; it uses a basic digital configuration that can be adapted along with other evolving technologies (*Memory medallion*, n.d.). If for any reason the device malfunctions during the first 10 years of operation it will be replaced at no charge. After that period a fee for shipping and handling is charged.

Along with such high-tech advancements as the Medallion Memorial and the Vidstone Serenity Panel, the imprinting of color pictures on memorial stones, individualized inscriptions and etched signatures, and photographic images are also gaining in popularity (Voelpel, 2005). Other innovations making their way into the selection process include caskets painted in the favorite color of the deceased, caskets engraved with names or military logos, and customized lid liners patterned with favorite golf holes and fishing holes. It appears that in death, as in life, the need to customize comes full circle. In essence, anything reminding mourners of the deceased and their interests and hobbies while alive is fair game for the memorialization project, illustrating Walter's (1996) contention that the focus has shifted from the soul of the deceased to the feelings of the survivors.

Marketing new memorial forms

According to Eric Fogerty (personal communication, 2006), of Dodds Monuments in Xenia, Ohio, personalized memorials are without a doubt an important part of the memorial business, but many memorial companies have very different definitions of "personalized." Additionally, adds Fogerty, the manner in which Memorialists (those in the memorials business) market personalized memorial products to families is a complex and continuous process that includes advertising, promotional literature, on-going sales training, and presentation. Marketing personalized memorials, in other words, is not confined to one aspect of the memorial business and, understanding the significant role that a Memorialist plays in a family's grieving process is critical. Nevertheless, Mel Lommel, general manager of the Royal Melrose division of Cold Spring Granite points out a noticeable increase in the number of personalized memorials: "The trend is certainly toward highly personalized, custom memorials. We're getting more requests to recreate the symbols of a person's interests and life. We only expect memorialization to become more specialized and more unique...I guess that's why we call our designers and fabricators 'granite artists,' because that is what they are increasingly called upon to create" (*Trendsetting*, 1999, ¶ 5).

Not only have devices like the Vidstone received significant attention among sellers of personalized memorials and funeral directors in the United States, but they have also received attention in the United Kingdom. Sergio Aguirre, founder and developer of the Vidstone Serenity Panel, remarked, "I think there is great potential for the Vidstone in the UK and other parts of the world. It is a unique and meaningful way to remember the deceased" (quoted in Johnston, 2005, ¶ 4). In order to begin marketing the Vidstone in the United Kingdom, Aguirre began by starting the process of seeking assistance from UK-based funeral directors to begin

promoting its unique interactive features throughout the United Kingdom. Since it is the custom of families throughout Europe to insert photographs of the deceased on the face of gravestones, the Vidstone could be considered the next logical step in personalizing memorials in the United Kingdom.

However, according to Julie Rugg (personal communication, January 6, 2006), director of The Cemetery Research Group at the University of York, there appeared to be a limited demand for video memorials. She indicated that most people personalize a memorial by what they leave on the grave--that is, nonpermanent items as opposed to specific features built directly into the memorial itself. Rugg adds that in the United Kingdom, local authorities tend to own their own cemeteries and separate private sector stone masons erect memorials, rendering innovations requiring any type of infrastructure change difficult to introduce. In addition to these factors, there is a high cremation rate in the United Kingdom.

Conclusion: Life after Death on the LCD Screen

Vidstones, Memory Medallions, and computer engravings exemplify the new medium forms available for adjusting to limitations presented to the body by time. Paul Badham (personal communication, 2005), an expert on death and immortality, notes, "Throughout history people have wanted to be remembered, with the very important and well-known being recognized with statues in churches and cathedrals as memorials. This is an updated version." These updated versions further "democratize" immortality, as the expense of such technologies are within reason. Badham contends that "the Vidstone is not an inappropriate way to remember a loved one; it is healthy to want to remember a relative in a living way." What implications do these new gravestone technologies thus hold for the psychic and social complex (McLuhan, 1964/1994)? How does a visual medium such as the Vidstone Serenity Panel affect the memorial

visitor's sense of the loved one? Is there a sense of displacement? In addition, how does a device such as an LCD display on a memorial reinforce the sense of the departed person as embodied? Does this, in any way, interfere with our thinking of the deceased as an immaterial soul?

As mentioned above, we contend that these new media forms enable an "imaginative re-embodiment" of the deceased. We perceive the dead (digital) images as living, essentially freezing the departed in time so that they don't seem departed at all. According to art historian David Freedberg (1989), responses to images are predicated on the assumption of presence, not on the fact of representation. He argues that our perceptions of, and responses to, images retain traces of a belief in a degree of life or liveliness in an image. In wanting the person to be there, we willingly concentrate on the image, and what is represented in it becomes present again, conflating the sign with the signified. Freedberg contends that with such responses, "it is not that the bodies are present; it is *as though* they were present" (pg. 30). Only the figure resembling human form, concludes Freedberg, enables the reconstitution of life: "The striving for resemblance marks our attempts to make the absent present and the dead alive" (pg. 201). Video gravestones achieve the height of resemblance -- since the departed will, in fact, become frozen in time relative to the time of the video memorial was made, he/she will always be seen in the body they had while alive (R. Grigg, personal communication, 2006). And, following Freedberg (1989), we respond to the memorial *as though* our dearly departed were present.

A second dimension of these new gravestone technologies that holds social and psychic implications is the way they contribute to--or help to satisfy--the penchant for "mediated voyeurism" (Calvert, 2000) in American culture. Recall Barrows' (*Today, 2004*) conjecture above of "how interesting it would be to go to tombstones where you didn't know the person, or

historical tombstones to find out what someone had to say." According to Clay Calvert (2000), we like to watch other people's private lives and revealing moments, but often care little for actually interacting with them. Memorial technologies allow complete strangers to peek into private lives and revealing moments, all the while erasing any concern of *ever* having to interact with the object of the voyeur's gaze. Calvert (2000) suggests that such mediated voyeurism is Janus-faced: on the one hand, privacy, civility, and respect are marginalized; on the other hand, the knowledge gained from gazing at others' lives may provide some sense of power and control over one's own life, fostering the courage to adopt or reject decisions about lifestyle with more confidence. Video gravestones could provide a veritable encyclopedia of experiences, values, and life decisions.

The experience of time as continuous and finite, and the attendant acknowledgement of our own inevitable death, has prompted people of many cultures in many ages to address the problem of time. Devices from the pyramids to video tombstones stand as testaments to humankind's quest to control eternity. Yet with each new medium, with each new means of extending the human body through time, has come changes for how a culture thinks about the finitude of human existence. Video gravestones are newcomers to this scene; their psychic and social impact remains amorphous. We have suggested here that these recent gravestone technologies re-embody those who are deceased. This re-embodiment is a function of, according to image-response theory, how we respond to the images on the screen and the degree of life we perceive in those images. New gravestone technologies therefore seem to attain the ultimate control over time and offer the promise of immortality. But what happens in the event of a technological glitch?

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