9 Paramortals, or Dancing with the Interactive Digital Dead

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Zombies are everywhere. They appear to embody deep-seated fears of contagion, paranoia, a military-industrial complex R&D run amok, and the dead—if not the dead, then perhaps their memory—the sins of the past, secret guilty pleasures? And what a weird dead they are! Inhabited not by a Haitian god or sorcerer but by malevolence for the living: mindless, shambling, intent on violation. No elegant, seductive vampires, nor noble savagery of the Lycan clan; these are proles, maddened nobodies, *ressentiment*-filled and infected neighbours, waiters, clerks, former beer buddies, bus drivers, nurses, housewives, middle executives, sheriffs, an obligatory preacher or two, and the homeless. We see them on the TV screen, on the cinematic screen, on the computer gaming screen. And they're fun to kill, right (providing there's some effective way to kill what's already dead)? You can't even refer to Plato's *organon empsykhon* (*Phaedrus* 276a) since there's really no ventriloquist throwing a voice or puppeteer pulling the strings. No, these are ferociously, individualistically mindless, things. And yet, the dead, in all their mythic and horrorific packaging, continue to fascinate.

John Durham Peters, in his *Talking into the Air*, presents the reader with an arresting, disturbing, if self-evidently true, observation: "All new media bring back the dead" (Peters, 1997). He's not talking about zombies, and since they've had nothing to say other than to growl inchoately, there's not much to say about them. Lycans aren't dead, and the undead are a different matter altogether (although under some circumstances they can emerge from the same sorts of terror-engendering zombies, but are to be differentiated from the latter by their seductiveness, intelligence, and grooming). No, Peters is on about the apparent immortality new media forms can accord to our late twentieth and early twenty-first century gods—the celebrities and stars of the entertainment media; and not just these—you and your family too. Like the funerary cults of the ancient Egyptians, our recording and web practices extend a "life everlasting" up and down the social ladder.

Think of all the photos, video or 16mm footage, audio recordings, letters, and mementos, along with all the e-mails, web entries and postings, memos and digital a/v collections we leave behind us like a wake. All of us born after 1900 have in one way or another left a data wake of thousands of moments and situations recorded. Family photo albums, video collections, documents, and all the institutional information kept on us since our birth: birth certificates, child-hood drawings and paintings, school report cards, driver's licenses, passports, medical records. As the twentieth century unfolded, these life records grew. Increasingly, we could restore much more vivid representations of ourselves, the generations whence we came, the dreams we dreamt for ourselves and others, our achievements and failures. And then came the process of gradual digitiza-tion. Worried we'd lose our growing biographical *mementos vitae*, we began to transfer our slides and photographs, audio recordings, films and videos into the digital element and store them in our desktops, laptops, smart phones, tablets, hard drives, and clouds.

This, along with the opportunities afforded by new digital and networked media and information mining and processing, sets up an environment where "bringing back the dead" can take on a very different dimension and mean-ing from what's offered in the zombie "folklore of industrial *man*," to poach from Marshall McLuhan (1951). When considering the "insistent technolo-gies" Robert Zingrone describes—technologies we've dreamt about or dreamt of having since human origins—it seems we're catching up to our dreams in

nearly every domain except one: death (1991). We're no less mortal than Enkidu of the Gilgamesh epic, nor any more immortal than Hector. We still mourn like Gilgamesh, Hecuba, and Priam. Killing death may well become a growth industry with an ever-growing sophistication in the not too distant future. What was once a promise of nearly all religions will be taken over by the geeks, and in time, death will die.

The effect will be neither zombies nor vampires nor anything we'd expect to see in situations of a rambunctious or malevolent paranormal. No, this will all be very normal, as normal as a smart phone to which you can talk, and which, on your behalf, will then order restaurant reservations, buy airline tickets, or show you the way to the washroom in some city you've never been to before. Why should any if this come as a surprise for us who play computer games or even engage in separate lives through avatars, for us who carry audiovisual and data records of ourselves in our companion technologies, who generate ever wider and deeper wakes of ourselves every time we interact with each other—ourselves, or our technologies—in our networked Internet-powered lifeworlds.

Let's concentrate for a moment on that wake, the one we all produce, a wake of relatively permanent data. That data—some of it in our companion technologies, some of it in the cloud—is considered a treasure trove of important information by the corporate and government sectors. Data miners sort through the wakes we leave to learn more about us, to better "see us" and understand us, so that the marketing apparatuses can provide us with something we've always wanted but never known we've wanted, as Ralph Caplan put it when describing successful new product design (1982).

Once this skill was a matter of intuition; then it became a matter of systematic study though focus groups and surveys; and now it's become a "science" of information analytics. And the important point is that the purpose is clearly predictive, in aid of prescience and mostly for profit. Time will tell whether all the scientific analytics can displace the creative surge and intuition of old, but for now it is evident that much about future behaviour can be learned from past and present actions, communications, preferences in entertainment and consumer goods and services, purchases and memberships, postal codes. And where, in the past, such data was episodic, appearing only in fragmentary forms, today it is truly biographical, almost in real time, a day-by-day record of interactions, transactions, comings and goings, people and places, mobile device records, all chronological, much of it saved chronologically, infinitely sortable and mashable, manipulable, and, providing the current keeps flowing, permanent.

Remember, this is conjecture; had I the imagination for it, it'd have been science fiction. But having no gift for inventing tales, I'm stuck with conjectures based in the world I live in at this moment, not some extravagantly imagined world. This is more pedestrian stuff, based on current developments in IT, robotics, information science, the Internet, cloud computing, artificial intelligence, and what the traditional media content of new media affords.

That said, consider the following scenario: As you get closer to life's departure gate, you, like an ancient Egyptian, start taking a scroll of information very seriously, but for slightly different reasons and an entirely different application. The ancient Egyptian, usually through a considerable financial investment, when getting on in life, sought out *The Book of the Dead*. At first, this guide to dying and "a happy-ever-aftering" was available only to the Pharaoh and his immediate kin. With time, a crack at the good life post-exit off the mortal coil was extended to wider reaches of elites, and then offered to what we'd read as the middle classes—scribes, doctors, court officials, tax collectors, priests and merchants (cats and crocodiles too, but they got to them later).

The Book of the Dead, usually illuminated with images, contained a step-by-step guide to what happened once the embalmed dead were entombed; once they entered into the land of the dead (Faulkner, 1997). Readers were given the correct answers to give, ways to behave, persons to hang with, where to dally and what to avoid—an extended algorithm, code, or crib sheet to life eternal, once all the incantations, stages, ordeals were done. The difference between the two scrolls, yours and the ancient Egyptian's, is that she or he went to meet Osiris in a mythical realm; you, on the other hand, will continue to "be here" long after you've gone. In a way both scrolls ensure immortality, but yours will have moving bits, bits moving between the newly resurrected digital you and the living, or even others just like you. The ancient's scroll was done in ink and pigment on papyrus; yours will be done in algorithms and databases, perhaps in the slightly more distant future with the abilities of Siri on steroids (that is, an intelligent software assistant and knowledge navigator functioning as a interlocutor application using databases drawn from, or incorporating, your data wake).

Another major difference is that the ancient Egyptian needed his or her scroll to ensure that, when gently judged by Ma'at, the consequence didn't put their soul in Ammit's jaws and belly but rather gained entrance for it into the light of everlasting life. This was promised by the scroll's title, not (as we now call

it) the *Book of the Dead*, but rather *Emerging into the Light, or Emerging into the Day*, presumably, of forever. For you, there'll be no land of Osiris, no Anubis or Thoth, neither a Ma'at nor her scales, where your heart will be weighed against a feather. So far as we know, there'll be nothing at all, but a you will be available to interact with those who wish to interact with that you.

LIVING [WITH] PARAMORTALS

Is this something to look forward to? It was rehearsed back in 1982 in *Dead Men Don't Wear Plai*d. In this comedy pastiche of the *noir* genre, Steve Martin interacts with a cast of the mostly dead (most were by the 1980s, and those who weren't sure didn't look in the 1980s the way they had in their prime of life in the 1940s): Edward Arnold, Ingrid Bergman, Humphrey Bogart, Wally Brown, James Cagney, William Conrad, Jeff Corey, Joan Crawford, Bette Davis, Brian Donlevy, Kirk Douglas, Ava Gardner, Cary Grant, Alan Ladd, Veronica Lake, Burt Lancaster, Charles Laughton, Charles McGraw, Fred MacMurray, John Miljan, Ray Milland, Edmund O'Brien, Vincent Price, Barbara Stanwyck, Lana Turner, and Norma Varden. Of course this was done by selective cannibalism of 1940s footage very effectively integrated into the look, feel, dialogue, and action of the movie. Throughout, Martin often called Marlowe/Bogart on the phone for advice. Marlowe/Bogart, thanks to the script and positioning of cannibalized footage, oozed attitude, was both relevant and helpful, and very dead. While *Dead Men* was pastiche and dark comedy, it foreshadowed things to come for both the living and the dead.

Elsewhere I have inquired into the effect of the digital environment on material culture, conjecturing the emergence of a new animated form of stuff, a lively stuff, the *animates* (Onufrijchuk, 1997). I saw the emergent elements for the animates in the development of new materials, increasing sophistication of sensors and actuators as applied to and emerging out of MEMS (micro-electro-mechanical systems), and gradual convergences between the biomechanical and information sciences. Animates would benefit from advances in neurology, expansion of the Internet and always-on personal digital companion devices, social and technological demographics, as well as advances in robotics applications, performativity, and technology. At that point the press was reporting "smart" this and that: "smart paint, "smart dust," "smart floors," "smart houses," "smart diagnostic toilet plumbing," "smart cars." The "smart phone" was around the corner and the tablet just down the street. Not only did this conjecture

incorporate a convergence between IT and the furnishings and functions of daily life and stuff, it also included semiautonomous robotic companions, caregiving, instructional, and military devices. In this conjecture, we'd inhabit a lifeworld where things interact through natural language, monitor our health and wellbeing, carry out varied tasks, and survey aspects of our reality for us, as deputized lieutenants such as those described in Bruno Latour's actor/network theory (Johnson/Latour, 1995). At that point I'd not yet conjectured domestic and companion semi-autonomous robotic devices into which one might also be able to load an OS driven by an inferential personality drawn from databases, a paramortal operating system as animator of an animate thing. Such a paramortal would reproduce an inferential personality based on and incorporating the data wake of the deceased, and produce a personality based in interactions with interlocutors, cohabitants, and, of course, other paramortals.

Should paramortals be limited to mere repetition of a few lines twistable by appropriate questions to answer anything intelligently, pure Platonic *mimēsis*, they'd become a version of "talking tombstones," not much better than an a/v digitized record/album embedded in a rock or your phone: mnemonic in depth perhaps, but hardly interactive. Even as this is written some enterprising morticians offer the soon-to-be deceased and their offspring a produced AV webpresence in perpetuity (with reasonably high production values). I suppose, in our mechanized interoperant world, one could always put a reminder in one's automated calendar to hit the memorial URL on a set date. But that's a machine talking to a machine, not a paramortal personality with which one can commiserate, confide, debate, negotiate, celebrate, converse, or consult. It's exactly all this, and probably more depending on the psychology of the living and the inferential psychology of the dead, that a paramortal offers. And it poses a question beyond information analytics and data—the aesthetics of presence.

And what a can of worms that opens, this aesthetics of presence! Where will a paramortal live: In a vessel the size of a breadbox? A computer? A smartphone? It seems appropriate that such a being would be found in a cemetery in a headstone, a place of pilgrimage, expiation of festering guilt, and consultation with the almost-dead. We could conjecture that the development of robotics will lead to domestic technologies that could become homes for paramortals: say, a carebot that possesses granny's paramortal remains as the OS. What better way to cheer a mortal granny than the paramortal of a grandchild whose paramortal's development has been stopped at about age five? Why not as a chip embedded in the brain, thereby reversing the process conjectured by Julian Jaynes, reopening

the doors of the bicameral mind, so granny can talk directly to us in our heads? Spooky it may be, and also just down the road, if not right around the corner. The point is we've not begun to imagine how a paramortal would appear; we as yet have no idea of the sensuousness neither of its presence, nor indeed of the consequences and conditions of living with one. What level of autonomy could they be given: for instance, the ability to make appearances through whatever medium they choose? Would their access to other paramortals and worlds for gaining experience and personality be controlled? To what degree would the programs running them be controlled by their "owners"? If we agree that ownership of another human being is a crime against humanity, then can we "own" a "paramortal," which would be, in effect, a human-based consciousness of a sort?

A reasonable conjecture: paramortal existence will first come as a push, and then it will develop both a pull and a normative character. So long as the current flows, stored digital data is, in effect, immortal; it's just octets of zeros and ones and can survive happily in a drive or in the cloud. If it's been posted on the Internet, it might get cached, remaining available in all its digital manipulability through search engines a century from now. So it's not too far to conjecture that paramortals will become the post-living norm for the next digital generation. Perhaps this will take the form of a lifelong preoccupation, to gain as much of the available data as possible and edit one's own paramortal, so that the light of posterity will not shine too brightly nor revealingly on the life as it was lived. A media form of this kind, combining knowledge navigators and machine learning along with natural language interactivity and data and information wakes, all creating an inferred and evolving personality, is an artist's dream come true. It is like making a living entity. Why confine it to the dead? Why not remake one's childhood with the grisly details omitted, the ones that lead one into adult neurosis or psychosis? Create someone exactly like you, but without the traumas you've lived through? Or, if trauma is what one is after, why not the paramortal of a past lover now gone behind a slammed door? One could go over the same ground over and over, trying to understand what led to the relationship's ending. One could commission or construct a "perfect" other personality, tailor-made to be a confidant and only true friend. . . .

Regardless, this is all safe conjecture. Forget the zombies, the vampires, ghosts and the whole range of the paranormal; something far more materialistic and real is potentially coming our way. The paramortal essence of friends and relatives past with which we can communicate could well be equipped with smart-agent knowledge navigator software and a real-language interface. And, if

we load them into a game of some sort, a virtual world populated by others like them, and enable them, when not interacting with the living, to go on adventures, interact with one another, and learn, develop, and share that growth, then will we not have in some sense killed death? Does this imagining take us to some great archive, storing millions who interact with one another in a great illusory world, not unlike *The Matrix* series? There is one crucial distinction between the virtual world inhabited by the film characters of *The Matrix* and the reality of a great virtual world filled with the lively paramortal remains of the real-dead: there will be no other reality, nor any bodies to return to. Will our species have finally killed death?

Ah, meat! Maybe overcoming the death of others, without having eradicated the shadow following each of us individually as we move toward a blinding light . . .

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