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# Hollywood Forever: Culture, Celebrity, and the Cemetery

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Hollywood Forever: Culture, Celebrity, and the Cemetery

by

Linda Levitt

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
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## **Hollywood Forever: Culture, Celebrity, and the Cemetery**

Linda Levitt

### **ABSTRACT**

As the final resting place of celebrities and notable public figures such as Rudolph Valentino, Douglas Fairbanks Sr. and Jr., Janet Gaynor, Mel Blanc, and Barbara La Marr, Hollywood Forever Cemetery in Los Angeles has long served as a tourist attraction and a site of public memory. The touristic visit or pilgrimage to the cemetery can be, like the visit to a sanctioned memorial, a means of stitching oneself into the cultural past. This dissertation considers the articulation and performance of commemoration in contemporary culture, specifically situated at Hollywood Forever. I examine how the cemetery leverages its rich resources from the past to generate new collective experiences and attitudes in the present.

Through the outdoor film series Cinespia, a communitywide Dia de los Muertos celebration, performances of Shakespearean plays, and annual memorial services and commemorative events in honor of celebrities interred there, Hollywood Forever invites visitors to use the cemetery as social space. Combining ethnographic research with cultural analysis, I consider how the public interacts with Hollywood Forever. This dissertation looks at the influence of celebrity culture, how shared experience in a unique

setting can create a meaningful sense of place, and how the past is appropriated for purposes in the present.

In examining the rituals and performances surrounding celebrity fan culture at the cemetery, I consider how fandom creates a sense of community that is deeply connected to the physical space of Hollywood Forever. Using the space of the cemetery for entertainment and leisure has the potential to change perceptions of the cemetery, as uneasiness with the setting fades and visitors become comfortable and enjoy their experience. As Hollywood Forever functions as a space that can provide both solitude and community, perceptions of the cemetery change in the process.



## Chapter 1

### Introduction

The burgeoning field of memory studies engages the social construction of memory in various guises, from consideration of the relationship between memory and history to the impact of and response to built memorials. Monuments and memorials, scattered across the built landscape, are the subject of study in an era in which our culture is driven to record, monumentalize, and historicize. This dissertation looks closely at the ways in which sites of memory can be used to connect ourselves to history and to cultural memory. Specifically, this dissertation focuses on Hollywood Forever Cemetery in Los Angeles, California, the final resting place of celebrities like Rudolph Valentino, Mel Blanc, and Marion Davies, along with thousands of “ordinary” Angelenos. Like cemeteries, sanctioned memorials redefine public space for commemorative practices. Some places, like the *Flamme de Liberté* monument near the Alma Tunnel where Lady Diana died, become significant sites of memory without being sanctioned memorials. The Lorraine Motel in Memphis, where Martin Luther King, Jr. was killed on the balcony, was not marked as an officially sanctioned site until 1991, when the motel became home to the National Civil Rights Museum. Other sites serve as the destination for pilgrimages on the anniversaries of celebrity deaths; examples include Jim Morrison’s grave in Père

Lachaise cemetery in Paris, and Dealey Plaza, the site of John F. Kennedy's assassination. These gatherings are not official, organized, or scripted events but rather mark the gesture of publicly acknowledging a cultural loss by situating oneself at a site of tragedy. The gravesite of Rudolph Valentino is the location of several memorial practices. Best-known among these events is the visit of a mysterious woman, dressed in black, who for years left roses at Valentino's grave on the anniversary of his death. Fans, film stars, and friends also make an annual pilgrimage for a memorial service at Hollywood Forever Cemetery, Valentino's final resting place.

Situated at Hollywood Forever, this project considers memorialization and cultural memory while also looking closely at the articulation and performance of commemoration in contemporary culture. Cemeteries are more significantly sites of personal or individual memory than cultural memory, yet Hollywood Forever, by virtue of who is buried there, becomes a site of cultural memory as well. As sociologist Eviatar Zerubavel points out, cultural memory is "more than just an aggregate of individuals' personal memories" but rather comprises what a group, culture, or nation "*collectively* considers historically eventful" (28, emphasis original). Unlike most cemeteries, but similar to many sanctioned memorials, Hollywood Forever is a tourist attraction. As the final resting place of many celebrities, visitors are drawn to the cemetery to remember people they did not know but feel connected to through their stardom. Like a site of tragedy, the celebrity cemetery enables a sense of proximity for the visitor who can get closer to the famous person, if only by virtue of his or her material remains.

This dissertation considers how the touristic visit or pilgrimage to the cemetery can be, like the visit to a sanctioned memorial, a means of stitching oneself into the cultural past. Spending time at a historic site, contemplating its landscape, and listening to its stories can be a powerful means of determining one's place in relation to the past. Our experience of significant events, spanning from the Super Bowl to September 11, is increasingly mediated. Although we are at a physical distance from these events, they have emotional affect and social relevance, and help shape our sense of the world. Because of the need to get closer, to see, touch, and hear what we know only through mediated experiences, we are often drawn to visit the sites of events that we experienced virtually. This sense of presence carries over to the cemetery as well: regardless of the commemorative acts one might perform to mark the anniversary of the death or birthday of a loved one, or even a beloved celebrity, there is no substitute for being present at that person's grave.<sup>1</sup> At sites of tragic events, many visitors experience a sense of connection by leaving remembrances or participating in other acts of commemoration. At Hollywood Forever, the centuries-old tradition of leaving flowers at a gravesite is expanded to include a variety of material markers and acts of commemoration that are addressed in this dissertation.

Hollywood Forever leverages its rich resources from the past to generate new collective experiences and attitudes in the present. Through the outdoor film series Cinespia, a Dia de los Muertos celebration, and annual memorial services and commemorative events in honor of celebrities interred there, Hollywood Forever invites

visitors to use the cemetery as social space. This chapter explores these cultural practices in more detail to locate this dissertation within the context of existing scholarship.

### **Situating the Cemetery**

There is something seemingly paradoxical about the rebirth of a cemetery, yet the story of Hollywood Forever is one of resurrection. Purchased out of bankruptcy by Forever Enterprises in 1998, the cemetery had lost its glamorous image as the final resting place of Hollywood legends from cinema's early years. Due to embezzlement and neglect by its former manager, the cemetery required an estimated \$7 million investment to repair damages and refurbish the buildings and grounds. The president of Forever Enterprises, then-twenty-seven-year-old Tyler Cassity, wanted not only to restore the cemetery but to transform the death care industry. Cassity espouses the idea of celebrating life rather than mourning death, and encourages this shift in cultural perspectives by inviting the use of the cemetery as leisure space. The focus on lives lived is also reinforced by LifeStories, the digital memorials produced by Forever Enterprises. Beyond their primary use as tributes shown as part of a funeral service, LifeStories are available for viewing online and on video kiosks at the cemetery. The inclusion of these viewing stations at the cemetery is crucial to Hollywood Forever's attempts to transform the cemetery from a space of grief into a space that can also accommodate joyful commemoration and celebration. Jay Boileau, executive vice president, shared Forever Enterprises' vision for the future of commemoration with *LA Weekly* reporter Brendan Bernhard. Describing a trip to the cemetery, Boileau says,

You're going to come in, look at the permanent marker, leave some flowers—but then I think it's natural that you're going to want to go to the [Forever] theater and relax and remember. The whole idea of Forever is really about celebrating a person's life rather than celebrating their death. So much of the death-care industry and the process people go through, they just can't see beyond the death of the person. It's all about the death, the death. You know, they go look at that marker. All that marker says to 'em is: Death. (Bernhard, par. 11)

Photographs, video, music, and personal recollections combined into a video tribute can be an effective prompt for visitors to the cemetery to recall the unique qualities of the person whose grave they are visiting and to subsequently remember times spent with them.

These innovative approaches to death care earned Hollywood Forever feature stories in *Time* magazine, the *New York Times Magazine*, *Forbes*, and *Variety*. News stories about Cinespia, LifeStories, and the Dia de los Muertos celebration at Hollywood Forever also appear in local and national media. While these articles engage issues relevant to cultural and critical analysis, each is narrow in its scope. In 2000, HBO aired the documentary *The Young and the Dead*, which traces the beginning of the transformation of Hollywood Forever after the cemetery was purchased by brothers Tyler and Brent Cassity. The cemetery also is featured on the History Channel's "Haunted Hollywood," as Hollywood Forever is reputedly haunted by actors Rudolph Valentino, Virginia Rappe, and Clifton Webb, all of whom are interred there. The Travel Channel

includes the cemetery among the Hollywood sights to visit on *World's Creepiest Destinations*.

Published work about Hollywood Forever is primarily limited to surveying the celebrity population of the cemetery. Several websites, as well as the self-published book *The Stars of Hollywood Forever*, provide a list of celebrities buried at the cemetery, biographical information, and where their gravesites can be located on the grounds. As no critical analysis is undertaken in these projects, this dissertation is the first comprehensive critical examination of Hollywood Forever, its history, and its contemporary practices.

### **The Cultural Life of Death**

The publication of Jessica Mitford's bestseller *The American Way of Death*, and the assassination of John F. Kennedy a few weeks later, marks the last time that cultural practices surrounding death and commemoration figured so significantly in U.S. culture prior to the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. While daily news related to September 11 has dissipated, we remain a nation deeply engaged by memorialization and commemoration, as evidenced by the outpouring of personal expressions of condolence from individuals with no connection to shootings at Virginia Tech and Northern Illinois University, for example. Where Mitford's book piqued interest in the funeral industry by exposing and questioning its practices, HBO's *Six Feet Under* brought the funeral industry to light as entertainment. *Six Feet Under* began airing in 2001, and A&E built on the new-found interest in the death care industry with its reality television series *Family Plots* in 2004. While there are feature films about the funeral industry, such as Ron

Howard's 1982 *Night Shift* and the 1997 comedy *The Undertaker's Wedding*, none of these films had the sustained impact of *Six Feet Under*, for which Tyler Cassity served as a consultant. The coincidence of HBO's series with the September 11 attacks, along with larger cultural shifts, may portend changes in funeral practices similar to those brought about by Mitford's book and Kennedy's assassination.

In addition to increased mediated encounters with death and dying, cultural attitudes are affected by the aging of the Baby Boomer generation. The death care industry is changing: as Baby Boomers are contending with the death of their parents and contemplating their own mortality, cremation is on the rise and traditional burial is subsequently declining. Several factors come into play. An interest in the environment has led some Boomers to prefer cremation to the permanent placement of one's body in the ground, taking up space. Cost is also an issue: cremation costs less than \$2,000, where funeral services, excluding the cost of a burial plot, average around \$6,500. Some prefer to spend their money sending their loved ones on a trip to scatter their ashes rather than to pay for a casket and plot.

Thomas Lynch, a funeral director, essayist, and poet, sees the changes in the death care industry in the generation that precedes the Baby Boomers, a generation experiencing longer life spans, earlier retirements, and later-life mobility in an unprecedented manner:

Back at the funeral home the hot topics—forgive me—are cremation and designer funerals. My parents' generation, in their seventies now, are buying motor homes and time-shares in casino towns, trading in their

piece of the rock for a piece of the action, taking a walk on the wild side of slot machines and casual sex, beginning to behave like their children used to: scattered, mobile, portable, still crazy after all these years. They do not want to be a burden to their children. They do not want to be “grounded” to the graves they bought, pre-need, back in the old days when people stayed put. Their ashes are FedExed and parcel-posted and UPSed around the hemisphere day and night in little packages, roughly the weight of a bowling ball, roughly the shape of that first starter home, roughly the size of a coffee can squared. Not nearly the full, life-sized burden of a casket, not nearly the bother or expense. (89-90)

As frequently as families in the U.S. move, subsequent generations are likely to leave the cities and towns in which they grew up. The pre-need purchase of a cemetery plot may mean burial in a city where one’s family no longer lives, making it unlikely that one’s children will be close by to visit and tend to one’s grave. As members of Generation X are attending the funerals of their grandparents, or participating in the rituals to spread their ashes, what are their thoughts on burial? Many of them may not have given a thought to their own mortality, while other GenXers, like Tyler Cassity, were confronted by death when AIDS affected the gay community during the 1980s. Cassity arrived in New York City in 1988, at what he describes as “the apex or the heart of the epidemic” (“Kodak”). He tells *This American Life*’s Ira Glass,

And so I think for a good six years, I was more obsessed about dying and death than I had ever been. And yet at the same time, there were more



people who didn't follow any type of tradition I'd seen. Maybe some people threw a nightclub party, and that was in their will. You know, I want you all to have fun. I want you all to dress in drag. Someone else had a dance ceremony, a poetry reading, and I think the form [of the traditional funeral] kind of seemed broken. [...] And broken, it was much more powerful. It served a purpose again. And I didn't think I was ever going to go home and return to the business but it affected completely how I looked at it. ("Kodak")

To be surrounded by death and dying profoundly changed Cassity's personal and professional life, leading him to join the death care industry, which was his father's professional calling as well. For many of Cassity's contemporaries, the AIDS epidemic brought about a new awareness of death, as well as the possibilities for new means of commemoration.

In *Death: The Trip of a Lifetime*, author Greg Palmer studies death rituals and funeral practices around the world. Palmer notes that when he asked people to describe their favorite funerals, they were unsettled; yet when he asked them to describe the worst funeral they had attended, answers came easily (191). With cultural preconceptions that funerals should be somber, it is difficult for many to speak about a funeral they may have *enjoyed*. In describing his own favorite funeral, Palmer relates the story of a friend from college who died from AIDS-related causes. This memorial service, Palmer explains, was a celebration of his friend's life, and was different from the mournful family funerals many of the guests were accustomed to. Comedian Bruce Vilanch explains:

Many of the people in show business who die of AIDS-related illnesses were not family men. They didn't have particular attachments because their attachments were their friends. And so when they died, their family would come and say, "He's ours now" and snatch the body away. They'd take him and bury him in Iowa somewhere. And his friends were left with nothing.

So we began organizing what were first called memorial services, because that was what we really knew how to do. But in the course of doing them, we discovered they were really celebrations; a way for us to say good-bye, to resolve his life and put a period on our relationship. And because the memorial services weren't traditional, not conducted by clergy or with the traditional trappings of a funeral, they could be whatever we wanted them to be. We weren't intimidated by having to be solemn. (qtd. in Palmer 194)

The removal of the body from a grieving circle may, in the instances Vilanch describes, be a means of liberation, allowing celebration to take precedence over mourning. In her seminal book *Death: The Final Stage of Growth*, Elisabeth Kubler-Ross argues that the absence of a body complicates the grieving process for family and friends. They have "no body around on which to focus and express their grief and they are vulnerable to the temptation to deny the reality of the death" (46).

Have these celebratory memorials had a lasting impact? In his study of death and funeral practices in the twentieth century, Gary Laderman describes the story of Oprah

Winfrey's pre-planning of her funeral as reported in the January 30, 2001 edition of the tabloid newspaper *Star*:

Inside, the story, entitled "Oprah's Bizarre Death Wish," explains that although she is only 47, Winfrey has carefully planned every element of her funeral, including the desired casket, music to be played (Motown favorites like the Temptations and Marvin Gaye) and a video eulogy she reportedly has already prepared. While not exactly a font of wisdom and truth, this tabloid tapped into a widespread consumer interest in shaping funerals to embody and celebrate the life lived rather than conform to conventional traditions that suppress or limit expressive ceremonies. (184)

When Richard Pryor died in December 2005, Forest Lawn Memorial Park referred his widow Jennifer Pryor to Pam Vetter, a "certified celebrant"<sup>2</sup> who works with families to transform mourning into celebration ("Celebrant"). This is particularly fitting for the funeral of an internationally-known comedian, yet Vetter has a growing list of clients and is only one of about 1,200 celebrants certified through Oklahoma City-based In-sight Institute. The Institute was founded by Pastor Doug Manning in 1996, whose experiences with funerals led him to turn his interests to the grief industry, an increasingly lucrative field. Like Forever Enterprises' LifeStories biographers, celebrants meet with family members, listen to stories, gather photographs, and compile a personalized funeral service. Clearly, Hollywood Forever is far from being the only transformative force in the death care industry, and the impact of their discourse and practices cannot be read as an exclusive effect.

## Cemetery Screenings

On Saturday nights in the summer, as many as 2,700 Angelenos pack picnic baskets and gather at Hollywood Forever to watch classic films projected on the exterior wall of the Cathedral Mausoleum. The Cinespia film series enables filmgoers to enjoy the cemetery grounds through a communal event, but what, if anything, does the film series commemorate? Classic Hollywood film evokes the past, not only as representative of archival Hollywood but also a glimpse into an earlier time. While its primary function is entertainment, classic film offers a lens into the lifeways, practices, and ethics of another era. This pedagogical element—teaching about the past—in a film series like Cinespia is inevitably intertwined with its entertainment value. As communication theorist Anthony Wilden boldly states, “Moving pictures rival language as the most powerful system of communication between people ever created” (138).

Media scholar John Ellis addresses the distinctions between film as an individual experience and as a shared, cultural experience. Noting that “the form of spectatorship offered by entertainment cinema is open to various kinds of social manifestation,” Ellis adds that “it tends to remain an individual experience” (87). The circumstances which inspire social interaction during a film are rare, such as “when one or more members of the audience demand an explanation of a particular aspect of the plot, and someone volunteers this” (87). Ellis also points to a situation in which the audience’s willful suspension of disbelief breaks down, and together, the audience will “make fun of it, laughing, mocking the film for being an ineffective piece of work” (87). Cinespia breaks from the cinematic scene Ellis describes in two ways that open opportunities for a

different kind of social experience. In the movie theater, “all face forward in the dark, awareness of anyone else unknown is reduced to a general awareness of the presence of a crowd, everyone and no one” (88). The physical arrangement of Cinespia is quite different: while enjoying food and drinks spread out on their blankets before the film, individuals within a group will sit facing one another, then shift slightly to direct their attention to the screening space on the mausoleum wall. The more casual seating arrangements on the lawn, rather than the regimented seating of the theater, invite the possibility for comment and conversation. Cinespia is designed as a social space as much as it is a cinematic space. Secondly, rather than screening first-run films, Cinespia’s schedule includes cult classics such as *Sunset Boulevard* and *The Maltese Falcon*,<sup>3</sup> as well as more contemporary films with a cult following like *Pee-wee’s Big Adventure*. Where in Ellis’ examples conversation occurs when audience members seek an explanation or join together in mocking a film, the knowledge of plot, scene, and dialogue typical among those who have a cult attachment to a particular film promotes interaction about the film during the screening.

Cinespia is more than a quirky only-in-Los-Angeles event; it is representative of Hollywood Forever’s innovate efforts to transform attitudes toward death. While recalling bygone cultural practices, picnicking on the cemetery grounds and projecting films on the mausoleum wall certainly raise questions about use of space. The picnic and screening area is the Fairbanks Lawn, a significant piece of greenspace on the cemetery grounds; visitors are not buttering their baguettes on anyone’s tombstone.

Cinespia creates and perpetuates a temporary but recurring public space. J.B. Jackson posits the idea that a landscape like the Fairbanks Lawn at Hollywood Forever can serve a social function merely by virtue of being space shared among individuals within a community. It is, after all, in public space that people can spend time with others and establish the bonds that form community. Jackson writes:

This is how we should think of landscapes: not merely how they look, how they conform to an esthetic ideal, but how they satisfy elementary needs: the need for sharing some of those sensory experiences in a familiar place: popular songs, popular dishes, a special kind of weather supposedly found nowhere else, a special kind of sport or game, played only here in this spot. These things remind us that we belong—or used to belong—to a specific place: a country, a town, a neighborhood. A landscape should establish bonds between people, the bond of language, of manners, of the same kind of work and leisure, and above all a landscape should contain the kind of spatial organization which fosters such experiences and relationships; spaces for coming together, to celebrate, spaces for solitude, spaces that never change and are always as memory depicted them. These are some of the characteristics that give a landscape its uniqueness, that give it style. These are what make us recall it with emotion. (16-17)

By situating Cinespia on the cemetery grounds, Hollywood Forever becomes a space that can alternatively provide both celebration and solitude. The conjunction of these two things—the social space of summer Saturday nights and the everyday space of quiet and

reflection—allows Hollywood Forever to become a uniquely meaningful place for visitors. Cinespia resurrects social practices of picnicking in the garden landscape cemetery, yet transforms those practices with contemporary media—music and film.

### **Inviting Back the Dead**

In addition to Cinespia, Hollywood Forever hosts a Dia de los Muertos (Day of the Dead) celebration. This traditional Mexican holiday, held just after Halloween, invites the dead to visit their living relatives. With an opening procession, exquisite altars, and live music throughout the day, the 2007 celebration saw more than 30,000 visitors. Despite the close proximity of Los Angeles to Mexico, as well as the city's large Mexican population, Hollywood Forever's Dia de los Muertos celebration could readily be seen as an instance of cultural appropriation. On Hollywood Forever's website for the 2005 Dia de los Muertos event, Tyler Cassity notes that the holiday is "a time to come to terms with our mortality and become aware of the cycle of life and death. Rather than deny and fear death this event teaches us to accept and contemplate the meaning of mortality" (*Hollywood Forever Presents...*). As a commemorative practice, Dia de los Muertos appears to reflect the perspective embraced by Hollywood Forever. In this regard, the act of appropriation can be understood as a positive extension of a specific cultural practice to serve a broader population.

While serving to bring people together and to encourage a shifting attitude toward the dead, Hollywood Forever's celebration is also an extension of its role as a tourist destination. Dia de los Muertos motivated the promotion of tourism in several Mexican

communities where an influx of visitors come each year to see the parades and altars and to shop for the unique crafts that incorporate brightly colored skulls and skeletons. In their essay “Day of the Dead: The Tex-Mex Tradition,” Kay Turner and Pat Jasper write:

Beginning in the late 1970s, the Mexican celebration of Day of the Dead achieved a new status as a tourist attraction, especially in south and central Mexico. People from all over the world now stream into these and other areas of Mexico to observe the celebration. Simultaneous with this phenomenon was the rise of interest in the Day of the Dead on this side of the border. About fifteen years ago [1973], Chicano galleries [...] began holding Day of the Dead exhibits in November. The trend continued to grow—in fact, it exploded—and by the late 1980s, Day of the Dead exhibits were being held in such diverse places as New York City, Chicago, Houston, and Miami. (133-34)

Although Turner and Jasper do not mention events on the west coast in their study, Self Help Graphics & Art began the first communitywide celebration of Dia de los Muertos in Los Angeles in 1972. The procession and community altar organized by Self Help Graphics remains a popular public celebration of the holiday, and many Dia de los Muertos events now take place throughout the city.

As Dia de los Muertos blends respect and humor, the celebration at the cemetery blends Mexican tradition with Hollywood kitsch. The hundreds of altars honor and remember the personal, the political, and the famous. Latinos and non-Latinos build altars to invite the return of their loved ones. Typical of the political altars is one



dedicated “To our sisters who were murdered in Ciudad Juarez.” Other altars are adorned with photographs of Rudolph Valentino, Che Guevara, Frida Khalo, Elvis Presley, or Jimi Hendrix. One could argue, as Thomas Lynch does, that recalling the lives of the stars we admire is a convenient stand-in for truly mourning our loved ones. Lynch argues that the intense media focus on celebrity deaths allows us to grieve for distant strangers in ways far more manageable than contending with the death of a relative or close friend:

With round-the-clock coverage on three cable channels and network news magazines and special reports, no one need change their schedules, put on a suit, order flowers, bake a casserole, go to the funeral home or church. [...] The catharsis is user-friendly, the “healing” home delivered. “Being there” for perfect strangers has never been easier [...]. (194)

Lynch implies that experiencing the public death of a celebrity is not truly grief, and serves little purpose beyond “morbid curiosity.” Rather than filling in for personal grief, mourning the death of a celebrity may prepare us to learn the scripts of death and dying. Could the time spent reflecting at the celebrity gravesite be a way to open opportunities for personal grief? The blending of altars honoring loved ones and celebrities at Hollywood Forever indicates the possibilities.

### **Talking It Over: Methods**

To understand how Hollywood Forever is used as social space requires spending time with those who use that space. This project is driven by participant observation research, supplemented with open-ended interviews with selected individuals. In addition

to spending time observing the everyday life of Hollywood Forever, I attended Cinespia, the Rudolph Valentino memorial service, the Dia de los Muertos celebration, and a performance of *Hamlet* at Shakespeare in the Cemetery. I interviewed visitors to the cemetery at each of these events while also observing how visitors related to the space and to each other.

Taking on the role of tourist, I participated in the Paramount Studios tour and the Haunted Hollywood and Dearly Departed tours, as well as the official tour of Hollywood Forever, to understand how the cemetery is portrayed in the rhetoric of tourism. Although Scott Michaels does not visit Hollywood Forever on his Dearly Departed tour, I spent a morning touring the cemetery with him. Film critic and author Mike Szymanski also toured the grounds with me. Both Michaels and Szymanski are property owners at Hollywood Forever and often spend time at the cemetery. Through their personal and professional interests, each has amassed a significant body of knowledge about the cemetery, its history, and its events. These visits enabled me to learn what attracts them to the cemetery and maintains their interest.

Visiting Forest Lawn Glendale, Pierce Bros. Westwood, and Hillside Memorial Park, all Los Angeles area cemeteries with well-known celebrities among their permanent residents, allowed me to compare these sites with Hollywood Forever. I observed the use of space by both mourners and tourists, as well as the relationships between cemetery employees and visitors.

Through membership in the Hollywood Underground and Rudolph Valentino discussion groups, I participated in the public discourse of celebrity graving and fandom.

Members of the Hollywood Underground include authors, tour guides, death care industry professionals, and more than two hundred individuals with an interest in celebrity deaths and death sites. The “We Never Forget” Rudolph Valentino discussion group is moderated by Tracy Terhune, author of *Valentino Forever: The History of the Valentino Memorial Services* and a frequent speaker at the services. Among more than four hundred group members are Valentino biographers Allan Ellenberger and Emily Leider.

To supplement on-site interviews, I created a brief survey on SurveyMonkey, focused on the experience of Cinespia with additional questions oriented toward how respondents use the social space of Hollywood Forever. Participants were informally recruited through word of mouth and through a formal request for participation posted on the Hollywood Underground listserv.

Participant observation research is inherently subjective, and my observations are framed by my own subject position. I come to this research site as an “outsider”: I am not a devoted fan of celebrity culture or of classic film, yet my interest in both is piqued by this project. Although this outsider position enabled me to maintain a critical distance, I find the people and events associated with Hollywood Forever so deeply engaging as to infringe on that distance. The enthusiasm of the cemetery hobbyist community in particular is quite infectious, and the appropriateness of celebrity graving—whether speculating on the final resting place of a celebrity who has recently died, trying to locate a gravesite, or simply spending an afternoon photographing celebrity graves with

friends—is unquestioned. At times, it was difficult to remember that many people find these activities both aberrant and distasteful.

While news coverage, websites, and blog posts provide adequate information, I regret not having the opportunity to attend the cancer benefit in honor of Johnny Ramone. Many fans participated in Dia de los Muertos, but I would like to experience Hollywood Forever when the space is dedicated to commemorating the Ramones.

### **Telling the Story: Preview of Chapters**

Situating Hollywood Forever historically in Chapter 2, “From Gardens to Gloom, Toward Grandeur,” frames the arguments made in subsequent chapters. The cultural and architectural history of Hollywood Forever tells a larger story of the role of cemeteries in the city, and how that role changed over time. The early “rural” cemeteries, dating from the 1830s, were established on the outskirts of urban areas and provided a refuge of nature for city dwellers. Picnicking and strolling at the cemetery were typical weekend activities. The cultural shift from dying at home to dying at the hospital resulted in an alienation from death and subsequently a cultural discomfort with the cemetery. Although many feel uncomfortable at the cemetery because it is a site of mourning and is represented as the frightening setting of ghost stories, zombie tales, and other encounters with the afterlife, cemeteries are also valued as historical sites. Hollywood Forever was named to the National Register of Historical Places in 1999, recognizing the cemetery’s cultural and historical value and marking it as worthy of preservation. The cemetery’s historical significance makes it an appealing tourist destination for those with an interest

in architecture, urban history, and celebrity culture. Looking at cemeteries as sites of memory, the chapter considers how individuals use these spaces to evoke and participate in personal and cultural commemoration. Hollywood Forever is still an operating cemetery, arranging and conducting funerals and burials. Combining its rich history with technological innovations, the cemetery portrays itself as a unique site, not only for tourists but also for those selecting a final burial place for themselves or their loved ones.

Chapter 3, “The Celebrity Cemetery,” distinguishes Hollywood Forever as a tourist attraction and addresses how the presence of the gravesites of celebrities and the presence of their fans shape the culture of this cemetery. The memorial service in honor of Rudolph Valentino, taking place annually at Hollywood Forever for more than eighty years, demonstrates the persistence of a social practice blending commemoration and celebrity culture. That the same individuals have participated in this memorial service for decades, some traveling thousands of miles to do so, is testament to the significance of celebrity fandom. Commemorative events honoring stars are a physical embodiment of fandom, an instance in which fans can publicly perform their interest in and devotion to a particular celebrity, within a group of people who, to varying degrees, might also share in that interest. Celebrity commemoration significantly creates public space at the cemetery, giving visitors the sense that they are welcome to come back to perform their own more private acts of commemoration or to bring others to see celebrity gravesites. This chapter also addresses celebrity gravers, who make a hobby of locating, visiting, and photographing the final resting places of celebrities. Many Los Angeles cemeteries, whether they promote tourism or discourage it, are sites of tourism. People plan trips to

the city, in part, for a kind of immersion in celebrity culture, whether to place your hands in the handprints of a favorite star at Grauman's Chinese Theatre, to eat at Canter's Deli or Spago, or to hope for a celebrity sighting. Along with the well-known drive-by tours of celebrity homes, visitors to Los Angeles can also participate in tours that relate specifically to celebrity death sites and cemeteries. These tours, which are condemned by some as disrespectful to the dead, are addressed in this chapter.

The next chapter, "On the Mausoleum Wall," examines Cinespia as a weekly ritual of screening films at the cemetery, potentially creating a sense of place for visitors who come to enjoy movies on the Fairbanks Lawn. The chapter begins with a discussion of greatly-needed places on the urban landscape where people can experience communal public life, and considers how Cinespia can enable an ephemeral feeling of belonging for those who participate. When Hollywood Forever is transformed into a screening space on summer Saturday nights, picnicking with friends and music provided by disc jockeys promotes a party-like atmosphere. The ambience encourages a more participatory role for the audience than is typical of a traditional movie theater, and moviegoers at Cinespia respond vocally and enthusiastically. In discussing Cinespia as cinematic space, the chapter places the film series within moviegoing traditions, from picture palaces and drive-ins to contemporary practices that situate the audience in out-of-the-ordinary settings. Extending Cinespia's sense of community to the virtual world, friends of the film series use Cinespia's MySpace page to participate in another public forum to share the films they love. As a record of years of screenings, rendered through comments, still images, and film quotes, MySpace becomes a site of cultural memory for the film series.

Because of its unique practices, Cinespia fosters an “in-crowd” feeling among those who attend frequently. The growing popularity of Cinespia has, for some, transformed the experience of the cemetery screenings from an intimate gathering of classic film fans to an overcrowded social scene.

Chapter 5, “Skeletons, Marigolds, and Sugar Skulls,” begins by tracing the history of Dia de los Muertos in Los Angeles and situates the celebration at Hollywood Forever within longstanding, community-based traditions. The celebration also builds on the cemetery’s own tradition of allowing creative methods of commemoration, such as evocative epitaphs and the inclusion of personal effects in memorial niches. For both altarists and visitors to the cemetery’s celebration, Dia de los Muertos can be a site for transformation of or expression of attitudes toward the dead. The event also offers another means of engagement with celebrity culture, whether altarists are remembering stars with whom they feel a deep sense of connection or are using the event as a way to draw attention to forgotten actors interred at Hollywood Forever. Expanding on the tradition of building altars to remember and welcome back family members who have died, many altars are created to honor loved ones who are buried elsewhere. As thousands of people pass through the cemetery for Dia de los Muertos, altarists tell the stories of their loved ones, which are inevitably also stories of family, heritage, and self.

“Transforming Forever,” the concluding chapter, reflects on changes to Hollywood Forever as the cemetery has undergone its transformation from a derelict embarrassment to a community asset. While the cemetery is regaining its cultural capital,

management policies and attitudes have alienated some property owners and celebrity  
gravers who have longstanding relationships with Hollywood Forever.



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For example, Tracy Terhune, author of *Valentino Forever: The History of the Valentino Memorial Services* and moderator of the “We Never Forget” Rudolph Valentino discussion group on Yahoo, posted a message to the group announcing that he was taking flowers to Valentino’s grave on the anniversary of the actor’s birthday. Several group members responded, expressing both their appreciation and the wish that they, too, could be in Los Angeles to commemorate Valentino’s birthday in person.

<sup>2</sup> According to the Celebrant USA Foundation and Institute, celebrants also preside over a variety of other social rituals, stepping in when, for whatever reason, those who are celebrating need assistance in planning their events: “Celebrants officiate at and co-create personalized ceremonies such as weddings, marriages, commitments, renewal of vows, baby welcomings and adoptions, coming of age, step-family tributes, new dwellings, birthdays, graduations, survivor tributes, job transitions, memorials, funerals/end of life tributes, divorce, special achievements and civic and corporate events” (<http://www.celebrantusa.com>).

<sup>3</sup> *Sunset Boulevard* and *The Maltese Falcon* are among the one hundred films Danny Peary chose to include in *Cult Movies: The Classic, the Sleepers, the Weird and the Wonderful* (1981).

## Chapter 2

### From Gardens to Gloom, Toward Grandeur

Standing outside the front gates of Hollywood Forever Cemetery, you'll find a strip mall on either side of you—one with a muffler shop, a transmission specialist, and window tinting service; the other with discount stores and a Mexican bakery. A car wash is across the street. In the distance, you'll see the iconic Hollywood sign in the hills. Turn around, and you'll see the water tower at Paramount Studios, just over the cemetery's back wall. The cemetery itself offers an array of exquisite statuary and architecture, tall palms and cypress trees, and a vast and welcoming lake. The Garden of Legends surrounds the lake, and it is the final resting place for many Hollywood luminaries. It wasn't always this way. This is the paradox of Hollywood Forever: over the past 100 years, the cemetery has been transformed from a site of austere glamour to a public embarrassment, and recently, into a hip hangout. Throughout these shifting cultural roles, however, the cemetery has remained just that: a place where loved ones—from Hollywood celebrities and politicians to everyday Angelenos—are laid to rest, remembered, and, at times, forgotten.

This chapter provides a brief history of the cemetery as a product of modernity and urbanization, expanding to recount the history of Hollywood Forever. As a site of cultural memory, the relationship between the entertainment industry and the cemetery is

crucial to understanding how Hollywood Forever functions as a landmark and as cultural space within the city. Lastly, an examination of Hollywood Forever's use of technology will demonstrate some of the innovative ways the cemetery is working to transform relationships between the living and the dead.

Hollywood Memorial Park (now Hollywood Forever Cemetery) was founded in 1899, a time when the fledgling town of Hollywood had only 500 residents. The cemetery served the city before the entertainment industry transformed it: in 1920, the cemetery sold forty acres of land to Paramount Studios, and today the Paramount backlot is adjacent to Hollywood Forever. Early studio stars and executives are buried at the cemetery, and just as the Paramount water tower can be seen from the cemetery, so are the cemetery grounds visible from the studio lot.<sup>1</sup> Paramount's familiar corporate logo, which adorns the tower, is comprised of a mountain surrounded by a halo of 22 stars, representing the studio's original leading actors, including silent film legend Douglas Fairbanks. Buried along with his son, Douglas Fairbanks, Jr., his is one of the most prominent gravesites at Hollywood Forever. Fairbanks Garden recalls the National Mall, with the sarcophagus set in a marble arch at the end of a long, narrow reflecting pool. The monuments and landscaping of this cemetery make it both aesthetically and culturally appealing. Many of the celebrities interred at Hollywood Forever are found in mausoleum crypts or have flat grass markers at their gravesites, while others have upright tombstones on the grounds. Among the most-visited monuments is a statue of Johnny Ramone,<sup>2</sup> guitar in hand, playing the Ramones' unique, straightforward punk rock into eternity. Visitors to the cemetery pose for photographs beside the memorial and leave

behind flowers and notes, which are removed daily by cemetery staff. Although Ramone was cremated<sup>3</sup> after his death from prostate cancer in 2004, he had the cenotaph designed as a place for his fans to remember him. The gravesite of bandmate Dee Dee Ramone, who died of a heroin overdose in 2002, is nearby.

Johnny Ramone's choice of Hollywood Forever as the site for his memorial indicates the recent gains the cemetery has made in reestablishing its cultural capital. Since Ramone's remains aren't buried at Hollywood Forever, this memorial could have been placed virtually anywhere—on the Sunset Strip, where rock culture flourishes, or in New York City, where the band rose to fame. As a permanent marker intended as a commemorative site, Ramone's cenotaph is now a gathering place for fans from all over the world. Similarly, Gil Rodman argues that Graceland gives Elvis Presley's fans

a geographic center that other fan communities lack; an environment where the type of "extreme" adulation that fans of other stars can't openly express is able to flourish with relatively little fear of public censure. The steady stream of visitors to Graceland [...] creates a physical (if somewhat fluid) community of fans who help reinforce for one another the feeling that their personal obsession is shared by thousands, if not millions, of other people" (128-29).

While Ramones fandom pales in comparison to the adoration bestowed upon Presley, the cenotaph, like Graceland, situates fan culture in a tangible, permanent space. The memorial brings a younger generation of visitors to Hollywood Forever, those who might be unlikely to make a pilgrimage to the graves of the cemetery's many black-and-white

era film legends. Ramone's memorial also reflects the significance of the cemetery's transformation from a place once so neglected that dozens of families, including the family of makeup artist Max Factor, had their loved ones disinterred and moved elsewhere. The history of the cemetery is intimately tied to the somewhat-mysterious history of Jules Roth, who first became affiliated with Hollywood Memorial Park in 1937. Although he was able to hide his past for decades, it came to light in the 1990s that Roth had been convicted of stock fraud in the 1920s and served five years of his prison term at San Quentin before being pardoned. He changed his moniker from Jack Roth to Jules Roth but didn't change his habits: he embezzled millions of dollars from the cemetery's endowment fund to support his lavish lifestyle. Meanwhile, with little money devoted to maintenance, the grounds and buildings were ignored. Earthquakes damaged buildings and tombstones, and shattered the stained glass in the mausoleums. None of these were repaired. The reflecting pool at Fairbanks Garden was clogged and overflowing. When Roth died in 1998, the bankrupt cemetery was placed on the auction block. Tyler Cassity, then 27 years old, purchased it for a mere \$375,000. Cassity's company, Forever Enterprises, has since invested millions of dollars in cleaning and refurbishing the cemetery, renaming it in the process. The renovation of the cemetery is widely praised, yet there is some skepticism about the new name, which has been critiqued for evoking the Disneyfication of the cemetery. Yet the Hollywood cemetery is the second to carry the Forever name; the first, Bellerive Forever in Creve Coeur, Missouri, was purchased and renamed by the Cassity family in 1992.

The gravesites of hundreds of celebrities such as Rudolph Valentino, Cecil B. De Mille, Janet Gaynor, and Mel Blanc render the cemetery as both a historical site and a tourist attraction. The Art Deco Society of Los Angeles presents an annual cemetery tour at Halloween, and Hollywood Forever's historic walking tour is available on an erratic weekend schedule. The guide is Karie Bible, who is also Hollywood Forever's official Lady in Black, carrying on the tradition of previous Ladies in Black who honored the memory of Rudolph Valentino by bringing red roses to his crypt (the Ladies in Black and the Valentino memorial service are discussed at length in Chapter 3). Cemetery tours and walks are common at sites where the famous are buried, as the material presence of the gravesites of the dead situates the past in a specific place: where the tour group stands in the present. Concluding *The Power of Place*, her study of urban sites of memory in Los Angeles, Dolores Hayden notes that "any historic place, once protected and interpreted, potentially has the power to serve as a lookout for future generations who are trying to plan the future, having come to terms with the past" (247). Contemplating the past is certainly the only way to learn from it, yet historic tours, like the historic places Hayden refers to, are inevitably an interpretation of the past. The stories any tour guide chooses to tell, as well as the gravesites not included in the cemetery tour, frame a particular history for the visitor. Tourists are not merely passive consumers of information provided to them but take on an interpretive and performative role themselves. Dean MacCannell argues that an "authentic touristic experience involves not merely connecting a marker [which MacCannell defines as 'a piece of information about a sight'] to a sight, but a participation in a collective ritual, in connecting one's own marker to a sight already

marked by others” (137). Having been told a story, the tourist now has her own story to tell.

As many cities and towns are reinventing themselves as tourist attractions, cemeteries, with their inherent historical value, are an obvious draw for heritage tourism sites. Yet, the cultural role of the cemetery is complex and varied. While it can be a place of daytime serenity and reflection for some visitors, the cemetery at night has long been characterized culturally as a site of fear and gloom. Whether one visits the cemetery on a ghost tour or with a small group of friends, there is some pleasure to be gained from the daring adventure of being in a foreboding, or perhaps forbidden, place at night. Popular culture has leveraged this fear through frightening stories set in the cemeteries of folklore, fiction, and film. For many, the proximity to the dead is enough of a discomfort to make the cemetery an unpleasant place. Some are uncomfortable with the idea of being surrounded by corpses, while others avoid the cemetery to avoid confronting the inevitability of their own death. Typical attitudes toward death are frankly expressed by sociologist Spencer Cahill in his ethnographic work with mortuary students at a community college. Cahill writes that he had “little contact with death and the dead. I was and still am frightened and repulsed by the very idea; therefore I gave them (and still give them) little thought. I doubt that I am unusual in these respects, at least among contemporary North Americans” (103-04).

Cultural perspectives on the cemetery are as diverse as culture itself, and the relationships individuals have with cemeteries are influenced by an array of factors such as religious beliefs and upbringing, attitudes toward death, and personal experience.

Children who grow up having family photographs made on Daffodil Sunday at Cleveland's Lake View cemetery, for example, will have their attitude shaped by participating in an enjoyable outdoor celebration at the cemetery. Mike Szymanski, who made frequent childhood visits to historic Green-Wood Cemetery in Brooklyn, now visits Hollywood Forever every week, typically bringing his own young sons with him. Szymanski's father's ashes are in a niche in the Abbey of the Psalms mausoleum, and Mike has a plot for himself and his partner across from the Garden of Legends. He says his father had more visitors at Hollywood Forever in the past year than he did during the last year of his life. Unlike Szymanski, many others only pass through the cemetery gates in a state of grief, attending the funeral of a loved one and hesitating to visit the gravesite on subsequent occasions because the memory associated with that place seems irreconcilably sad.

While discomfort with the cemetery is more common than not, this was not always the case. Two acts of separation mark the changing cultural outlook toward the cemetery: the removal of the dying and the dead from the home, and the relocation of the dead to the outskirts of the city. In his work on heterotopias, Michel Foucault marks the shift in attitude toward the cemetery as one that accompanies a geographical shift: the relocation of cemeteries outside of the city, which became common practice at the beginning of the nineteenth century, separated the living from the dead. Foucault describes the cemetery as a paradoxical "other space." Deeply connected to familial and cultural life "since each individual, each family has relatives in the cemetery," it is also detached from the processes of everyday life, and physically removed on the landscape



(25). Establishing new cemeteries on the outskirts of the city was part of urban growth in the United States in the 1820s and 1830s, and marked a significant shift in burial practices. In her extensive study of cemetery history, *Silent City on a Hill: Landscapes of Memory and Boston's Mount Auburn Cemetery*, Blanche Linden-Ward describes burial reform at that time as “only one of many ways in which urbanites attempted to improve their surroundings” (149); enhancing the conditions of graveyards was part of the overall growth and transformation of urban life. The overcrowded graveyard as the source of a pungent stench stemming from the decay of corpses buried there certainly contributed to the sense of the cemetery as a fearful place, even after more sanitary and pleasant facilities were built. Rather than being a place to mourn, the graveyard was a place to avoid. Mount Auburn Cemetery was established in 1831 to stem controversy over burial practices in Boston. It was the first of the so-called “rural cemeteries,” and it marks a shift in the lexicon from “graveyard” to “cemetery” to reflect the significant differences in the burial sites. Located in neighboring Cambridge, the cemetery was well removed from the urban center of Boston at the time of its founding. Mount Auburn served as the model for many other new cemeteries throughout the country. The rural cemetery is designed to combine the aesthetics of the natural environment with neatly-planned and organized plots, resulting in a garden-like setting. As such, the cemetery began to take on new purposes. Stanley French explains that in the rural cemetery “the plenitude and beauties of nature combined with art would convert the graveyard from a shunned place of horror into an enchanting place of succor and instruction” (46-47). As an “enchanting place,” the rural cemetery also became leisure space, a location for strolling along shaded

paths and picnicking, before the development of city parks allowed citizens to escape the noise and chaos of city life. Cemeteries provided the primary space available for enjoying the outdoors in an urban context. Similarly, the monuments and artworks located in rural cemeteries offered the public access to art before museums were established.

The rural cemetery design led to a new kind of overcrowding—the overwhelming number of trees, shrubs, and monuments created visual clutter as well as high maintenance costs for mowing and upkeep. In response, landscape architect Adolphe Strauch created the first lawn park cemetery in 1855 at Spring Grove in Cincinnati, minimizing the landscape elements and prohibiting fencing of individual gravesites. The result is a more placid environment, focused on uniformity and cleanliness rather than a lush natural setting. Hollywood Forever describes its origins as paving the way for “a (then) revolutionary concept in the cemetery industry: the lawn park. Spacious, simple, pastoral landscapes would be complemented by elegant monuments and markers, combining art and nature in a beautiful park-like setting” (*Official Directory 2*). Where public parks began to take over some of the greenspace functions of cemeteries at the turn of the last century, now Hollywood Forever is drawing people to the paths and gardens on the grounds. Visitors stroll through the cemetery, and are welcome to do so. Others use the cemetery space for reflection: as a quiet, sheltered space in the midst of hectic Los Angeles, Hollywood Forever is a refuge. As Rachel,<sup>4</sup> a cemetery regular, points out, “it’s the only place you can be in Hollywood where you don’t feel like you’re in Hollywood, even though you’re surrounded by Hollywood stars. It’s quiet, it’s peaceful. There’s so much love here.” While she was recently unemployed, Rachel says,

she visited the cemetery three or four times a week. She would feed the ducks, and walk through the cemetery, often stopping at the grave of a fourteen-year-old girl. “Every time I’d come, you could tell her friends had brought more stuff, and trinkets, and letters. She was fourteen—that takes a lot of effort for kids her age to get here every week. To constantly come, over the course of the year, it’s constant love.” Rachel witnessed fundamental acts of remembering, putting together a story of grief and care through the material evidence of the remembrances left behind at the cemetery.

The cemetery is a temporal refuge as well. Entering this isolated space can function as an escape from the crisis time of the present, into a variety of pasts that can be rendered as more romantic, more idealized, or simpler than life is now. This kind of nostalgia is, as geographer Karen Till posits, “often motivated by a desire to replace apprehension about change in the present and future through the pleasures of remembering a known place in the past” (57). Cemeteries are locations outside of place and time, and frequent visitors develop a strong sense of place that creates feelings of familiarity and comfort. It may seem paradoxical that a place where one goes to grieve, or may choose to avoid because of the grief associated with it, can be a place of comfort. Spending time tending to the grave of a loved one is a way of spending time with memories of that person, opening oneself to the pleasure of remembering that may be mingled with a profound sense of loss. Through that commingling, however, healing and a sense of acceptance about the inevitability of loss and death is possible.

For the celebrity cemetery, sense of place develops through the memories accumulated by visitors attending Cinespia, Dia de los Muertos, Douglas Fairbanks’

birthday party, or myriad other events. Cultural geographer J. B. Jackson describes a contemporary sense of place as being present in localities that “are cherished because they are embedded in the everyday world around us and easily accessible, but at the same time are distinct from that world.” He adds that “a visit to one of them is a small but significant event. We are refreshed and elated each time we are there” (158). For Hollywood Forever, this sense of place is accompanied by a distinct sense of time. The convergence of times at the cemetery can create a kind of timelessness: the eternal time of the dead blends with the slow pace of tourist time and the hectic press of Los Angeles time. The historical appeal of the cemetery adds to the sense of timelessness, allowing visitors to share stories of the successes and scandals of the celebrities buried at Hollywood Forever, resurrecting a past in the present. The unique tempo of mourning time runs alongside this timelessness as the period that is set aside in the aftermath of a death for coping, healing, and reordering one’s life in the absence of a loved one. The cemetery regulars who drop in to Hollywood Forever for frequent visits use the cemetery to physically dislocate themselves from the time of everyday life, escaping from immediate routines, concerns, and pressures.

Hollywood Forever is working to alter perceptions of the cemetery and to change the alienated relationship between the living and the dead. Beginning in the early twentieth century, the increasing number of individuals who died in the hospital rather than at home had a profound effect on displacing death from everyday life. The physical removal of the dead from the space of the living renders a psychic and emotional distance from the body of the deceased. When death takes place in the hospital, and the body is

carted away for burial, the body can be seen as “other,” no longer the loved one himself or herself, but “only” the remains, to be properly handled by the professionals of the death care industry. This growing distance and difference between the living person and his or her dead body creates a social discomfort that extends to the cemetery as the physical space where the dead are buried. As Joseph Roach asks in his inquiry into history, memory, and death, “If the dead are forever segregated, how are the living supposed to remember who they are?” (55). By inviting visitors to use the cemetery as social space, Hollywood Forever closes the gap between the living and the dead: if we can enjoy a picnic and a film, listen to music, or celebrate the lives of Rudolph Valentino and Tyrone Power in the cemetery, then that place can be associated with more than just grieving. When films are shown at Cinespia, a thousand people gather on the Fairbanks Lawn, resting on blankets and reclining on lawn chairs. Is the cemetery at night still frightening in the company of so many people, enjoying a screening of *The Maltese Falcon* or *Chinatown*?

### **Sites of Cultural Memory**

The gravesite pilgrimage is not an uncommon cultural event: Arlington National Cemetery, for example, claims four million visitors a year, as individuals and families travel to Washington to perform acts of personal and cultural memory. But what do these sojourns accomplish, and why do memorial sites matter? Cemeteries serve both personal and public roles; a visit to the gravesite can be a way of spending time with and caring for the memory of a loved one, or it can be a means of engaging local or national history. A

typical afternoon at Hollywood Forever readily includes mourners laying fresh flowers beside a headstone and sightseers snapping photos of celebrity graves.

In his work on memory and history (“Memory”), Pierre Nora argues that the modern, mediated world has forestalled the possibility of living in a society in which cultural memory is held by individuals and their communities, since the function of memory as a part of everyday life has been replaced with official versions of history that dictate our understanding of the past. “If we still dwelt among our memories, there would be no need to consecrate sites embodying them,” Nora writes. “*Lieux de mémoire* [places of memory] would not exist, because memory would not have been swept away by history” (289). For Nora, history is “the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer. Memory is always a phenomenon of the present, a bond tying us to the eternal present; history is a representation of the past” (289). The tension between history and memory demands that personal memory be carefully tended, and that individuals and groups continue to work to imbue places with meaning that can open the dialogue between the past—from which we are separated and no longer feel we belong to—and the present, trying to integrate a sense of who we were with an idea of who we are now. Living in a culture where a sense of history erodes memory through the act of creating official, sanctioned versions of the collective past, we are less capable of finding the past to be of personal value. History becomes someone else’s story. As Nora points out, history belongs to everyone and therefore to no one, where memory belongs not only to the individual but also to the communities to which that individual belongs (“General” 3). How can we activate the past to make it meaningful? How do we bridge

the space between personal memory and cultural memory, integrating ourselves into a collective sense of remembering?

Visiting sites of cultural memory is a way to set into motion the relationship between the present and the past. Not only the graves but also the historically significant architecture of Hollywood Forever effectively evoke the past, from the turn of the previous century to the recent past. The original Bell Tower, built in 1905, still stands, and the Eliza Otis Memorial Chimes, named in honor of the wife of the *Los Angeles Times* founder, are still operating as well. Built in 1938 to display the remains of those who choose cremation, the cemetery's columbarium is a warm, Spanish-style building with a fountain set in the rotunda. A handful of public figures are among those who are memorialized in the columbarium. Celebrities run the gamut from Elmo Lincoln, the first actor to play Tarzan in 1918's *Tarzan of the Apes*, to Lana Clarkson, the starlet found dead in the home of record producer Phil Spector in 2003. Although two generations separate these actors, both have memorial niches that remind the visitor of their roles in celebrity culture. The traditional, and expected, language for the grave marker is often an indication of familial bonds, such as "loving husband" or "devoted father." Lincoln's grave marker simply reads: "Elmo Lincoln / The First Tarzan / 1889 – 1952." His daughter was only sixteen when he died, but she describes him as a caring and dedicated father. One wonders who decided how his grave would be marked.<sup>5</sup>

Where Elmo Lincoln's niche contains only an urn holding his cremains, Lana Clarkson's large niche in the columbarium appears like a fan's memorabilia collection. The sides and back of the niche are covered with leopard-patterned cloth, and a large

color photograph of Clarkson in a tank top, grinning broadly at the camera, takes up most of the back wall. A marquee card with Clarkson seductively posed in a short red dress is one of several other photographs included. Family members and fans who visit leave flowers, notes, balloons, and other remembrances. Unlike the outdoor memorial for Johnny Ramone, it appears that most of the remembrances for Clarkson are left beside her niche. The presence of these items, in addition to the niche itself, indicates to the visitor that Clarkson is, quite simply, remembered. More complex, however, is the way in which the visitor makes meaning of the entire assembly of images and texts. Her niche is evocative, and like Lincoln's niche, draws on celebrity to indicate her cultural position in time as well as in terms of cultural capital. Including items that are markers of celebrity in the niche informs visitors of the culturally significant career of the person inurned there. For example, a few steps away from Lana Clarkson's niche is the final resting place of Ann Sheridan, Warner Bros.' "Oomph Girl." Sheridan's biographer Karen McHale (who is also the founder of the Hollywood Underground website and listserv) learned that her wishes to have her cremains placed in a columbarium in Los Angeles were not carried out. McHale found the executor of Sheridan's will, located her ashes, and arranged for Hollywood Forever to donate a niche for her in the Columbarium. A framed portrait of Sheridan on the cover of *Time* magazine, a significant sign of her fame, is placed beside the urn containing her ashes. While this seems appropriate to the celebrity cemetery, the lack of restrictions Hollywood Forever imposes on what can be included in a niche is unique among cemeteries and allows those who want to be remembered by more than a name and dates of birth and death to create memorable sites



of commemoration. By capturing the attention of visitors, these informative and engaging sites of memory keep the names and roles of these actors in circulation. The visitor to the columbarium can act as a beacon, carrying the stories of these bygone celebrities back into contemporary discourse.

Cultural memory is not merely a matter of looking back to the past, but rather looking back with a purpose—to reify, to restore, to transform, or to otherwise use the past to serve purposes for the present. Cultural memory is comprised of the stories we tell ourselves and the images we hold up to remind ourselves of who we are. We maintain those stories because they form a narrative of a world we want to belong to, and allow us to have a place in it. We work to transform—or choose to ignore—the stories and images that conflict with a desired worldview. Public monuments, memorials, and cemeteries are material articulations of that narrative. Communication scholar Barbie Zelizer asserts that cultural memory is concerned with “the establishment of social identity, authority, solidarity, and political affiliation” rather than with historical accuracy (217), pointing to its role in group and community formation. Unlike history, cultural memory is shifting, contestable, and readily revisable. How particular aspects of cultural memory are valued and privileged changes across the spectrum of culture and time. There may be general agreement that Rudolph Valentino was the first superstar, but the extent that Valentino still matters 80 years after his death is open to debate. Cultural memory includes the sinners and the saints, sometimes embodied within a single figure. Griffith Jenkins Griffith, who is buried at Hollywood Forever, is considered a great philanthropist: he gave the city of Los Angeles 3,015 acres of land for Griffith Park, the largest

metropolitan park in the nation. He also shot his wife in the face, permanently disfiguring her, and consequently served time for attempted murder. The name Griffith will always be in circulation in Los Angeles, as 10 million people make use of the park each year. Yet it is the dramatic and outrageous stories of Griffith's life that make him, as an individual, interesting. Place names—from Griffith Park to O'Hare Airport to Rockefeller Center—become so strongly associated with a site and its function that the person for whom the place is named can fade into the background. The soaring obelisk that marks Griffith's grave at Hollywood Forever indicates his social significance, and perhaps his enormous ego, but offers no evidence that during his lifetime he was considered "the most hated man in Los Angeles" (Scott 40). Visit Hollywood Forever with a cemetery enthusiast and you are likely to hear Griffith's tale, as it is a favorite anecdote among those with an interest in Hollywood's dearly departed.

Situated in the cemetery, and activated by the material evidence of history, Griffith's story exemplifies cultural memory as dialogic. While the physical presence of the memorial site does work to sustain a sense of the past, our understandings of and relationship to the past change over time. The gravesite is fixed and unchanging, and there is no certainty that the story it tells will be the same story told in the future. Nora notes that

although it is true that the fundamental purpose of a *lieu de mémoire* is to stop time, to inhibit forgetting, to fix a state of things, to immortalize death, and to materialize the immaterial [...] it is also clear that *lieux de mémoire* thrive only because of their capacity for change, their ability to

resurrect old meanings and generate new ones along with new and unforeseeable connections (that is what makes them exciting). (“General” 15)

Engagement with places of memory can lead to a shift in the meaning of past events and individuals: spending time at the cemetery, talking with others about the people buried there, and participating in commemorative events enable the past to be reconsidered and reconstituted in the present. In seeing sites of memory as dialogic, communication scholar Bradford Vivian argues that “an official site of public memory—a monument, an archive, or sacred ground—represents not the static container of such memory, but the dynamic reference point for the diverse memory work that sustains it, the commemorative nexus formed at the intersection of a public’s many mnemonic practices” (203). The sheer number of individuals who visit cemeteries, whether to engage in personal or cultural memory, indicates that conversations with the past are ongoing. The cemetery is a space in which, inspired by the surroundings, conversation about the past can occur. To visit the grave of a loved one is to spend time with the memories of that person. Mourners often address the individual aloud, carrying on an actual conversation with the dead. For the celebrity graver or the visitor with historical interests, the cemetery can be a place to continue a conversation with the past already underway, enabling a material reference point for nostalgia, fandom, or history. Standing by the grave of Tyrone Power or Marion Davies is to situate oneself to tell, or to hear, a story that may not materialize in another way.

Participation in celebrity culture manifests itself as valuable in a variety of ways. Through admiring and emulating celebrities, fans may find a sense of identity, whether for good or ill. With her jet-black short hair and a small silver barbell piercing her nasal septum, Alexis appears likely to be visiting Hollywood Forever to remember Johnny Ramone or Bianca Halstead, former lead singer of the Los Angeles band Betty Blowtorch. But it is Rudolph Valentino that draws Alexis to the cemetery, to attend her third memorial service held in his honor. She notes that her interest in the silent film star began when she picked up Emily Leider's 2004 book *Dark Lover*, one of many Valentino biographies. Yet Alexis's fandom is rooted in familial and ethnic culture. "My great-grandparents came over about the same time he did. And it gave me a little taste of what they possibly went through when they came to a new country and wanted to start a new life for themselves," she says. "So I feel very touched by him being Italian, and my admiration for my own family. Not to mention that he was talented, and beautiful, and intelligent. I was very taken with him." Alexis has since become a collector of Valentino memorabilia and displayed some of her items at a silent film screening in San Francisco, where she lives. Through this performance of fandom, Alexis asserts her identity not only as an admirer of Valentino but also as an Italian-American who embraces the immigrant story of struggle and success.

Celebrity culture also provides a reference point for the details of a particular era. To recall a film or song from one's childhood, or any other particular time in our lives, is to recall ourselves—who we were, what we knew and believed, our worldview in that moment. Peter Finch's crypt is across from Rudolph Valentino's. Despite Finch's long

career, he may be best remembered for his role in 1976's *Network*, for which he won a posthumous Academy Award. The rallying cry "I'm madder than hell and I'm not going to take it anymore," readily associated with Finch and Howard Beale, the character he played in *Network*, epitomizes the post-Watergate, pre-cable television moment in which the film was made. Other luminaries buried at Hollywood Forever have careers that outlived them; as stars of classic films, they are routinely resurrected on cable networks like American Movie Classics and Turner Classic Movies. These networks serve as important repositories of cultural memory, and the films that are aired provide certain celebrities with more opportunities to be remembered than are afforded others. The American Film Institute, celebrating the centennial of cinema, has renewed the cultural cache of classic films and stars through its highly-publicized lists of the best 100 movie quotes, musicals, and screen characters, among other categories. Hundreds of fans travel from as far away as the Midwest to honor the memory of Rudolph Valentino at each year's memorial service, and there are active internet-based fan clubs for Tyrone Power and Jayne Mansfield,<sup>6</sup> in addition to scores of other dead celebrities. After Mansfield's untimely death in 1967, a memorial service was held in Beverly Hills and her body was transported to Pennsylvania for interment. More than thirty years later, Mansfield's Los Angeles fan club dedicated a cenotaph for her at Hollywood Forever, giving them a place to gather and remember her. The cenotaph is engraved with the same language found on Mansfield's grave marker: "We live to love you more each day." That Mansfield's fans felt compelled to create this site is testament to the power of place to situate and give voice to cultural memory.

Many theorists take the perspective that places of memory function to forestall forgetting and to prevent obsolescence. As Marc Augé points out, the memorial monument “is an attempt at the tangible expression of permanence or, at the very least, duration.” Monuments “thus enable people to think in terms of continuity through the generations. [...] Without the monumental illusion before the eyes of the living, history would be a mere abstraction” (60). Augé offers a commonly-held perspective on memorials, that they are constructed in the service of the present moment, in order to speak to the future. J.B. Jackson takes a similar stance: “The monument, in short, is a guide to the future: just as it confers a kind of immortality on the dead, it determines our actions for years to come” (93). In order for a memorial to determine our actions, we must be able to respond to it, and the moment of reception must be taken seriously. As meanings are not universal, neither is the response of the visitor. This is especially true of the cemetery, which is a site of both personal and cultural memory. The cemetery has only limited authority over the design of individual grave markers, yet it can work to promote a certain public image of itself as a site of cultural memory. At Hollywood Forever, even the negative aspects of the past are mobilized to reframe the cemetery’s image. Hattie McDaniel, the actress who played Mammy in *Gone With the Wind*, was the first African-American to win an Academy Award. When McDaniel died in 1952, her wishes were to be buried at Hollywood Memorial Park, in the company of other prominent Hollywood figures including Victor Fleming, who directed *Gone With the Wind*.<sup>7</sup> Jules Roth denied her request, as the cemetery had a “whites only” policy at the time. As the new owner of the cemetery, Tyler Cassity offered a burial place for

McDaniel, but her family chose not to have her disinterred and reburied, so a cenotaph was dedicated in her honor instead. The cenotaph is prominently located across the bridge from the Fairbanks Garden, and a few paces from Johnny Ramone's memorial. Paying tribute to Hattie McDaniel recalls not only *Gone With the Wind* and all that it invokes, but also recalls the cemetery's racism. In "righting that wrong," Cassity may be trying to erase a racist past, but also creates a material reminder of it. Regardless of Cassity's intentions, how the memorial for McDaniel is understood rests with the visitor to the cemetery. If Hollywood Forever is working to change attitudes about death, the material artifacts of cultural memory—namely the gravesites and memorial markers—are used in conjunction with organized events to create experiences that can evoke a desired perspective about our cultural past, transforming the cemetery from a place that is strictly solemn to one that can also invite celebration.

### **Cemetery Tours and Walks: Expanding the Tradition**

Historic cemeteries, including Hollywood Forever, have long attracted tourists as well as those on a pilgrimage to see the final resting places of the politicians, military leaders, celebrities, and artists they admire. Many of these sites offer guided tours, as well as maps for visitors to locate the gravesites they seek. Atlanta's Oakland Cemetery, a rural cemetery established in 1850 on farmland on the outskirts of the city, is now situated in the city center. Like Hollywood Forever, Oakland provides a quiet respite in downtown Atlanta. The last lot at the cemetery was sold in 1884,<sup>8</sup> so visitors are far less likely to encounter mourners at Oakland than at Hollywood Forever, which is still

accepting new interments. Priding itself on its architecture, horticulture, and historical significance, Oakland Cemetery positions itself much like a museum or city park, offering afternoon and evening tours focusing on each of these aspects of the cemetery. Taking on the role of city park, Oakland hosts an annual Easter egg hunt and Arts in the Park, ten days of performances, lectures, and art installations on the cemetery grounds.

The events at Hollywood Forever are somewhat in keeping with the social and cultural functions carried out at Oakland, Green-Wood, and several other cemeteries, albeit with a Hollywood twist. Many who feel comfortable with the presentation of a play or the performance of classical music at a cemetery disapprove of Cinespia: showing films in the cemetery, and projecting them on the mausoleum wall, seems disrespectful toward the dead. In some regard, this disapproval veils a highbrow/lowbrow critique; that “culture” can find its place on sacred ground but popular culture cannot. Andrea and David, a twenty-something couple whose first Cinespia outing is the 2006 screening of John Ford’s *The Searchers* (1956), are divided on the issue of appropriateness. Concerned that Andrea would be unhappy at the cemetery, David only told her beforehand that they were going to watch a film outdoors, not mentioning that the screening is at Hollywood Forever. “I don’t think he knew either way if it was going to bother me,” she says. “And here I am. I’ll leave when I get uncomfortable.” David shrugs and says, “Well, it’s going to happen someday,” indicating that he is at ease with his mortality and thus does not mind being in the cemetery. Andrea mentions that her grandparents are buried at Mt. Sinai Memorial Park, noting that she would not mind a public event such as a play being held in the cemetery, but not a film. Whether it is her



discomfort with the cemetery, the chilly evening, or her anger at David's deception, Andrea and David leave before the film ends.

Some within the death care industry echo the sentiments of those who find social events in the cemetery irreverent. In his book of essays, *Bodies in Motion and at Rest: On Metaphor and Mortality*, essayist, poet, and funeral director Thomas Lynch<sup>9</sup> finds fault with the performance of a play at a community cemetery. When family members of those buried in the cemetery complained about the play, the thespian group argued that the performance was a celebration of the lives of the dead. Yet in the town's newspaper, opponents argued the cemetery "is full of fathers and mothers and daughters and sons who have no obligation to educate or entertain or instruct the living. Museums and libraries, art galleries and public parks, serve these purposes. The bodies of the dead make Oak Grove a sacred place" (240). Lynch adds his own concern to that of his neighbors, warning that "the harm, of course, is that once the gate is opened it is hard to close, and lost forever is the sacred and dedicated space that is only a cemetery and needs be nothing more" (242). Lynch maintains a traditional perspective on burial and is unwilling to allow the corruption of what he sees as the sacred space of the cemetery. Yet this is also a perspective on death: that the lives of the dead should be revered, but not celebrated, in the cemetery. For *Hollywood Forever*, the effort to change the public's relationship to the cemetery means overcoming opposition from within the death care industry as well as encouraging new social practices within the cemetery space.

## Technology and the Cemetery

The story of Hollywood Forever begins with LifeStories: in 1998, Tyler Cassity attended the California Funeral Directors Association convention, trying to sell the industry on offering video tributes as part of their funeral packages. The funeral directors were largely uninterested, but Cassity found something of interest himself—the fate of bankrupt Hollywood Memorial Park. Purchasing the cemetery not only launched a new career for Cassity, it also gave Tyler and his brother Brent a ready-made market for LifeStories, the personal biographies Forever Enterprises produces through audio clips, photographs, video, and text. Hollywood Forever is the final resting place of more than 80,000 “ordinary” people, as well as several hundred Hollywood stars, yet Cassity’s approach to burial and death is hardly ordinary. The funeral chapel is wired for live broadcasts of services over the Internet, so family and friends unable to be in Los Angeles can attend funeral services virtually. The digital tributes are available at the cemetery and on the Internet, where the LifeStories technology functions as a digital memorial. Visitors to artist and performer Tomata du Plenty’s LifeStory, for example, can watch the video tribute shown at his funeral service and add a message to the list of memorial posts celebrating his life and mourning his death.

Although the project was inspired by Tyler Cassity’s discovery of an audiotape made by his grandmother before she died, LifeStories are not only for creating biographies of the dead. Anyone can begin creating their own LifeStory with a single photograph and 100 words of text, at no charge, on the Forever Network website (“LifeStories”). The full video production can be costly, but the Cassitys argue that

money is better spent on a lasting video tribute than on an expensive casket and funeral (Cloud 66). Scott Everett Berger, who participates in LifeStories, offers an example of how the technology can be used to record the landmarks in one's life. In addition to photos, videos, and a biography, Berger used the Lifestory e-mail function to document turning forty, getting laid off from his job, meeting the love of his life, and his subsequent marriage. Berger has the assurance that when he dies, he will be remembered as he would like to be. For anyone who has ever made a list of what songs they would like to have played at their funeral, LifeStories may be an appealing technology, although it also means inevitably confronting one's own mortality.

If LifeStories is a way for an individual to write his or her own obituary, this technology can have a broader cultural impact. Many writing on the death industry (Lynch 2000; Mitford 1998; Palmer 1993) relate incidents in which a family tells a funeral director, "it's what Dad would have wanted," when the funeral arrangements are more likely to reflect what the family wants. In her groundbreaking book *The American Way of Death*, Jessica Mitford recounts an informal survey conducted by the *San Francisco Chronicle* in which individuals on the street were asked what kind of funeral they wanted. She says the respondents typically wished for inexpensive, simple funerals. In her wry manner, Mitford notes:

Oddly enough, the funeral men [...] are not particularly worried. After all, these people will not be around to arrange their own funerals. When the bell tolls for them, the practical essentials—selection of a casket and all

the rest—will be in the hands of close relatives who will, it is statistically certain, express their sense of loss in an appropriately costly funeral. (130)

As advances in medicine have allowed many terminally ill individuals to sustain some quality of life, many have worked with their loved ones to decide how they want their funerals to be arranged. Including the LifeStory tribute video in a funeral can serve as a catharsis, focusing on the celebration of the life lived rather than mourning death. To bring this sense of joyful memory to the traditionally somber funeral is crucial to Hollywood Forever’s efforts to change attitudes about death.

On *This American Life*, host Ira Glass recounts the story of his producer’s experience of attending a funeral at Hollywood Forever in 2000, ultimately inspiring Glass to interview Tyler Cassity. Unaccustomed to having technology incorporated into a funeral, guests were initially shocked as the LifeStories video began:

On screen are pictures of the deceased—black and white on the beach as a young man, a wedding shot with his wife, the obligatory goofy shot of him in a dress with his buddies. The photos were selected by the family and set to a musical soundtrack, which was also selected by the family. These being Jews, my people, as you might guess, there is only one choice about the music. (In the background, we hear Barbra Streisand begin to sing “Memory.”) Really, no choice at all. Barbra. Auntie Viv audibly exclaims, “Oy vey!” Grandma Goldie responds, “Oy, Viv!” But here’s the thing: people are crying. They’re crying more than they did during the eulogies. Later, after the burial, back at the house everyone watches the video over

and over. They laugh, they cry, they rewind, they replay. Barbra hasn't had a hit like this since *Yentl*. ("Kodak")

While poking fun at his own cultural traditions, Glass also shows how the traditions surrounding funeral practices can be transformed when mourners are given the opportunity to collectively share photographs, and subsequently reminiscences, of the deceased. For children, grandchildren, and friends who did not know this man in his youth, new perspectives on a life lived may emerge.

Most of the news coverage of LifeStories positions this technology as an adaptation of Hollywood aesthetics; that the production of one's video biography promises Andy Warhol's "fifteen minutes of fame." As John Cloud, writing for *Time* magazine points out, "Forever is doing well because the Cassitys realized before anyone else in their glacially changing industry that many Americans would love to have their own A&E *Biography*" (66). I would argue that LifeStories is a natural extension of home movies, blogging, and other uses of technology for the production of self-expression and self-identity. This perspective makes LifeStories less of a novelty and more of an ordinary next step of integrating technology into both life and death. All of the LifeStories, including hundreds of celebrity biographies created by Forever Studios, are available on their website. For the bereaved, the opportunity to read messages left by others and to contribute to the digital LifeStories memorial can provide an emotional outlet for grief. Tracing the history of memorial practices in the U.S., Cheryl Jorgensen-Earp and Lori Lanzilotti note a shift in these customs:

A primary cultural aspect of the nineteenth century was the creation of private memorials in the home—daguerreotypes of the deceased, hair woven into wreaths for mourning lockets, embroidered or painted memorial pictures, mourning scrapbooks or quilts—many of which reached the level of “funerary art.” [...] Today, the surviving remnants of such private rituals as post-mortem photographs or mourning rings are often viewed as morbid or perverted. Yet, the bereaved of today often point to the bureaucratic rituals they have conducted after a relative’s death—with the bank, insurance companies, social security, and veterans affairs agencies—as a coping mechanism that similarly gave them “something to do” in the days and weeks following the death. (158)

These bureaucratic responsibilities can function as a checklist, so that completing each necessary step brings the bereaved toward a sense of closure. But this is closure in the business sense, not the emotional or psychic sense. In a culture driven by accomplishment, it is not difficult to mistakenly substitute “finished with business” for “finished with grieving.” Some of the requisite emotional work can occur through the digital memorial.

Digital memorials often allow visitors to contribute to the site by posting comments to a guestbook, often termed leaving “flowers” or remembrances. The digital memorial’s guestbook, in fact, may come to replace the traditional condolence card. As the Internet becomes a fixed aspect of everyday life, digital culture is increasingly a space in which public discourse is created and perpetuated. The medium allows for exchanges

and conversations that might otherwise never take place, and allows both friends and strangers to share in commemorating the dead. Unlike a traditional condolence card, however, visitors often address the deceased directly rather than expressing a shared loss to family and friends. LifeStories is one of hundreds of memorial websites available on the Internet, but its relationship to the Forever cemeteries makes it uniquely an extension of the funeral itself.

While the death care industry may not have been interested in adopting LifeStories when Tyler and Brent Cassity initially presented the technology, video tributes are now a standard feature in funeral packages throughout the industry in the United States. At Forest Lawn Memorial-Parks in the Los Angeles area, for example, the DVD tribute is part of the most expensive funeral package, called “Elegance,” and also is priced a la carte at \$375 (“Funeral Packages”). Simply described, Forest Lawn offers “DVD Tributes that create a slide show of photographs set to music that can be played during the service, as well as being a personal and touching keepsake for the family” (“General Price List”). With its focus on an Internet presence, Forever LifeStories goes beyond the chapel tribute to include online photographs, videos, and a site for visitors to leave memorial messages.

Like Hollywood Forever’s LifeStories, Dignity Memorial focuses on digital commemoration as a benefit to its clients. Dignity Memorial is the brand name for products offered by Service Corporation International (SCI), the death industry conglomerate that acquired funeral homes, mortuaries, and cemeteries around the world during the 1980s and 1990s. In the Los Angeles area, SCI holds among its properties

Pacific View, the final resting place of John Wayne, and Pierce Bros. Westwood, where Marilyn Monroe is buried. According to its website, the technology company Making everlasting Memories partnered with SCI in 1998 to create the Everlasting memorial, “combin[ing] a biography with images such as photographs, awards and certificates, with tributes from friends and family across the globe to create a meaningful, enduring legacy to be shared with future generations” (“MeM Fact Sheet”). Evidence of the growing popularity of digital obituaries and memorials is offered by Legacy.com, an online service that provides obituaries for more than 500 newspapers nationwide. According to an article in the *Erie Times-News* in Erie, Pennsylvania, “In the first quarter of 2001, Legacy.com posted about 3,000 obituaries, which attracted some 2,000 guest-book entries. In the first quarter of 2007, about 300,000 obituaries were posted, accompanied by more than 2 million guest-book entries” (Bardin, par. 8).

At Hollywood Forever, innovative uses of technology and inventive uses of space are focused on transforming not only the experience of the cemetery but also the death care industry. Whether one considers Tyler Cassity a marketing whiz kid, a cultural visionary, or a savvy entrepreneur, he encourages new attitudes toward death and the cemetery through his leadership and public image. As visitors are made welcome in the cemetery and blend mourning with celebration, a powerful sense of place can develop. The cemetery can facilitate this change, yet each individual must be willing to set aside his or her sense of foreboding and pass through the gates to engage the cemetery as social space. As celebrity graver and Dearly Departed tour guide Scott Michaels says, “there is a point within each person that the switch eventually happens, and it’s no longer a creepy,



scary place. It's actually a nice place. But there actually is, I think, a moment within somebody's own mind when that happens." Michaels has a multifaceted relationship with Hollywood Forever: although it is not included in his tour of celebrity death sites, he has considerable knowledge of the cemetery and its residents. Living within walking distance of Hollywood Forever, he visits often and regularly attends Cinespia, sitting in the back in a tall chair. He has purchased a niche for his ashes in the Cathedral Mausoleum, near Rudolph Valentino's gravesite. Michaels is one of many who have enduring relationships with Hollywood Forever, in life and in death.

The multiplicity of meanings attached to Hollywood Forever is not unique to cemeteries, nor is it unique to public spaces in general. As a site of both personal memory and cultural memory, visitors have different reasons for coming to Hollywood Forever: some to mourn, some to commemorate, and some as a pilgrimage. At the celebrity cemetery, these meanings can overlap, not only as tourists walk discreetly past mourners, but also as each visitor intent on paying respects to an admired celebrity has his own personal reasons for doing so.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> From the ground, only the trees and mausoleums are visible from the Paramount lot, but the mausoleums are merely buildings and don't readily denote death as a tombstone would. Offices with windows in the upper stories of buildings on the studio lot would offer a broad view of the cemetery, potentially serving as a reminder of Hollywood's history as well as the ephemerality of both life and film. The HBO documentary *The Young and the Dead* includes footage of the view of Hollywood Forever from the Paramount lot in Chapter 15, "The Neighbor."

<sup>2</sup> When the Ramones formed in 1974, all of the band members adopted the surname Ramone. Johnny Ramone's given name is John Cummings, and Dee Dee Ramone's given name is Douglas Glenn Colvin. In both instances, both names are used to mark the individual's gravesite.

<sup>3</sup> Ramone's widow Linda has his ashes.

<sup>4</sup> I have used only the first names or pseudonyms for the majority of the individuals I interviewed. Their perspectives and stories are more relevant than their concrete identities. In instances in which a person's identity is important to the project, full names are used with permission.

<sup>5</sup> See Marci'a Lincoln Rudolph, *My Father: Elmo Lincoln, The Original Tarzan*. Madison, NC: Empire Publishing, 2001.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, <http://bxluvrox.tripod.com/tyronepowerprinceofacting>, <http://tyforum.bravepages.com/typower.html>, [www.jaynemansfield.net](http://www.jaynemansfield.net) and <http://www.lovingjaynemansfield.com>. The Internet provides a forum for fans of dead celebrities to participate in digital communities with others who share their interests. Iconic stars Elvis Presley, Marilyn Monroe, and James Dean each have networks of fan clubs with local, national, and on-line fan bases.

<sup>7</sup> McDaniel died before her *Gone With the Wind* costars Clark Gable and Vivien Leigh. Gable, who died in 1960, is interred at Forest Lawn Memorial Park, Glendale. Following her death in 1967, Leigh was cremated and her ashes scattered.

<sup>8</sup> Although the last lot at Oakland was sold more than a hundred years ago, there are recent interments of note: former Atlanta mayor Maynard Jackson was buried at Oakland in 2003, one of 25 mayors interred there. Famed golfer Bobby Jones, an Atlanta native, was buried in 1971. Margaret Mitchell, author of *Gone With the Wind*, was buried at Oakland following her death in 1949.

<sup>9</sup> Lynch is often called upon by reporters to deliver a negative critique of Hollywood Forever. See, for example, John Cloud's "Meeting Your (Film) Maker: The Cassity boys want their cemeteries to tell your life story" in *Time* magazine, 10 July 2000, 65-6; and Norma Meyer's "Mourning glory: Nearly forgotten celebrity cemetery in Hollywood rises from the dead with groundbreaking attractions" in the *San Diego Union Tribune*, 6 September 2001.

## Chapter 3

### The Celebrity Cemetery

The name Florence Lawrence is not widely known, and was not known at all at the beginning of her Hollywood career. Yet Lawrence, who was buried in an unmarked grave at Hollywood Memorial Park in 1938, marks the beginning of the star system and celebrity culture as we know it. Actor Roddy McDowall, who was a collector of celebrity memorabilia, gave her a gravemarker in 1991, and Carl Laemmle gave her a name in 1910. In cinema's early years, actors were not credited by name and Lawrence, who had signed to Biograph with director D.W. Griffith, became known as "The Biograph Girl." She was hired away by Laemmle, who gave her individual billing, making Lawrence the first star to be known to the public by name. Yet Laemmle wanted to ensure that her name would be familiar to movie-going audiences. In what is widely considered the first celebrity publicity stunt, Laemmle planted a story that Lawrence had died suddenly. Soon after, he retracted the story and Lawrence made an appearance in St. Louis, well received by an adoring crowd that may not have given her much thought before their vicarious emotional involvement in her fabricated death and resurrection.

Lawrence reentered cultural memory at the 2006 Dia de los Muertos celebration at Hollywood Forever when a group of four friends built an altar in her honor. Sandy, a

set designer, worked with her husband Matt and their friends Trevor and John to create a papier mâché skeleton surrounded by enormous intertwining strands of film stock. Strewn about the film strands were dozens of gigantic Styrofoam ants, a reminder of Lawrence's unfortunate suicide resulting from a combination of cough syrup and ant paste, which contains arsenic. Alongside this somewhat morbid scene, however, was a continuous looped reel of Florence Lawrence film clips. Situated just outside the Cathedral Mausoleum, the altar drew the attention of many passersby who were introduced to a forgotten Hollywood star. Sandy and Matt, who live within walking distance of Hollywood Forever, created altars commemorating Janet Gaynor, Rudolph Valentino, and Douglas Fairbanks for previous Dia de los Muertos celebrations. She says the group deliberately chose Florence Lawrence because of her relative obscurity and the desire to bring her work to a broader contemporary public.

Photographs and brief biographies of Lawrence appear in many of the books and websites for tourists with an interest in celebrity burials. While some of these texts are indicative of capitalizing on interest in celebrity culture, even after celebrities are dead, the authors of several books and websites are cemetery hobbyists themselves. Karen McHale, founder of the *Hollywood Underground* website, thought she had an unusual hobby until her site went live in 1998. "I created this page because I thought that I was the only one interested in finding the graves of celebrities. After creating this page, I found out I wasn't the only one, that many people share this fascinating hobby," recalls McHale. (*Hollywood Underground* par. 1). Like McHale, *Findagrave.com* webmaster Jim Tipton was surprised to discover how many people shared his interest. In a *Los*

*Angeles Times* interview, he says running the website “started out as a pure hobby. I never dreamed it would go this far” (Colker, par. 4). Since Tipton started *Find a Grave* in 1995, thousands of visitors have contributed images and text to the site, which now features more than 20,000 celebrities. The 200,000 registered users at *Findagrave.com* indicate the broad popularity of and interest in celebrity graving.

This chapter considers the phenomenon of the cemetery as a tourist attraction, looking at how the presence of celebrity gravesites shapes Hollywood Forever as social space in which mourners, fans, and tourists intermingle. In organized tours and as casual visitors, people learn about and engage with the history of celebrity culture as they stroll through the cemetery. Memorial services and commemorative events at Hollywood Forever and other Los Angeles area cemeteries show how these spaces become sites where fans gather, and return, taking photographs and leaving remembrances to demonstrate their ongoing involvement with the celebrities they continue to admire. Specifically, the life, death, and afterlife of Rudolph Valentino offer a lens through which the history of Hollywood Forever and its relationship to celebrity culture can be examined. The mysterious mourner known as the Lady in Black, and the women who fought for the status and notoriety associated with the role, tells a story of fandom that demonstrates the enduring cultural significance of celebrities long after their death. Spanning more than eighty years, the Valentino memorial services trace the history of Hollywood Forever from prominence through decay to resurrection.

## “We Never Forget”<sup>1</sup>

He was the first dark stranger. Through his dazzling performance of the Argentine tango, Rudolph Valentino created a seductive image in New York clubs, on tour, and on screen. His expertise as a dancer, along with his penetrating gaze, turned him into an international sex symbol and earned him the nickname “the Great Lover.”<sup>2</sup> The young Italian film star was catapulted into the spotlight in part because he was marked as an exotic Other, one who carried an air of sexuality and mystery because of his difference. Of his breakout role in 1921’s *The Four Horsemen*, a reviewer for *Photoplay* wrote, “[...] immediately the film world knew it had the continental hero, the polished foreigner, the modern Don Juan in its unsuspecting midst” (qtd. in Leider 123). The release of *The Sheik* later that year solidified Valentino’s stardom while simultaneously establishing the dramatic persona for which he was typecast in his brief career: the eroticized foreigner, dominating yet at times tender, who hails from a distant elsewhere. In a series of first-person articles published in *Movie Weekly*, Valentino wrote, “I was selected for villains because of my dark complexion and somewhat foreign aspect, I presume. This was a cause of regret to me, for I realized that the ‘heavy’ man has usually slight chance of attaining the most profitable and desirable positions in motion-picture acting, in spite of the artistic effort frequently needed for such roles” (qtd. in King, par. 9). The audience’s pleasure of engaging this Orientalist other is found in a mix of what Edward Said describes as “sensuality, promise, terror, sublimity, idyllic pleasure, intense energy,” always from the perceived safety of superiority (118). The mystique attached to the

exotic other added to the sexual allure of the characters Valentino played in *Blood and Sand*, *The Eagle*, and his final film, *The Son of the Sheik*.

Valentino was in New York City in August 1926 on a promotional tour for *The Son of the Sheik*, and fell ill after a party at the home of a friend. Following emergency surgery for appendicitis and gastric ulcers, newspapers and radio kept a close watch on Valentino's failing health. Crowds gathered outside Polyclinic Hospital and others called for updates on his condition; with as many as eight to ten calls coming in every minute, extra operators were brought in to handle the volume ("Valentino Sinking"). Peritonitis set in, then pleurisy. Rudolph Valentino died on August 23, at the age of 31. The *New York Times* headline read, "Valentino Passes with no Kin at Side; Throngs in Street." Campbell's Funeral Home offered its services gratis, in an act of benevolence mingled with capitalizing on celebrity death. Frank Campbell made clear, however, that he would not be unhappy should United Artists, with whom Valentino was under contract, offer compensation. Thousands of New Yorkers—some devoted fans, some curiosity seekers—lined up to wait for the opportunity to view Valentino in repose. More than 9,000 people each hour passed through the funeral home, with an estimated 100,000 visitors over three days.

Despite this outpouring of concerned affection, the *New York Times* reporter on site at Campbell's believed that the tremendous turnout for Valentino's viewing included more spectators than admirers. "Certainly the Campbell attendants cried admonitions to the line of sightseers to hurry along. Not for an instant was one allowed to linger. Nor did many seem to want to linger. They were merely curious, and looked it. Hardly one looked



even sorrowful, much less reverent. The occasional one who sought to take a second glance was taken by the arm and hustled along” (“Thousands in riot”). Even lacking the expected funereal decorum, the impulse to participate in a public viewing can be understood as the desire to be a part of a significant cultural event. Paying one’s respects to a prominent statesman or celebrity allows the individual to experience a sense of belonging by joining with others in a meaningful moment in popular culture. Cultural capital is also gained through being able convey to others the experience of having “been there.”

Being at Campbell’s Funeral Home meant taking part not only in mourning rites but also in the creation of public hysteria. With the announcement in newspapers and on radio of Valentino’s viewing, crowds began to gather outside Campbell’s as early as six o’clock on the morning of August 24. Biographer Irving Shulman reports that “at noon the crowd, by the most conservative estimate, numbered more than ten thousand and it became increasingly difficult for the dozen policemen—ten on foot, two mounted—to control it” (12-13). The doors to the funeral home were not scheduled to open for another two hours, and the thousands massed on the streets became unruly as it began to rain. A plate glass window at the entrance to Campbell’s was smashed, and more than 100 people were injured in the ensuing melee. The police captain on duty told the *New York Times* that the crowd was unprecedented for public gatherings in the city. “For numbers, for unruliness and for complete failure to realize the necessity for some order and the significance of the occasion, he said it was without equal” (“Thousands in riot”). The emotional response of devoted fans was likely enhanced by individuals paid by studio

executives to stir up the crowd in order to draw attention from the media. United Artists, after all, had a vested interest in keeping its star in the news. *The Son of the Sheik* was yet to have its full nationwide theatrical release, and the studio faced a potentially devastating financial loss. As Shulman points out, in the 1920s

moving pictures starring dead actors and actresses played to empty theaters. The superstitious public apparently believed it indecent to watch dead people perform in their full vigor, to see men and women officially dead and properly buried engaging in such dramatic activities as the preliminaries to the heavy-breathing courtship which preceded conception, maturation and birth. (3-4)

Joseph Schenck, chairman of United Artists, made a point of announcing that plans to release *The Son of the Sheik* would go on “as long as there seemed to be a public demand for it” (“Thousands in riot”). Indeed there was public demand. Millions flocked to the theaters to see Valentino in his final, and perhaps best, performance. Fans and onlookers numbering in the thousands lined the streets of Los Angeles on September 14, 1926, to watch the funeral procession as Rudolph Valentino’s body was transported from the Church of the Good Shepherd in Beverly Hills to Hollywood Memorial Park. Admission to witness Valentino’s interment in the Cathedral Mausoleum was by invitation only, yet the annual memorial services at the cemetery have always been open to the public.

The Valentino memorial service is the longest-running annual event in Los Angeles, other than the Easter Sunrise Service at the Hollywood Bowl, which began in 1921. With this rich history, the memorial becomes more than a remembrance of a

particular film star. It is transformed into a cultural event, specifically a Hollywood event. On the eightieth anniversary of Valentino's death, two elegant red and white floral displays adorn the steps of the Cathedral Mausoleum. To the left, a life-size, black-and-white photograph of Rudolph Valentino, dressed as the Sheik, is draped with another garland of flowers. More than 200 guests will file into the mausoleum for a standing-room-only celebration of his life and career. As Lensi, a longtime attendee, says of the Valentino memorial services, "I go to most of them, to look for my friends and to look for celebrities."<sup>3</sup> Lensi is drawn to the services for Valentino and for Tyrone Power (held separately at Hollywood Forever in November each year) because, he says, "movies have been my life. Movies are my life. I have always been fascinated by the movies since I was a kid. I always wanted to be a star. I worked as an extra in the movies, but that wasn't enough." Not having become a star, Lensi became a collector of celebrity memorabilia and a participant in celebrity culture. He was first inspired to attend the Valentino memorial after seeing Anthony Dexter play the silent film idol in the 1951 film *Valentino*. From the warm greetings shared among old friends at the memorial service, it is clear that he is not the only one who has visited the Cathedral Mausoleum for more than fifty years.

Hollywood Forever can be, after all, a fitting moniker for the place where the physical remains of hundreds of celebrities are placed in perpetuity, while there is always the possibility, however remote, that Angelica Huston will visit the gravesite of her father, director John Huston, or Nicolas Cage and punk pundit Henry Rollins will pay tribute to their friend Johnny Ramone. The trace of celebrity is ever present: the informed

visitor to Hollywood Forever is aware of those who have passed through before to take part in funerals or to pay their respects, from Bing Crosby serving as an honorary pallbearer for Marion Davies to Charlie Chaplin, laying his mother to rest. As Valentino's gravesite was long considered a must-see stop for those new to Hollywood, and especially those seeking stardom themselves, celebrities including Jean Harlow, James Dean, Frank Sinatra, and Eddie Murphy are reported to have visited the cemetery (Terhune, personal correspondence). The desire to occupy the same space where others have once stood at the cemetery is similar to sociologist Joshua Gamson's description of the tourist experience at Grauman's Chinese Theatre, where the visitor can get as close as possible to the physical presence of the famous by literally standing in their footsteps: "Handprints, footprints, and signatures of movie stars (most of them dead) are set in concrete. The typical snapshot taken there is of the tourist with his own hand in one of the handprints. 'Here I am with Marilyn,' the snapshots seem to say. She actually stood on this spot at a moment in time, her hands like this, and here is the evidence" (140). The power of place, common among Hollywood Forever, the Chinese Theatre, and countless historical sites, draws tourists to experience the past through situated presence.

The cultural memory of a particular site can blend with personal memory through one's experiences of that place over time. Cultural critic Lucy Lippard argues that we can transform a space into place, and develop our own sense of place, by listening to its stories and making those stories our own. "Narratives articulate relationships between teller and told, here and there, past and present. In the absence of shared past experience, in a mult centered society, storytelling [...] take[s] on a heightened intensity" (50). The

Valentino memorial services engage this influential means of connection: in the early years, many of the speakers recalled their encounters with Valentino; since most of those who knew Valentino have died, now historians and friends retell their stories as part of the memorial program. Silent film actors James Kirkwood and Mary MacLaren, who both worked with Valentino, were repeatedly called on to share their memories of and prayers for Valentino with the hundreds of mourners and spectators gathered at the cemetery. Another longtime celebrity appearing at the memorial was Rudy Vallee, whose commemorative song “There’s a New Star in Heaven To-Night—Rudy Valentino” saw significant national airplay as Valentino’s corpse made the long train trip from New York to Hollywood. In his comprehensive history of the Valentino memorial services, Tracy Terhune notes that in the 1980s and 1990s, the services grew stale, as the same speakers appeared on the program year after year (175). As those who had worked with Valentino died, the featured speakers at the annual memorial service changed.

Mike McKelvy, who first attended the Valentino memorial in 1980 as escort for Mary MacLaren, describes how he came to be part of the program: “Mary MacLaren used to have her dressing room next to Valentino and she was a speaker every year. Then she passed away in 1985. And Bud Tesla, who ran the services for fifty-something years, asked me if I could do a little eulogy on Mary. So that same year, Rudy Vallee died, who also used to be a speaker. And he said, ‘Well since you’re going to do one on Mary MacLaren, could you do one on Rudy Vallee?’” Actor Lorenzo Tucker, known as “The Black Valentino” because of his charisma and good looks, also died prior to the 1986 service, and McKelvy delivered eulogies for all three. He continued as a speaker for

many years, commemorating women who had played significant roles in Valentino's films or his personal life. For Mike McKelvy, for Lensi, and for hundreds of other Valentino fans who make the annual sojourn to Hollywood Forever from as far away as Rhode Island or Chicago, the cemetery is a gathering place for creating a sense of community. The pleasure of fandom, after all, is not solely in the relationship between the fan and the star but in the relationships among fans. Erica Doss notes that Elvis Presley's fans "come to Memphis as individuals but come together at Graceland," experiencing "an immense emotive power in the transforming bond of *communitas* that going to Graceland generates among Elvis fans" (90). Tracy Terhune describes the shared experience of fandom on the homepage for his Yahoo! group devoted to Valentino, inviting visitors to

discuss and continue to learn from each other about new items such as books, DVD's, and television broadcasts, all pertaining to Rudolph Valentino. No star of the silent screen has before, or since invoked such passion with his devoted admirers. We here have fun getting to know each other and also finding out more about Rudy and his life. The places he visited, his taste in clothes, food, women, and his career in general. (*"We Never Forget"* par. 1)

Outside of this community, it may be difficult to fathom devoting time to the close study of one person's movements in the world—down to the minutia of what he ate and what he wore—more than eighty years ago. Yet Valentino fans, and certainly fans of other celebrities in their own forums, delight in these conversations that would be of little

attraction to those who do not share an interest in Valentino. For those engaged with Valentino's charisma, his personal life can provide a cultural lens into the past. To look closely at his life is also to take on a historical study of the early years of the 1900s. In *Dark Lover*, for instance, Emily Leider describes Valentino and his friends shopping at the Italian groceries on Main Street in downtown Los Angeles, playing records on the phonograph late at night, "taking in the American Legion prizefights, or seeing a movie at the Iris, Apollo, or Egyptian theaters" (221). These descriptions of Valentino's leisure activities offer a glimpse into the past; "finding out more about Rudy and his life" is also a means of studying everyday life in that era.

Much has changed in Hollywood over the past eighty years, and the cemetery has been through changes as well. Certainly Jules Roth's neglect of the grounds and buildings had an impact on the annual memorial service for Valentino. Terhune reports that the decaying conditions of the cemetery, particularly after the 1994 Northridge earthquake, made visits increasingly less pleasant:

In the Cathedral Mausoleum several of the skylights had cracked and broken away, letting rain stream in. Even the stained glass windows were broken in several places, including the one in the Valentino alcove. Cobwebs and dirt became commonplace in the corridors and it was obvious that no upkeep of any sort was being maintained within the mausoleum. (175)

In this bleak setting, mourning was perhaps a more prominent feeling than celebration for Valentino's life and career. Yet such mourning would be tinged with nostalgia not only for Valentino himself but also for the long history of memorial services in his honor

and the touch of glamour that once accompanied them. Dignity, if not glamour, has been restored to the memorial services along with the restoration and renovation of Hollywood Forever.

Despite the many changes at the cemetery, there is one constant: the ever-present Lady in Black, a role played—and contested—by several women over the past eighty years. In the 1920s and 1930s, part of the media's interest in the anniversary of Valentino's death was to discover whether the Lady in Black would pay her respects, kneeling in prayer before Valentino's crypt and leaving behind flowers in honor of the Great Lover. This mysterious woman, clad entirely in black and with a veil covering her face, began paying an annual visit to the Cathedral Mausoleum on the second anniversary of Valentino's death. But there was more than one Lady in Black: in 1937, at the eleventh annual memorial service, a second veiled woman appeared at the mausoleum, adding another dimension to the story of this devoted fan. Mausoleum caretaker Roger Peterson, along with reporters and photographers who had seen the Lady in Black over the years, had contradictory descriptions of the mysterious woman. Thus it was clear that there were several Ladies in Black, and as the character gained notoriety, any Valentino fan or publicity-seeker could easily perform the role of a woman who chose to hide her identity behind a black veil.

In 1941, the curious public would get its answer, or at least one answer, to the identity of the Lady in Black. After leaving flowers at Valentino's crypt, Ditra Flamé laid claim to being the woman who had been mourning there for fifteen years. Flamé told the story of how as a teenager, she was acquainted with Valentino before he was famous,



struggling to make ends meet at a boarding house in Los Angeles. When Flamé was admitted to the hospital for an abscess in her ear, Valentino came to visit her. She told him that she was afraid she would die, and he consoled her. Flamé claimed that she and Valentino made a pact, in which she promised that should he die before she did, she would remember him with a single red rose on the anniversary of his death. She founded the Hollywood Valentino Memorial Guild, and devoted herself to maintaining and promoting the public memory of her idol. She fervently upheld her role, seeking status as both a dedicated fan and as a person with privilege in the Valentino legacy since, as she claimed, she had promised him that she would always perform these acts of commemoration.

Another former acquaintance of Valentino who claimed the role of the Lady in Black was Marion Benda, who was his date on the night he fell ill in New York City. She appeared once at Valentino's tomb on the anniversary of his death, dressed in black, and refused to speak to the media, so there was evidence that she had performed this particular role. Yet her claim that she was the mysterious visitor who appeared each year was easily dismissed. A quick bit of research revealed that Benda had been living abroad for ten of the fifteen years since Valentino's death. Benda's story is an unfortunate one; in addition to claiming that she had secretly married Valentino and borne his two children, Benda attempted suicide several times. When she finally succeeded in taking her own life in 1951, newspapers reported that Valentino's Lady in Black had died, much to the chagrin of Ditra Flamé.

New Ladies in Black continued to appear at the Valentino memorial services over the years, but none rivaled Ditra Flamé for notoriety until Estrellita Del Regil arrived at the 1978 memorial. Where Flamé strove to attain dignity on Valentino's behalf, Del Regil earned her reputation among the Valentino memorial regulars for her outrageous antics. She claimed that her mother was the original Lady in Black, and that Valentino was in love with her. When her mother died in 1973, she was buried at Forest Lawn "by mistake," according to Del Regil, who had her disinterred and moved to Hollywood Memorial Park. Among Del Regil's acts of commemoration were placing large, black paper stars with Valentino's name in gold glitter in the corridor leading to his crypt (Terhune 161) and using black electrical tape to place red roses on the crypts surrounding Valentino's. Like Flamé, Del Regil assumed an air of privilege as the Lady in Black, but the Valentino crowd considered her an imposter who disrupted rather than complemented the memorial services.

Del Regil attended her last memorial in 1994, and a new Lady in Black, Vicki Callahan, took on the role the following year. Callahan publicly considered herself the "third generation Lady in Black" (*Portrait* 1 par. 1); rather than vying for a place of honor, she intended to pay tribute to the dedicated fandom of those who came before her. Despite her tenuous, but authentic, connection to Valentino—her high school drama teacher was Walter Craig, who used the stage name Anthony Dexter when he portrayed Valentino on film—Callahan could do no more than perform the role. She is, to use Joseph Roach's term, the Lady in Black in effigy. For Roach, performed effigies "provide communities with a method of perpetuating themselves through specially nominated

mediums or surrogates” who stand in the place of the absent original (36). Callahan’s mournful, self-conscious appearance at the Valentino memorial recalls and brings into being the history of the Ladies of Black who came before her. As she walks through the mausoleum to lay flowers at Valentino’s grave, she literally follows in the footsteps of Ditra Flamé, Marion Benda, and Estrellita Del Regil, evocatively embodying the past for those gathered to pay tribute to the silent film star. Her parodic performance of mourning is saved from being comedic because of its symbolic effect of representation that extends far beyond Callahan herself.

At the 1995 memorial, Callahan was among a handful of guests dressed as the Lady in Black. She stood out among the others, she says, because of her kitschy accessories: “I had two name broaches made which spelled out ‘Rudolph Valentino’ in rhinestones. The writing is done in elegant cursive style. They sparkled like mad on my black velvet handbag and even caught the camera’s eye a number of times. Rudy’s name was once again in lights,” she says (*Portrait* 3 par. 8). For Callahan and for others, camp appreciation plays a discernable role in the performance of Valentino fandom and commemoration. Although Hollywood Forever designated Karie Bible the official Lady in Black at the 2002 Valentino memorial service, women still come to the services dressed in vintage black dresses and veils, both in homage to Valentino and to carry on the tradition themselves. Referring to the revitalized interest in classic Hollywood films *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* and *Sunset Boulevard*, cultural critic Andrew Ross sees camp as an instance in which “the products (stars, in this case) of a much earlier mode of production, which has lost its power to produce and dominate cultural meanings,

become available in the present, for redefinition according to contemporary codes of taste” (312). Ross’ perspective is fitting for Valentino as well, as one of the pleasures in Valentino fandom is in recovering a Hollywood figure who is occasionally referred to in today’s popular culture but whose work—along with most silent films—is more broadly thought of in archival terms than as useful and relevant entertainment.

Among Valentino fans, a pop culture icon is elevated to a level of reverence, in part through a celebration of the antiquated conventions of silent film. Many who attend the memorial services also collect celebrity memorabilia, with some interested exclusively in items owned by or relating to Valentino. Camp is part of collecting as well, as the purchase—often at auction—and display of memorabilia aestheticizes everyday objects and elevates them to a level of preciousness. Valuable items such as Valentino’s hairbrush, glassware, and ashtrays, as well as invitations to the funerals in New York and Beverly Hills have been displayed in glass cases at the annual memorial service. For the more casual (although perhaps not less devoted) collector, lobby cards, photographs, posters, and vintage commercial items bearing the star’s image or signature are the usual fare. Unlike Valentino’s personal effects, these items are valued by collectors in part because of their relative rarity but also because they are material markers that translate fandom into the object world.

Rudolph Valentino died in 1926, long before many in attendance at the memorial services were even born. What draws individuals to mark his passing, year after year? What cultural circumstances allow his reputation to live on, so long after his death? The events surrounding Valentino’s death, and its aftermath, are significant cultural markers

of the phenomenon of celebrity fandom. His sudden and unexpected death, at the height of his fame, allows Valentino to be immortalized in youth, as were James Dean, Marilyn Monroe, and Jim Morrison in later generations. Not only was Valentino adored by millions, but this adoration occurred among a much smaller circle of celebrities than those who capture media attention today. As film critic and journalist Richard Schickel points out in his book *Intimate Strangers: The Culture of Celebrity*, “at the height of Hollywood’s power over us, there were, after all, no more than a couple hundred people who could be called stars—and that is stretching a point—including character players who commanded top billing on occasion” (100).

At the end of 2007, the *Los Angeles Times* posted a photo gallery of Notable Deaths to commemorate those who passed away during the year, an end-of-year ritual typical of both broadcast news and celebrity news television programming. The *Times*’ gallery includes 172 individuals, from Benazir Bhutto to Evel Knievel, from philanthropist Brooke Astor to Luciano Pavarotti. The photo gallery is remarkable not only for the spectrum of cultural sectors represented, but also the sheer number: by this account, a notable person died every two or three days in 2007. Rather than seeing this as a large number of people who died, a more useful approach is to consider how many people are deemed notable. In a media-saturated world, scores of people can become well known; fewer are truly famous. Far fewer, perhaps, are stars, those individuals whose lives and achievements are celebrated in the larger culture. Film critic Leo Braudy notes that “as each new medium of fame appears, the human image it conveys is intensified and the number of individuals celebrated expands” (4). When there were fewer media outlets

and consequently fewer opportunities for media coverage, celebrities had a level of stature and achievement that is simply not available to many of today's notables. Part of the appeal of fandom for celebrities like Rudolph Valentino, Douglas Fairbanks, or Tyrone Power is an appreciation of the magnitude of stardom these celebrities achieved. They were more than notable; they were famous. The extensive celebrity of early film stars saturates the rhetoric of fandom, in part as a means of justifying the fan's considerable interest in a long-dead star. The official website in honor of Tyrone Power provides an example, although the site is developed not by fans but by CMG Worldwide, which represents the estates of dozens of celebrities and controls distribution of their images. The site refers to the "majestic magic encapsulated by Hollywood icon Tyrone Power," who was "beloved by the masses" and "led a career most would-be actors today only dream about" ("Tyrone"). This extravagant rhetoric extends to the death scene as well. Recalling Power on the 35<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his death, *Los Angeles Times* reporter Ron Russell describes his funeral as "held in a cramped cemetery chapel and marred when 3,000 shoving fans mobbed the celebrity mourners" (Russell, par. 11).

Media allows participation as audience members in marking the death of celebrities; fans are able to grieve at the same distance from which they have appreciated the talents of actors, musicians, and artists they admire. In addition to prompt and often prolonged news coverage, a willing audience typically has access to documentary-style profiles on television and photo essays on the Internet. For well-known celebrities, scenes from public viewings, interviews with other celebrities in attendance at the funeral, and career highlights are often featured on the news. Although it is an uncommon event, the

sense of participation available through the live broadcast of a funeral like that of Diana Spencer, for example, can be rather fulfilling in a mediated culture. In his analysis of the relationship between celebrity, media, and disaster, Wheeler Winston Dixon reports that 2.5 billion viewers worldwide tuned in for the live broadcast of Diana's funeral in 1997 (150). He notes that "on CNN an announcer reminds the viewer that 'in case you missed any part of Diana's funeral, the funeral will be replayed in its entirety in a very short time'" (151), yet the replay is insufficient. To fully participate in the mediated spectacle of Diana's life and death, one must "show up" for the funeral in real time, engaging in a shared experience of mediated grief. If proximity is impossible, then real time is imperative.

### **Celebrity, Situated**

A typical Sunday afternoon at Hollywood Forever resembles Sunday at most cemeteries: mourners file out of the chapel following an early funeral and walk in slow, small groups to their cars. Being the weekend, visitors come throughout the day to remember their loved ones and to tend to their graves. Some clear away old, wilted flowers and replace them with fresh ones; others burn ceremonial incense; and some simply sit in contemplative silence or utter a few quiet prayers. At Hollywood Forever, things are slightly different: in addition to the funeral services and the tending of graves underway, small clusters of visitors gather in the back of the cemetery, seeking a different kind of gravesite—the burial places of the famous. Tourists with cameras in hand traverse the Garden of Legends, where they locate and photograph the final resting places of

Marion Davies, Tyrone Power, Janet Gaynor, and John Huston, among others. The doors of the Cathedral Mausoleum are propped open, as visitors pay their respects to Rudolph Valentino, Peter Lorre, or Barbara La Marr. The buzz of human activity is not solemn, but neither is it disrespectful. The social scripts for mourning in a cemetery are carried to Hollywood Forever and dictate the behavior of visitors, although with an upbeat edge. This is appropriate for the cemetery whose owners are dedicated to celebrating life rather than mourning death.

Many of the visitors to Hollywood Forever who see the cemetery as a tourist attraction have reverence for the stars buried there and feel a personal, if not familial, connection to them as well. Yet there are others for whom a visit to the cemetery is merely a quirky stop on a tourist itinerary. While there is a general appreciation for the historic and aesthetic aspects of Hollywood Forever, the casual tourist lacks the enchantment of the fans and cemetery hobbyists who enthusiastically seek out particular graves, making photographs and often leaving flowers, notes and other remembrances.<sup>4</sup> Fans of cartoon voice master Mel Blanc, for example, leave Daffy Duck and Bugs Bunny figures at his grave, which is marked with the appropriate and humorous epitaph, “That’s all folks.” Visitors to the cemetery can purchase roses or carnations at the flower shop near the entrance; leaving a stuffed animal at a gravesite indicates planning and intention on behalf of the fan. In this regard, the remembrance is a performance of fandom: not only does the fan leave a gift for the person he or she admires, which is itself a communicative act, but the presence of items left by others indicates to visitors that the person interred there is honored and remembered. Such remembrances may, in fact, draw



the attention of other visitors. The candles, gold stars, drumsticks, cigarettes, and flower petals artfully arranged on punk rocker Bianca Halstead's gravestone, a few steps away from Dee Dee Ramone's, create a visual panorama that invites curiosity and closer examination.

Like the display of remembrances at Bianca Halstead's grave, much of the commemoration that occurs at Hollywood Forever is due to the dedication of fans rather than the efforts of the cemetery itself. The cemetery did not organize the Valentino memorial service until 1951; for twenty-five years prior, the commemorative acts of fans occurred spontaneously. Yet due to the popular culture phenomenon of the Lady in Black, the anniversary of Valentino's death routinely received news coverage and public interest. When Forever Enterprises took ownership of the cemetery in 1998, they also took over the Valentino memorial services, adding a video montage to the service and an evening screening of a Valentino film with live accompaniment. Like Valentino, public commemoration of Douglas Fairbanks, Sr.'s contributions to cinema begins with his fans. Film historian Sparrow Morgan runs the recently-organized Douglas Fairbanks Memorial, which began publicly celebrating the star's birthday only four years ago. For the 2007 celebration—Fairbanks' 124<sup>th</sup> birthday—the group screened the silent film *The Gaucho* (1927) and served birthday cake and punch on the Fairbanks Lawn. "Watching a Douglas Fairbanks movie on his birthday is one of the best ways we can keep his memory alive, particularly when the movie is screened in a non-traditional environment like Hollywood Forever," Morgan says. "I love Hollywood, and I love its history. I think it's our duty as members of a community to preserve what came before us, and that is

most definitely film” (“Celebrate” par. 3). Morgan indicates that the cemetery is an unusual environment for screening a film, as the audience brings blankets and chairs to the Fairbanks Lawn to watch *The Gaucho* outdoors. Equally significant is enjoying this film that Fairbanks wrote, produced, and starred in, while sitting in the shadow of his sarcophagus. A number of other sites associated with Fairbanks would be appropriate locations for celebrating the silent film star’s birthday, including Hollywood landmarks like the historic Roosevelt Hotel or Grauman’s Chinese Theatre, as he was a partner in both establishments. Where once the cemetery may have seemed a morbid location for a birthday party, Hollywood Forever now seems the obvious choice, due to its increasing popularity as a site for celebrity events.

The annual memorial service for Tyrone Power has taken on new energy, also due in part to the strong sense of place established for frequent visitors to the cemetery. Power died of a heart attack in 1958 while filming in Madrid, and his body was transported back to Los Angeles for interment. The annual memorial is marked by the frequent participation of Power’s daughter Taryn, who joins with fans to honor the memory of father. At the 35<sup>th</sup> annual memorial service, held in 1993, Taryn Power noted that she learns things from fans that she never knew about her father, as she was only five years old when he died. Actor Nicky Blair, for example, shared his memories of serving in the Marine Corps with Power during World War II (Russell, par. 20). The loyalty of Tyrone Power’s fans is exemplified by Ada Tucker, who, according to the *Los Angeles Times*, “visits Power’s grave at least twice a month and sets aside Nov. 15 to observe the anniversary of his death.” Tucker noted at the 1993 memorial that “there’s a sense of

family among the people who still come here for this,” and that sense of family is heightened by Taryn Power’s presence (Russell, par. 2). Because cemeteries are places where we publicly enact our grief, both at a funeral and on subsequent visits, Hollywood Forever simultaneously allows and demands performances of mourning by tourists, fans, and cemetery regulars. This performative aspect of the cemetery normalizes tender and heartfelt acts of commemoration by fans as well as family members.

Hollywood Forever is not the only cemetery in Los Angeles to host memorial services in honor of its famous permanent residents, but it is host to the longest running of such annual events, the Rudolph Valentino memorial service. Hillside Memorial Park holds events to honor Al Jolson and Jack Benny, two of the best-known Hollywood legends interred there. Both have sumptuous burial sites: Benny and his wife Mary are interred in an enormous black marble sarcophagus in the Hall of Graciousness in Hillside’s mausoleum. Jolson’s memorial, complete with a 120-foot waterfall and towering pillars, is visible to passing traffic on the nearby 405 Freeway. Jolson was buried at Beth Olam Cemetery, the Jewish section of Hollywood Memorial Park, until the memorial was built at Hillside. Jack Benny delivered the eulogy at the unveiling of Jolson’s memorial in 1951, almost a year after Jolson’s death. In his remarks, Benny noted that

it is more or less accepted that memory is a fickle thing. That it fades in proportion to time, made necessary by the press of day to day events. To us, whom Al has left behind, time has been unusually kind. It has helped erase the

sorrow of his passing, yet has left his memory a bright and living thing. His great gift to mankind, his voice, is with us now and forever.” (“Jack Benny Eulogy”)

As Benny points out, recordings of Jolson singing have made the leap from vinyl to cassette to compact disc, keeping the memory of the singer from fading into obsolescence. The International Al Jolson Society has more than a thousand members worldwide, evidence that his music and films continue to appeal to new generations. A memorial salute to Jolson at Hillside Memorial Park included remarks from members of the Jolson Society along with a wreath-laying and a color guard from the Jewish War Veterans (“Legendary Entertainer” par. 1).

Rather than marking the anniversary of his death, the International Jack Benny Fan Club hosts an annual service at Hillside as part of a day-long celebration held on his birthday. From Hillside, club members go on to visit other sites relevant to Benny’s life, such as the Chinese Theatre and Canter’s Deli (“Valentine’s Day baby” par. 2). For Benny fans, these sites function in ways similar to Pierre Nora’s *lieux de mémoire*, memory places that “arise out of a sense that there is no such thing as spontaneous memory, hence that we must create archives, mark anniversaries, organize celebrations, pronounce eulogies, and authenticate documents because such things no longer happen as a matter of course” (7). Because the locations on the Jack Benny tour are transformed into ritual places, invested with a specific meaning for a defined group of individuals, the Jack Benny tour of Los Angeles is a significant performance of fandom, especially on Benny’s birthday.

Like Hillside, tiny Westwood Village Memorial Park hosts an annual service for its most famous resident, Marilyn Monroe, who died in 1962. Monroe's grave is one of the most visited celebrity burial sites in the world, with an estimated 350 people coming to pay tribute each day (Masek 187). Visitors are welcome to sit and reminisce on a white stone bench donated by two Marilyn Monroe fan clubs to mark the thirtieth anniversary of her death. One of the clubs, Marilyn Remembered, organizes the annual service in her memory. A fan who attended the August 5, 2007 memorial said, "It was a great presentation and a tremendous tribute to her memory. Even though she's been gone for 45 years, the memorial made me feel as if she had just died and this was her actual burial service because of all the people who spoke that actually knew and worked with her" ("Hollywood Underground"). The funeral is a social act of intimate players that can be considered through the metaphor of performance. As Jessica Mitford points out, the rhetorical transition from undertaker to funeral director was accompanied by the funeral director adopting "the dramaturgical role, in which the undertaker becomes a stage manager to create an appropriate atmosphere and to move the funeral party through a drama in which social relationships are stressed and an emotional catharsis or release is provided through ceremony" (16-17). The celebrity funeral is also a social act, but one that becomes spectacle by virtue of the corpse itself: the entertainer or artist who created a spectacle in life does the same in death. This is not to say that the celebrity funeral lacks respect or decorum but rather that it invites a false intimacy among the distant bereaved, whether dedicated fan or casual onlooker. The celebrity funeral or memorial service, certainly as seen at the memorials for Rudolph Valentino and Johnny Ramone, is a scene

that draws people with a variety of motivations: those who seek a glimpse of the famous stand alongside fans who share in collective grief for those whom they admire only from a distance. Some “go to see why everyone else goes” (Doss 88), while others, like the character Harold in the film *Harold and Maude*, find the funerals of strangers intriguing. Certainly the stranger is less conspicuous at a celebrity funeral than at a smaller gathering of close family and friends.

In its early years, Hollywood Memorial Park was selected as the final resting place for many in the entertainment industry because of its location. That the cemetery borders Paramount Studios made it appealing to director Cecil B. De Mille, one of the founders of Paramount. Its proximity to Sunset-Gower Studios, the original location of Columbia Pictures, led Columbia founder Harry Cohn to choose burial there as well. Some fifty years after the deaths of these legendary industry figures, others choose Hollywood Forever in order to be buried near the celebrities they admire. Phil and Ernie, a couple in their eighties, purchased a cremation plot in 1991. When an enormous black granite gravemarker was erected beside their plot, they asked for another location. They were given the spot next to the De Mille family plot at no additional cost, Ernie says, because nobody wanted it at the time.<sup>5</sup> “It has meaning to me,” he adds, “only because I was in the industry. I worked with the man, I didn’t know him well. I worked as an extra and I would stand in.” Ernie’s personal connection to Cecil B. De Mille is only part of his desire to be interred at Hollywood Forever; his feeling of being a part of the entertainment industry more powerfully creates a sense of belonging to the community of Hollywood Forever.

Although all of the crypts in the Cathedral Mausoleum are occupied, fans of Rudolph Valentino now have the opportunity to be interred near their idol. At the 1999 memorial service, the cemetery announced the impending construction of the Valentino Shrine, a wall of cremation niches added on at the end of the corridor in which the silent film star is interred. The cemetery is certainly capitalizing on Valentino fandom, but they are also offering their customers something they want, something that is utterly unique and, of course, eternal. Niches here have been purchased by others who are not necessarily fans of the Great Lover but fans of Hollywood itself, as many other stars and city founders are buried in the Cathedral Mausoleum. During an interview at the 2002 memorial service, former ballet dancer and Valentino fan Quentin de Chalfont discussed his purchase of a niche. "Spending eternity in Hollywood is not such a bad idea when you consider the alternatives," he said ("Ladies in black" par. 12). Certainly the company is admirable. The ashes of actor David White, who portrayed Larry Tate on the television comedy *Bewitched*, are placed in a niche in the Valentino Shrine; reportedly, White's ashes were in storage at Grandview Mausoleum following his death in 1990 ("Elizabeth Montgomery"). White's niche is also a memorial to his son Jonathan, who was killed in the 1998 terrorist attack on Pan Am Flight 103. A list of White's film and television credits and a bronze bust share the small niche with photographs depicting father and son from the time of Jonathan's childhood, to his graduation, to images of both men later in life. Through these artifacts, visitors are able, to paraphrase Tyler Cassity, to fill in the dash between the dates and get a sense of life lived by both men.

The desire to be buried near celebrities one admires extends even to the famous themselves: alternative rocker Morrissey, former lead singer of The Smiths, recently sat contemplating his mortality at the foot of Johnny Ramone's cenotaph. "I like that cemetery," Morrissey said. "I stumbled across Johnny Ramone's stone and thought it was very nicely placed. I sat there for a long time and I felt quite good about it. It was nice his bones were under the soil I was sitting on. So yeah, that's my spot" ("Morrissey picks..."). Discovering that Ramone's bones are not, in fact, under the soil at Hollywood Forever, is unlikely to alter Morrissey's decision. In 2004, Morrissey organized a reunion of the punk band New York Dolls, for whom he is a former fan club president. Whether Morrissey's fandom extends to include the Ramones, who were part of the same burgeoning punk scene as the New York Dolls in the early 1970s, being buried near Johnny Ramone's cenotaph will likely bring fans and celebrity gravers to Morrissey's grave as another site to see on the celebrity cemetery tour.

If, as Joseph Roach argues, dying can be thought of as a liminal space between life and death, then in celebrity culture, there is another liminality between death and burial, an in-between time during which the public may take stock of an individual's cultural contributions to consider his or her place in cultural memory. When death occurs suddenly and unexpectedly, the public experiences a heightened sense of loss, as in the deaths of Lady Diana, John Lennon, and Rudolph Valentino, among others. The deaths of James Brown in late 2006 and Anna Nicole Smith in early 2007 brought extended media and public attention to the liminal state between death and burial as those close to both Brown and Smith fought over the preferred location for burial. When Douglas Fairbanks,



Jr. died in New York in 2000, his heirs debated whether burial with his father at Hollywood Forever would be appropriate. Less than two years had passed since the cemetery was purchased by Forever Enterprises, and prior to the takeover the family considered disinterring Douglas Fairbanks, Sr. because of the deplorable conditions at the cemetery. Fairbanks Jr.'s burial at Hollywood Forever marked a turning point for the cemetery, reasserting both its reputation and the confidence of the celebrity community. Regarding the Fairbanks funeral, Tyler Cassity says, "It was very dramatic. He was a knight, so there was a representative from the queen. There was a full honor guard, 21-gun salute, but it was beautiful to see this whole area come alive again with a service and for the cemetery to have this old tradition kind of renewed" (Montagne). With the moss cleaned from the reflecting pool, the overgrown weeds cleared, and renovation underway, Hollywood Forever's revival was in full bloom as family, fans, and media gathered to pay their last respects to Douglas Fairbanks, Jr.

### **Emulating the Other**

Shortly after he purchased the cemetery, Cassity shared his vision for Hollywood Forever in an article in the *New York Times Sunday Magazine*: "I want it to be a cultural center—because it is, and the neighborhood needs one" (Spindler, par. 5). Although at the time of the interview, nearby historic Hollywood Boulevard offered more danger than "culture" for visitors, the cemetery serves a much broader audience than the immediate neighborhood. Many of the cemetery's visitors travel from distant points in the greater Los Angeles area to attend and participate in events. Those who grew up in the area and

spent time there as children and teenagers continue to see the cemetery as leisure and cultural space. The model for Cassity's cultural center, he says, is Forest Lawn Memorial Park, founded in Glendale in 1917.

Cassity's desire to make Hollywood Forever something more than a burial site for the dead certainly reflects the story of Forest Lawn and its longtime general manager, Hubert Eaton. An innovative force in the death care industry, Eaton brought about dramatic changes by creating the nation's flagship lawn park cemetery. He envisioned Forest Lawn as a uniform expanse of serene greenspace, absent of the clutter of standing tombstones. "The Builder's Creed," penned by Eaton and exhibited on a monumental stone edifice at Forest Lawn, lays out his vision:

I shall try to build at Forest Lawn a great park, devoid of misshapen monuments and other customary signs of earthly death, but filled with towering trees, sweeping lawns, splashing fountains, singing birds, beautiful statuary, cheerful flowers, noble memorial architecture with interiors full of light and color, and redolent of the world's best history and romances. I believe these things educate and uplift a community.

Eaton's rhetoric draws on the tradition of Boston's Mount Auburn and the other rural cemeteries that used it as an example. Like Mount Auburn, Eaton saw Forest Lawn as a place where visitors would not only remember their loved ones but could also engage in an aesthetic experience of art and nature that would educate and enlighten.

To complement the greenspace of Forest Lawn and provide an instructive and often religiously uplifting experience for visitors, Eaton began collecting and

commissioning reproductions of famous works of art. The grandeur of the artworks replaces monumental tombstones and sarcophagi, shifting the aesthetic away from a focus on the dead. Included among the artworks at Forest Lawn Glendale are reproductions of Michelangelo's *David* and *La Pieta*; a Labyrinth that is, to quote a Forest Lawn brochure, a "full-size Terrazzo and bronze recreation of one located in the nave of Chartres Cathedral in France;" and "a faithful mosaic rendering of John Trumbull's classic painting" *Signing of the Declaration of Independence*. The motifs of religiosity and patriotism guide the cemetery's collection. Three of Forest Lawn's artworks are displayed in elaborate presentations each day: a stained glass reproduction of Leonardo da Vinci's *The Last Supper* and paintings of *The Crucifixion* and *The Resurrection*, two of the largest religious paintings in the world.

*The Last Supper* window is located in the Great Mausoleum's Memorial Court of Honor, where Eaton and his wife are among those interred. The ambience of the Memorial Court is similar to both a church and a museum; in the seating area set before *The Last Supper*, which is concealed behind black curtains, visitors are surrounded by reproductions of famous works of art and several elaborate gravesites, including Eaton's. One inscription on his sarcophagus reads, "I believe, most of all, in a Christ that smiles and loves you and me." After the lights are dimmed and the curtains part to reveal *The Last Supper*, a meticulous, recorded explanation describes the emotional state of each disciple. James the Greater, for example, "is appalled by the accusation," while John "bows his head in despair." The audience hears a two-pronged history that is both personal and religious; a portion of the narrative is devoted to the story of Eaton's

commission of the artwork while the focus is on an account of this significant moment in the history of Christianity.

To accommodate their enormous size and to create an appropriate space for the elaborate hourly unveiling of the paintings, a special hall was built to house *The Crucifixion* and *The Resurrection*. The Hall resembles a traditional theater with a ticket booth and red velvet barricades, both of which seem superfluous since no tickets are distributed and there is no charge for the presentation. In the dark interior of the theater, heavy black curtains open slowly and dramatically as the story of how the 195-foot-long painting of the Crucifixion made its way from Poland to Los Angeles unfolds. *The Resurrection* was commissioned by Eaton to complete Forest Lawn's "Sacred Trilogy." Detailed descriptions of both paintings are narrated by a deep, serene male voice while particular characters and portions of the paintings are backlit for emphasis. Adjacent to the Hall of the Crucifixion-Resurrection is the Forest Lawn Museum, where the eclectic collection includes a moai statue from Easter Island, ancient coins, stained glass, and *Paradise Doors*, made from a cast of Ghiberti's cathedral doors at the Baptistery in Florence, Italy. The museum is complemented by a gift shop that carries much of the typical museum store inventory—notecards, postcards, jewelry, and trinkets—many of which have no direct relationship to Forest Lawn and its collection. Singling out Forest Lawn with its own exclusive chapter in *The American Way of Death*, Jessica Mitford sees the museum reflecting Eaton's vision as expressed in the Builder's Creed and exemplified in the landscape and buildings of Forest Lawn. Mitford writes: "The purpose of the museum and the method used to assemble its contents are explained by Eaton in

*Comemoral*. If a museum is established, people will become accustomed to visiting the cemetery for instruction, recreation, and pleasure” (103). There is little overt relationship between the objects in the museum and the acts of commemoration and memorialization that typically occur in cemeteries. Yet despite the desire to attract visitors for instruction and enlightenment, Forest Lawn Glendale and the other five Forest Lawn cemeteries discourage use of the cemetery space for purposes other than paying respects to one’s loved ones and aesthetically engaging the cemetery’s collection of artworks.

On the reverse side of the map distributed at the front gate and flower shop at Forest Lawn are official guidelines for the visitor. While a color brochure encourages guests to “see the world’s greatest art” at Forest Lawn, the guidelines indicate, contradictorily, that loitering is prohibited: “Persons other than property owners and relatives and friends of deceased persons interred or to be interred in the Forest Lawn Memorial-Parks should not linger or ‘hang around’ on the grounds or in the buildings.” The traditional act of picnicking on cemetery grounds is also explicitly prohibited, as is photography “except at funerals, weddings, and other private services with the consent of the person(s) in charge.” For those with an interest in visiting celebrity gravesites, Forest Lawn’s guidelines translate into a strong prohibition. According to the *Hollywood Underground* website, the Forest Lawn cemeteries are opposed to visitors who think of their cemeteries as tourist attractions:

Forest Lawn Memorial Parks are the Cadillac of cemeteries. They are beautiful and ornate. The grounds are lush. There is beautiful statuary all over. There are four cemeteries in the Forest Lawn system here in

California. Glendale was the first one. Many of the really big named stars are here like Jean Harlow, Clark Gable, Spencer Tracy, Robert Taylor and Nat King Cole, just to name a few. Forest Lawns DO NOT like cemetery hunters. They discourage people from looking for stars' graves and will ask you to leave if you are carrying books like *Final Curtain* or *Permanent Californians*. Do not bother asking any staff member for directions to stars' graves. The Great Mausoleum is private and there are cameras watching the whole thing. There are four locked gardens with stars. Too bad, for most of the greats are here! ("Forest Lawn," par. 1)

In this passage, *Hollywood Underground* founder Karen McHale provides an image of the celebrity graver: guidebook in hand, checking off a list of graves located, the tourist moves through the cemetery space with both reverence and enthusiasm.

Unlike Forest Lawn, Hollywood Forever welcomes celebrity gravers; visitors can purchase a map of celebrity gravesites at the cemetery's flower shop. The map, along with the occasional tours of Hollywood Forever, reifies the celebrity of those buried at the cemetery. If Hollywood Forever sees itself as a tourist attraction, it suffers from the relative lack of contemporary celebrities interred there. While Jules Roth neglected the cemetery's buildings and grounds, Hollywood's elite chose other cemeteries for their final resting places. For Hollywood Forever to be a premier tourist destination, the cemetery must make the gravesites of its stars—many of them somewhat obscure to contemporary audiences—attractive to the visitor as worth seeing. Thus the cemetery must function as a publicist for the dead celebrity. Comparing the celebrity to the cultural

hero, Daniel Boorstin elaborates on the fleeting fame that must be reinforced by the image machine, arguing that the celebrity “is the creature of gossip, of public opinion, of magazines, newspapers, and the ephemeral images of movie and television screen” where heroes are “made by folklore, sacred texts, and history books.” As such, the hero gains immortality, whereas the celebrity fades away (63). Boorstin does not take into account the possibility of immortality for celebrities, and there are many who take on iconic status. Clearly Rudolph Valentino, Tyrone Power, and Douglas Fairbanks, among others, continue to draw new fans long after death. As the culture industry continues to promote and profit from celebrities after their deaths through DVDs, CDs, books, and other paraphernalia, so does Hollywood Forever benefit from leveraging its cultural capital. For those who want their own permanent property in Hollywood, a new mausoleum is under construction and cremation niches are available in the Cathedral Mausoleum, the Columbarium, and the Abbey of the Psalms.

If Forest Lawn is Tyler Cassity’s model for the cemetery as cultural center, then the model for the cemetery as a tourist attraction must certainly lie elsewhere. Hollywood Forever’s own history of tourism offers strong traditions to restore.

### **The Cemetery as Tourist Attraction**

In their 2000 book *Dark Tourism: The Attraction of Death and Disaster*, John Lennon and Malcolm Foley investigate the growing trend of turning sites of death and disaster into tourist destinations. Defining dark tourism as a postmodern phenomenon in which sites of catastrophe become commodities of spectacle, in part as a mirror of our

mediated experience of disaster, Lennon and Foley exclude cemeteries from their definition. Categorizing the touristic visit to the cemetery as a pilgrimage, they remark on a perceived difference between cemeteries and sites of dark tourism, arguing that “gravity and reverence are not always characteristic of death sites/grave sites. Jim Morrison’s grave in Père Lachaise in Paris questions the whole Victorian bourgeois cultural view of the cemetery as a place of dignity and mourning. Now tourists rather than mourners visit and undertake cemetery tours” (77). The exploits of fans at Jim Morrison’s grave are exceptional rather than routine, and are certainly notorious. Lennon and Foley imply an inherent disconnection between the touristic experience and the possibility for reverence and gravity. Yet if the visitor to the cemetery, entering that space as a tourist, feels a connection to the famous individuals buried there, why would the visitor not have a sense of reverence? One need only watch footage of the thousands of visitors, walking in almost funereal procession past Elvis Presley’s grave, to see the gravity of the gravesite visit. This performance of mourning reinforces the relationships between the fan and the celebrity and among the fans themselves, and acts as a cathartic moment in the fan pilgrimage.

Every August, thousands of fans gather in Memphis for Elvis Week, which culminates with the Candlelight Vigil on August 16, the anniversary of Presley’s death. In her analysis of “Elvis Culture,” Erika Doss describes the Candlelight Vigil as a cultural ritual drawing on “traditional religious practices”:

Around 9:00 P.M., Elvis Country Fan Club members officially start the ceremony with prayers, poems, and Elvis songs. A dignitary (usually a



member of the Presley family or an executive from Elvis Inc.) lights a torch from the eternal flame at Elvis's grave and walks down to Graceland's gates. Shortly thereafter, the gates open and the single-file procession to the Meditation Gardens begins. Standing at attention, feet planted, hands clasped, heads bowed, members of the Elvis Country Fan Club and fan club presidents from around the world line Graceland's driveway. [...] Each solemnly bears a glowing candle, lit from the torch at the start of the procession. (95)

Elvis fandom is certainly the extreme expression of celebrity culture—CNN reports that between 40,000 and 50,000 fans participated in the 30<sup>th</sup> annual Candlelight Vigil—yet fans make similar pilgrimages to the gravesites of celebrities worldwide (“Elvis Week” par. 9). Doss notes that “however morbid it might seem to make the pilgrimage to the grave of their favorite American icon, even on a honeymoon, Elvis fans go to Graceland to emotionally indulge themselves, to become overwhelmed by their feelings of love, loss, and loneliness for Elvis. Elated inside his house, many openly weep beside his grave” (90). Among Elvis fans, such emotional displays are not unexpected, and invite compassionate empathy. The perceived morbidity of the gravesite pilgrimage for fans of stars buried at Hollywood Forever is tempered by the cemetery's social events and by the increasing popularity of tourism focused on haunting, celebrity death and disaster, and on the cemetery itself.

As the premier cemetery in Hollywood during the 1920s, Hollywood Forever is the burial site of celebrities made notorious by virtue of their involvement in scandals of

murder, sex, and drugs that made headlines in Hollywood's Golden Era. Virginia Rappe, the subject of one of the most lurid sex scandals of the era, is buried in the Garden of Legends. Rappe died following a party hosted by Roscoe "Fatty" Arbuckle, and he was subsequently tried, and acquitted, for her rape and murder.<sup>6</sup> Director William Desmond Taylor, who was murdered while the second of Arbuckle's three trials for Rappe's murder was underway, is interred in the Cathedral Mausoleum. Taylor's 1922 murder remains unsolved and is a favorite subject among conspiracy theorists and fans of the decadent tales of Hollywood infamy. Arbuckle's trial and Taylor's murder, along with the death of actor Wallace Reid resulting from morphine addiction, led to the institution of the Hays Code, intended to subdue the decadent image and influence of Hollywood by censoring the content of films.

A few dozen steps from Taylor's crypt is the final resting place of fast-living actress and writer Barbara La Marr, known as "The Girl Who Is Too Beautiful." According to Fay Wray, another permanent resident of Hollywood Forever who is best known for her role in the original *King Kong*, "Barbara La Marr was a big star and film favorite of the 1920s. She had talent to match her incredible beauty, and that is really saying something" (qtd. in Bangle, par. 48). In her short life, La Marr suffered from addictions to alcohol and drugs; in *Hollywood Babylon*, his tabloidesque exposé of celebrity scandals, Kenneth Anger chose her to headline his list of "heroin heroines" (89). Claiming that she slept less than two hours a night so as to not waste time, La Marr's lifestyle caught up with her. She was diagnosed with tuberculosis and died before her thirtieth birthday.

As a tourist destination, then, Hollywood Forever is a repository of scandal for Hollywood's decadent, pre-Hays Office era. Certainly there are many sites of scandal in the greater Los Angeles area, and a tourist with an interest in the tragic or macabre past can readily visit those sites by joining the Haunted Hollywood tour, operated under the Starline Tours umbrella, or the Dearly Departed tour, run by Scott Michaels. Haunted Hollywood tour guide Aaron Rosenberg says that out of respect for both Hollywood Forever and Westwood, he won't drive the tour vehicle, a 1961 Cadillac limousine, onto the cemetery grounds when there are signs affixed to the car indicating its affiliation with a tour company. As he takes his clients around Los Angeles, Rosenberg says, "a lot of the people in the houses that I go up to—Rudolph Valentino, Jayne Mansfield, Marion Davies—they're all here [at Hollywood Forever]. Needless to say, I talk about the cemetery every day, five times a day, on the tour. And I tell them about the movies that are here on the mausoleum wall, and the Lady in Black, a little bit of the history about this place." Like Rosenberg, Scott Michaels refers to Hollywood Forever on his Dearly Departed tour. One of the stops on Michaels' tour is the house in Beverly Hills where gangster Benjamin "Bugsy" Siegel was gunned down in 1947. Siegel's crypt in the Beth Olam Mausoleum is surprisingly popular among cemetery tourists. The gangster's crypt is often marked with lipstick kisses and pennies, which are used to represent the Jewish tradition of leaving stones as a remembrance on top of a gravemarker or tombstone. Because of Siegel's role in developing Las Vegas as a gambling capital, some may leave pennies as a wish for good luck.

Hollywood tour guides engage their clients through a love for film, for celebrity culture, and for Hollywood itself, and their personal interests are evident in the content of their tours. Karie Bible, who runs the official tour offered by Hollywood Forever, demonstrates her love of classic film, as well as her feminist point of view, in her tour rhetoric.<sup>7</sup> At the Douras family mausoleum in which Marion Davies is interred, Bible lays out the argument that William Randolph Hearst, with whom Davies had a decades-long affair, hindered rather than helped her career. Under Hearst's influence, Davies was typically cast in hyper-feminine, romantic roles that Bible believes served to diminish Davies' natural comedic talent. Standing beside the crypt of Barbara La Marr, Bible discusses the tendency in the early years of the Hollywood studios to discard reels at the end of a film's theatrical run: once a film had garnered profit for the studio and the theaters, the film reels were deemed to have served their purpose. The idea of film preservation did not take hold until the mid-1930s to combat both the intentional destruction and the accidental decay of classic films from the silent era, and thus much of La Marr's work is forever lost. There are, however, instances in which preservation and restoration have enabled classic films to be brought to contemporary audiences. The Rudolph Valentino film *The Young Rajah* (1922), for example, was considered lost until some fragments of 16-millimeter film were recovered. Flicker Alley worked diligently to piece together a version of the film from still photographs, theatrical trailers, and the film fragments, but so much content is missing that the new version must be considered a reconstruction rather than a restoration of the original film. Nonetheless, this version of *The Young Rajah* aired on Turner Classic Movies and is part of a recently-released

Valentino box set. By injecting her personal point of view, Bible uses her tour not only to share the history of the cemetery but also to promote enthusiasm for the creative work of the actors, directors, and public figures interred at Hollywood Forever.

Brian Sapir takes a lighthearted approach to his Haunted Hollywood tour, infusing jokes into his spiel and relating some of Kenneth Anger's scandalous stories from *Hollywood Babylon*.

Sapir takes his clients on a drive past sites throughout the greater Los Angeles area that are reported to be haunted, including the Comedy Store, reputedly haunted by comedian Sam Kinison; Chateau Marmont, where Jim Belushi overdosed; and the Viper Room, where River Phoenix died. Whether or not Sapir believes in the supernatural, his exuberant delivery sometimes pokes fun at the possibility of ghosts, accommodating both the believers and the skeptics who might be on board. His enthusiasm also reveals his love of Hollywood history.

Scott Michaels' Dearly Departed tour visits some of the same locations as the Haunted Hollywood tour, but with a somewhat different tone. Where Sapir leans toward humor, Michaels tends to engage the historical narratives of Hollywood scandals and their characters to a greater degree. On the website *Findadeath.com*, Michaels has written about and provided supplemental documents including death certificates and photographs for the deaths of more than 300 entertainment industry figures. The profiles, and the tour itself, are often colored by Michaels' opinions and his personal experiences. On the profile for former Hollywood Memorial Park owner Jules Roth, Michaels relates this story:

I remember when I first took over Grave Line,<sup>8</sup> and there was a previous arrangement made with the cemetery and us, to take a group of contest winners to the cemetery for a tour and a picnic. We arrived, Roth threw a fit and refused to let us because they were a classy joint. So as a compromise, they let us eat our lunches out back, behind the Abbey of the Psalms, next to a busted old casket (with toe tag) they exhumed someone from. I take pictures of everything, and am glad I did. (“Jules Roth”)

Through this personal narrative, the reader gets a sense of Roth’s unfriendly attitude as well as the worsening conditions of the cemetery in the early 1990s. Michaels’s love of Hollywood history and his work for Grave Line, Dearly Departed, and *Findadeath.com* have earned him expert status in the community. Among his many interviews and appearances, Scott Michaels has been featured on *The Girls Next Door* and *E! 20 Most Horrifying Hollywood Murders*.

A Grave Line tour in the late 1980s introduced cemetery enthusiast Diana to Hollywood Memorial Park. “The first time was about 18 years ago,” she says. “I went on a Grave Line tour that offered a map of the cemetery of all of the celebrities that were buried here. And I still have my original map. I just remember thinking the cemetery was so beautiful and coming back here from time to time to photograph some of the headstones.” Diana is a regular visitor to Hollywood Forever and encourages friends and family to join her for Cinespia, Dia de los Muertos, and Shakespeare in the Cemetery. “When I tell people about the movies or the other events, they just feel put off because it’s a cemetery. I say, ‘You won’t feel the way you’re thinking you’re going to feel.’ It is

the most welcoming, beautiful place ever. You don't feel spooked. It's just a really beautiful space to be in.”

Diana's perspective is more broadly shared as ghost tours—whether in haunted theaters, hotels, and houses, or in cemeteries—are increasingly popular across the U.S., and particularly in locations like Key West, Savannah, New Orleans, and other cities that market themselves as heritage tourism sites. In August 2007, *msnbc.com* columnist Gael Fashingbauer Cooper published an article about her visit to Westwood Village Memorial Park, considered one of the friendliest cemeteries for celebrity gravers and those who make the pilgrimage to visit Marilyn Monroe's grave. The many comments from readers were overwhelmingly positive, with the exception of one reader, Robin from Los Angeles, who wrote,

Dear Ms. Fashingbauer-Cooper: Westwood Memorial Park is NOT A TOURIST ATTRACTION! This is a graveyard, a final resting place for people's loved ones, celebrities or not. There is nothing more disgusting than a bunch of grave diggers like you and your sick flock haunting and disrespecting me and other families while visiting there [sic] loved ones. You should be nothing more than ashamed of yourselves. Get another hobby and stay the hell away from Westwood. There are enough sickos in this world.....go find them! (“Visiting Marilyn Monroe” par. 21).

Many readers followed up with comments on Robin's post, often offering their own experiences to discourage a negative perspective on celebrity graving. Mark from Los Angeles, whose grandparents are buried at Westwood, says, “I personally don't have a

problem at all with folks coming to visit Marilyn and the other celebs. It is a very nice cemetery and the staff are very courteous, and I have always found people to be quite respectful in my visits there” (“Visiting Marilyn Monroe” par. 46). A former Los Angeles resident writes, “I have been there w/my Mom & others & my Mom cried at several of the sites, recalling memories of this star or that and, for some, mourning the way in which they had passed and how young. Everyone else I saw there was very respectful & not treating it as a ‘tourist attraction’” (“Visiting Marilyn Monroe” par. 29). Rhetorically, naming the cemetery as a tourist attraction has a powerful negative connotation. The distinction between the adventurous traveler and the passive tourist is common in public discourse; the tourist is seen as both a bore and a boor, and would be thought of as potentially disrespectful or irreverent at the cemetery.<sup>9</sup> Yet most visitors to the cemetery who are not there to pay respects to a loved one are, in fact, tourists. Perhaps it is the association of leisure with tourism that renders the cemetery an inappropriate place for the “tourist” to explore.

The practices of tourists and fans at the cemetery demonstrate the significance of celebrity culture, showing how people use their relationships to celebrities as sites of identity formation and expression. The flowers and remembrances they leave behind draw the interest of other visitors and are material evidence that a particular celebrity is remembered and commemorated. Hollywood Forever welcomes fans to organize events in honor of stars from Douglas Fairbanks and Tyrone Power to Bianca Halstead and Johnny Ramone. These events temporarily transform the cemetery into a space of celebration. Using the cemetery as social space raises questions about protocol: if these



are unconventional practices, what are the guidelines for appropriate behavior? How should tourists and visitors behave in the company of mourners? Who decides what constitutes “respect” for the living and the dead? Such questions come to bear significantly at Cinespia, when more than a thousand visitors occupy the space of the cemetery to enjoy a picnic dinner and a film in the open, outdoor space of the Fairbanks Lawn.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> In 1928, at the second annual memorial service for Rudolph Valentino, an enormous floral display in the shape of a cross was emblazoned with the phrase “We never forget.” Many Valentino devotees have taken this phrase to be their personal mission, collecting memorabilia, participating in and promoting silent film festivals, and paying tribute to Valentino at Hollywood Forever.

<sup>2</sup> For extensive treatments of Rudolph Valentino’s life, see Emily Leider’s *Dark Lover: The Life and Death of Rudolph Valentino* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Geroux, 2003) and Irving Shulman’s 1967 biography, *Valentino* (New York: Trident Press, 1967). Both Leider and Shulman address Valentino’s death and its aftermath, which is covered in extensive detail by Allan Ellenberger in *The Valentino Mystique: The Death and Afterlife of the Silent Film Idol* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, 2005).

<sup>3</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all quotes in this chapter are drawn from interviews conducted at Hollywood Forever Cemetery in August 2006, October 2006, and July 2007.

<sup>4</sup> Joshua Gamson uses the terms “hobbyist” and “tourist” to distinguish among the attitudes of those who attend events in order to engage in celebrity-watching. He notes that “the spectators fall into two detectable groups: hobbyists, ranging from the serious to the casual, and tourists. Both are mixed in terms of age, gender, and race. The hobbyists tend to be more serious about celebrity watching; they are regulars at such events. The activity of the tourists differs from the hobbyists’ less in kind as in the degree of its seriousness” (130). These terms readily carry over from watching celebrities arrive at an event to seeking out celebrity gravesites.

<sup>5</sup> The phenomenon of wanting to be buried near one’s favorite celebrity or hero is not uncommon. Expecting that admirers will want to be buried near Rosa Parks, Detroit’s Woodlawn Cemetery now charges more than \$25,000 for a crypt near Parks’, up from \$17,000 prior to her interment there in October 2005. While some of Parks’ relatives are angered by this, Woodlawn officials deny profiting from her burial.

<sup>6</sup> Rappe’s death and Arbuckle’s trials are described in vivid detail elsewhere. See Arbuckle biographies including Stuart Oderman’s *Roscoe “Fatty” Arbuckle: A Biography of the Silent Film Comedian, 1887-1933* and Andy Edmond’s *Frame-Up!: The Untold Story of Roscoe “Fatty” Arbuckle*, as well as Kenneth Anger’s *Hollywood Babylon* for a more concise version of the events.

<sup>7</sup> I took Karie Bible’s Hollywood Forever Historic Walking Tour on 21 July 2007, the Haunted Hollywood tour with Brian Sapir on 22 August 2006, and the Dearly Departed tour with Scott Michaels on 19 August 2006.

<sup>8</sup> Greg Smith started Grave Line Tours in 1987, and Scott Michaels moved to Los Angeles from Detroit to join the business. When Smith moved back to Kansas in 1992, Michaels took ownership of Grave Line.

<sup>9</sup> See Daniel Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America* (25th anniversary ed. New York: Vintage Books, 1992).

## Chapter 4

### On the Mausoleum Wall

In the 2006 Independent Film Channel/Acura promotional short film *The Projectionists*, four 30-something hipster men drive around Los Angeles debating whether popcorn or chocolate is the ideal movie snack. They drive past a number of buildings, including Frank Gehry's Walt Disney Concert Hall, sizing up and criticizing each one. Their purpose is not clear until the car pulls up in front of a vast green lawn and the young men approvingly eye the long, low wall of a building beyond the grass. The men get out of the car and open the trunk, where a projector is pointed at the wall. A wide shot shows the four men sitting in lawn chairs beside the car, contentedly watching a film projected on the wall. The projectionists are not alone in finding this to be a fine place to screen a film; yet one might need to be familiar with Hollywood Forever to recognize the Fairbanks Lawn as the site for this guerilla drive-in screening. This vast expanse of grass behind the tall, arched sarcophagus of Douglas Fairbanks Sr. and Jr. is broken only by three small family mausoleums. The lawn runs alongside the Cathedral Mausoleum, an ornate Italian Renaissance-inspired building that was the largest mausoleum in the world at the time of its completion. Thanks to Cinespia, it is now the screening space for a popular outdoor movie theater.

The first screening on the Fairbanks Lawn was held in conjunction with the 1999 Rudolph Valentino memorial service. Building on decades-long traditions, Hollywood Forever expanded the annual event by screening Valentino's last film, *The Son of the Sheik*, projecting it on the exterior wall of the mausoleum. Chairs arranged on the Fairbanks Lawn provided a comfortable makeshift outdoor theater for Valentino fans (Terhune 192). Hollywood set designer John Wyatt, who ran a film club called Cinespia, was inspired by the Valentino tribute. When his club grew too large to attend screenings as a group, Wyatt sought a place to show films himself (Epstein, par. 2). He approached Tyler Cassity with the idea of screening classic films at Hollywood Forever, and Cinespia launched at the cemetery in 2001. On a typical summer Saturday night, as many as 2,700 Angelenos enjoy picnic dinners, music, and movies on the cemetery grounds. As Matt,<sup>1</sup> a frequent Cinespia moviegoer explains, the experience begins long before he and his friends arrive at the cemetery:

When I know what's playing, I'll send the e-mail to my friends saying, "This is on." Or someone will send the e-mail out: "This is on at the cemetery, who's in?" We'll start creating a little bit of excitement. And then it actually comes around. We'll figure out who's bringing what food. One of my friends always goes and gets these Vietnamese sandwiches that are spectacular. Everyone generally brings something. It's comparable to a potluck dinner party. Everyone comes over and you're just chilling with your group, with good friends. You're listening to music, during dinner, and not only are you listening to music at the cemetery but you don't have

to do anything with the music. There's somebody there who's thinking about it for you, putting on these records, and just wants you to have a good time. We go, we stake out our spot, and we set up our blankets and our chairs and start eating dinner, and drinking a little bit. We try to get there when it opens, at the beginning, because it's just nicer to be done with all that by the time the movie starts.

Matt describes the festive environment created by the comfortable rituals of sharing food with friends and gathering with hundreds of others to listen to music and watch a film. Where Matt and his friends are at ease with spending the evening in a cemetery surrounded by thousands of graves, many find their first visit to Cinespia somewhat ominous. As Hollywood Forever is transformed into social space, however, most visitors easily forget the foreboding aspects of being in a cemetery. Through this transformation, Cinespia can create a powerful sense of place for repeat visitors. This chapter situates the social practices of Cinespia within the context of community and identity in urban settings, and considers how the experience of screening films in the cemetery can establish an ongoing yet ephemeral sense of belonging. A glance backward at the experience of moviegoing as a public event locates Cinespia as a nostalgic practice, especially with regard to the drive-in theater. Lastly, examining the choice of films that are screened at Cinespia reveals the important cultural work motion pictures can do to create identity and group belonging while also opening a lens to the past.

## Creating a Sense of Place

Cinespia is not free to attend (a \$10 donation is requested for cemetery restoration), yet the film series creates a type of public space on the cemetery grounds. Communal public space is one of the benefits of attending Cinespia; entering into a shared space, establishing your spot on the lawn, and getting acquainted with your temporary neighbors, perhaps exchanging food or drinks, happens without any overt plan. Although John Wyatt was merely looking for an interesting space to show classic films, Cinespia now does important cultural work by creating and perpetuating a temporary but recurring public space. Many bemoan the loss of this kind of public space and the dwindling presence of everyday public life that occurs in parks and town squares. Creating and designating spaces intended for interaction and shared experience is rife with challenges, and urban planners like Ronald Lee Fleming are working to find ways to create a sense of place in the built environment. Fleming suggests that “a certain kind of public life can be nurtured through triangulation: setting up some third element—an activity, a work of art—that ignites a conversation between people. [...] An interaction between strangers creates an effect of animation, which is one stimulus for public life (“Whatever Became...” 53). As the sun sets before a film is shown at Cinespia, the images of both classic and obscure film posters are projected on the mausoleum wall while disc jockeys play music for the crowd. The pre-screening entertainment can create this essential interaction Fleming describes. Matt and his friends, as previously noted, appreciate that “there’s somebody there who’s thinking about it for you, putting on these

records, and just wants you to have a good time,” like the host of a party who selects the background music for his guests.

Places in which this kind of communal life can occur are increasingly difficult to find. Jane Jacobs, in her landmark book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, points to city sidewalks as a vital site for creating a safe, rich, and diverse public life. To function as such, sidewalks require pedestrians and everyday users who repeatedly traverse a similar path on foot. In an automobile culture, especially in a city like Los Angeles with a staggeringly immense network of highways, the public life of city sidewalks tends not to be significant. As a visitor to the cemetery explains over dinner at a Cinespia screening, “We have to drive our cars—everything is far. It’s not like New York or Boston where you’re in the city and you walk. In a smaller compact city, more people walk around, go to the local coffee shop. Here, no one walks around. You drive to work, from work, not a lot of social interaction.”

Within the greater Los Angeles metroplex, there are a handful of exceptional neighborhoods like West Hollywood that have a vibrant pedestrian culture. In most of the city, however, people are transformed into drivers who step out of their vehicles only to move from parking lots to building entrances, and sidewalks cannot serve the important function of creating public life for residents. Jacobs argues that

the sum of such casual public contact at a local level—most of it fortuitous, most of it associated with errands, all of it metered by the person concerned and not thrust upon him by anyone—is a feeling for the public identity of people, a web of



public respect and trust, and a resource in time of personal or neighborhood need. (73).

Community, as Jacobs might define it, is not merely about the demarcations of physical space, such as a boundary street separating Hollywood from West Hollywood, but must also refer to a social network of support and shared experience. The sidewalk, then, can be a space for the formation and articulation of community.

In the absence of a public life that finds its rich presence on city sidewalks, in parks, or in public squares, places like coffeehouses, barber shops, or neighborhood bars can fill this space for community life. As Ray Oldenburg notes in *The Great Good Place*, “the problem of place in America manifests itself in a sorely deficient informal public life. The structure of shared experience beyond that offered by family, job, and passive consumerism is small and dwindling” (13). The kind of shared experience Oldenburg refers to is important to one’s quality of life. The comfort of feeling welcomed and at ease in a familiar place can create a sense of belonging that grants individuals some respite from the alienation increasingly typical of everyday urban life. Oldenburg uses the term “third place” to designate “a great variety of public places that host the regular, voluntary, informal, and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals beyond the realms of home and work” (16). In Oldenburg’s characterization, conversation is the primary activity of the third place, and the time between the cemetery opening for Cinespia and the screening itself allows for plenty of conversation, not only with one’s companions but also with strangers on nearby blankets and chairs. As an operating cemetery, Hollywood Forever cannot fulfill Oldenburg’s requisite characteristics of a third place, yet when used

as social space, the cemetery can temporarily serve as a locale for much-needed communal experiences outside of the spaces of home and work. Social discomfort with the cemetery, however, can be a barrier for Cinespia to create an opportunity for Hollywood Forever to serve as a third place. While there are those who object to the idea of watching a film in the cemetery and refuse to participate in Cinespia, others get past their trepidation with encouragement from friends who have already attended. Reflecting on his first visit to Cinespia, James says, “Initially, the idea was slightly creepy but the feeling quickly subsided once I was inside the grounds. It was no longer about simply being in a cemetery but seeing great films with lots of other film lovers.”<sup>2</sup>

On Cinespia’s popular MySpace page ([www.myspace.com/cemeteryscreenings](http://www.myspace.com/cemeteryscreenings)), a commenter named Betsy posted a message about her experience: “Last Saturday it occurred to me that I am no longer afraid of walking through cemeteries in the dark. I’m not sure that’s healthy...but I do love your summer screenings.”<sup>3</sup> Even in the casual discourse of a social networking site like MySpace, the larger cultural perception of the cemetery as a foreboding place guides this poster’s comments. Considering Hollywood Forever’s ideological ambitions to foster a sense of comfort with death and with the dead, feeling at ease while walking through the cemetery after dark is indeed a healthy perspective, as it indicates the attitude toward death that Hollywood Forever aspires to normalize.

MySpace profile pages include a space in which individuals who have been added as “friends” are listed, along with their selected avatar. Clicking on the avatar takes a user to that friend’s page. Friends of Cinespia comment on their filmgoing experiences and

post requests for upcoming screenings. As rock and hip hop bands, political candidates, and other public figures and cultural venues establish a presence on MySpace, one often has no personal relationship with or knowledge of one's "friends." As a social networking site, MySpace encourages users to invite friends from profiles they visit to become their friends as well, based on a shared affinity or common interests. The Cinespia profile on MySpace was established in May 2005, and more than 1,800 friends were linked to the site by July 2006. By December 2007, Cinespia had amassed more than 5,700 friends. It is difficult to determine whether this significant increase is a result of the popularity of Cinespia or the popularity of MySpace. In June 2007, a Cinespia friend named Nicole posted this comment: "Wow. 5,000 friends? I miss you when it was about 200 friends sitting on the lawn." Nicole's wistful post addresses the loss of an in-crowd feeling for both the events at the cemetery and the virtual community on MySpace. The growing popularity of Cinespia and its consequences for visitors' feelings of community are addressed later in this chapter.

The film series also has an Internet presence with its own website, [www.cinespia.org](http://www.cinespia.org). Each week during the season, Cinespia posts a preview of the upcoming screening accompanied by a still photograph promoting the film. Also posted on the site are film and music recommendations, a link to a Google map of Hollywood Forever, a "how-to" section on making the most of your filmgoing experience, and information on the DJs who play music before and after each screening. Visitors to the website are invited to join a mailing list and receive information about upcoming films via e-mail. Volunteers at the cemetery also solicit mailing list subscribers before

screenings. David, a first-time visitor to Cinespia, said he found out about the film series from his uncle, who forwards the weekly e-mails to him. “I told him I wanted to go, to start sending me the e-mails, and I decided to come out,” David says. “The e-mail they sent me—it had the MySpace link. I went out to it for a second. It didn’t seem to have enough information on it.” David points to the different functions of these two virtual sites: where the purpose of Cinespia’s own website is to provide information and promote upcoming screenings, the MySpace page is intended to establish a communicative site for the exchange of comments and images that reinforce a shared interest in screening films at Hollywood Forever. After the 2007 screening of *Harold and Maude* (1971), for example, a MySpace friend named Sunny posted a still image of the opening credits of the film projected on the mausoleum wall along with a quote from Maude, the title character played by Ruth Gordon: “Well, if some people are upset because they feel they have a hold on some things, then I’m merely acting as a gentle reminder—I’m sort of breaking it easy. Here today, gone tomorrow, so don’t get attached to things. Now, with that in mind, I’m not against collecting stuff...”

Prior to and following the screening of *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* (1982), commenters posted images from the film. The first is a movie still featuring Sean Penn’s character Jeff Spicoli in the classroom, the other a shot of Spicoli from the cemetery screening. These are acts of participation that exceed the screening itself and serve as a manifestation of the relationship between the viewer, the film, and Cinespia. In the first instance, the commenter using the moniker “The Average Movie Fan” locates the “right” image that the Fan feels best represents the film or captures a favorite scene. In the age of

media convergence, the availability of such images, and the possibility of posting them for viewing by a virtual community, enables a more significant act of fandom than possible through text alone. Where the Average Movie Fan might post a statement on Cinespia's MySpace page saying, "I love this film," the still image enables the Fan to say, "Let me show you how much I love this film, and why." The image is evocative in a way text alone simply cannot be.

Evan, the MySpace friend who posted the second image, extends his appreciation of Cinespia, and of *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*, to the film series' virtual community. In the photograph from Cinespia, the bright, colorful image from the film is foregrounded against a seemingly black-and-white background of spindly palm trees towering above the mausoleum wall. With its strong sense of place and temporality, this photograph functions as a digitally-rendered souvenir, establishing authenticity for Evan. At the same time, the photograph reminds the visitor to Cinespia's MySpace profile of her own experience at the events or, for one who was absent, creates longing and nostalgia. Susan Stewart contends that "the souvenir is not an object arising out of need or use value; it is an object arising out of the necessarily insatiable demands of nostalgia" (135). As Stewart goes on to say, the photograph as souvenir comes to have meaning by virtue of the narrative that is inspired by and attached to the photograph itself. In the virtual community of MySpace, the photograph from Cinespia generates a brief narrative in the form of a comment of a few lines, while also initiating conversations that occur elsewhere: in instant messages, in blogs, and in face-to-face conversations among Cinespia patrons. Cinespia's virtual community not only perpetuates the real and

temporary sense of “real-life” community found when people gather at Hollywood Forever, it extends it. Media studies scholar Ken Hillis argues that virtual environments blend the transmission and ritual models of communication “to suggest, at a time when the ‘inbetween’ meaning of place is perceived as in retreat, that the act of transmission itself becomes an ersatz place and constitutes a ritual act or performance.” A virtual space is “modeled as a cyberspatial ‘room’ where all might ‘gather together’ in a manner that—at the scale of human bodies—*seems* to extend even as it dilutes or subverts the ritual component of communication” (63, emphasis original).

The ritual nature of moviegoing is one in which the meaning of experience is not given and preformed but rises out of the experience itself, as participants interact with and respond to the film, the space in which the film is screened, and other members of the audience. In the era of majestic movie palaces like Grauman’s Chinese and Egyptian Theatres and the Warner Hollywood Theater, an evening out at the movies was an event. The early movie theaters were designed with spectacular exteriors and equally magnificent interiors, intended to transform the moviegoers’ experience even before the film began. The Warner Hollywood, located at Hollywood Boulevard and Wilcox Avenue, was replete with “lounges with rich, walnut paneling, authentic antiques, a smoking room, a nursery with toys, and a music room” (Williams 159). The opulence of these theaters was not, however, class-bound: rather than excluding the working class Angelenos unaccustomed to such lavishness, the picture palaces invited them to transcend their everyday experiences not only through engagement with the film but also with their surroundings. In her study of southern movie palaces, cultural critic Janna

Jones contends that “picture palace developers created a public space that for the first time dramatically mixed various classes of picture show fans. This was no doubt motivated by the desire for high profits; however, many of them claimed that they had created a democratic space of leisure” (19-20). Jones adds that running alongside this self-proclaimed democratization were “design elements and structures built into the palaces [that] were intended to enforce acceptable public behavior” (20). Similarly, Cinespia welcomes any moviegoers willing to pay the requisite \$10 donation, and moviegoers are free to select their own space on the expanse of the Fairbanks Lawn. Yet security guards directing motorists to appropriate parking spaces, along with barricades placed on certain off-limits roads, make clear that the event space is limited to the lawn.

Historical picture palaces have been renovated as part of the recent revitalization of Hollywood, but their contemporary audiences tend to include tourists in t-shirts rather than the evening attire appropriate to these theaters in their heyday. In his study of movie audiences, Bruce A. Austin notes that “moviegoing was once a communal ritual, often set in an opulent ambience. [...] Going to the movies meant being in the company of friends and strangers who would sing songs together by following a white ball that bounced across lyrics projected on the screen.” Austin adds that “today, moviegoing retains comparatively little of the social and experiential specialness it once had” (44). Through a combination of unique aspects of the cemetery space as a site for screening movies, Cinespia audiences participate in ways that recall the rituals Austin describes. Being outdoors in open space eases some of the constraints of social decorum that dictate behavior in an indoor theater. This openness is enhanced by music and socializing before

the screening, which evoke a more party-like atmosphere. Lastly, the audience participation that often occurs at the screening of cult films, typical of movies that audience members are already familiar with, carries over to Cinespia. At a screening of the John Wayne classic *The Searchers* (1956), audience members chuckled collectively at the guarded manner in which sex was addressed in the film, and applauded together at its ending. Recounting the 2006 screening of *The Warriors* (1978), Chris says, “the female lead actress, Deborah Van Valkenburgh, was there and it was her birthday. Everyone sang to her. Also at the end of the film, the part where one of the characters clanks bottles together and chants, ‘Warriors, come out and play,’ the whole crowd clanked their bottles and chanted it. It was amazing!”<sup>4</sup> In a climactic scene from the film, Luther, a member of the rival gang the Rogues, slips beer bottles onto his thumb, pointer finger, and middle finger, and clicks the three bottles together while taunting the Warriors, who lay in wait. That the audience spontaneously joined in with Luther’s chant is significant testimony to the film’s status as a cult classic. In their sociological reading of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975) and other cult films, Patrick Kinkade and Michael Katovich find this kind of participation common among audiences of films such as *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) and *Pink Flamingos* (1972). They report that “viewers can anticipate and then laugh together at the sheriff’s line in *Night of the Living Dead*, ‘They’re dead, they’re all messed up,’ while appreciating its irony in a ‘horror movie’ context” (196-97).

Media scholar John Ellis draws a distinction between the filmic experience and the cinematic experience that plays out in the ways visitors engage with Cinespia. Ellis posits that what the moviegoer purchases with his theater ticket “is the possibility of a



pleasurable performance: the performance of a particular film and the performance of cinema itself, both together” (26). The appreciation of the cinema stands apart from an appreciation of the film, and, Ellis contends, “often people ‘go to the cinema’ regardless of what film is showing, and sometimes even with little intention of watching the film at all. Cinema, in this sense, is the relative privacy and anonymity of a darkened public space in which various kinds of activity can take place” (26). People certainly go to Cinespia in the manner in which Ellis describes. Drinking a bottle of wine with friends, people-watching, or merely spending time in a cemetery at night are all part of the appeal of Cinespia.

The appreciation for a particular film, and the desire to watch it with a crowd of enthusiastic viewers, can draw individuals to Cinespia. Ryan was enticed by the screening of *Repo Man* (1984), one of his favorite films. “Yeah, I love that movie,” he said. “It was cool. It wasn’t that crowded. It’s like weird, sort of, because we’re in a cemetery. But it’s like seeing a movie anywhere, except we’re on the grass. It’s like the concept is weird, because it’s the cemetery and that’s usually associated with bad times. But there’s a movie. It’s like a movie theater you can smoke in. After a while it doesn’t even feel like you’re in a cemetery. You’re watching the movie. It’s just like another movie theater.” As Ryan points out, although the cemetery is “usually associated with bad times,” the transformation of the cemetery into social space allows it to feel “just like another movie theater.” The cemetery is then experienced as a pleasurable space, and if one returns to it for a funeral or to commemorate the death of a loved one, the positive memories of Cinespia may make mourning less difficult. Some visitors find themselves

surprised by how comfortable they become spending time at the cemetery. “I came here and I saw *North by Northwest*. And I was tired, and I feel asleep, and I woke up, and I was like, ‘Oh god! I fell asleep in a cemetery, at nighttime? Let that be the last time I ever do that!’ Until the next time,” Aaron admits.

More than fifty users have posted comments about Cinespia on *Yelp.com*, a website where local residents review restaurants, businesses, events, and other aspects of city life. Each Yelp site focuses on a particular metropolitan area and is designed to serve as a grassroots city guide for residents and visitors alike. Yelp describes itself as helping people “find cool places to eat, shop, drink, relax and play, based on the informed opinions of a vibrant and active community of locals in the know” (“Frequently...”). Trisha L. writes on Yelp, “This cemetery is the nicest one I’ve ever seen. These people really go out in style! Though it seems unsettling to have a picnic next to some dead folks, it really feels more like a big park than a cemetery.” The broad expanse of the Fairbanks Lawn, where moviegoers sit with their backs to the surrounding gravestones and mausoleums, enables visitors to focus on the immediate park-like setting. In her Yelp review, Kerri R. from Calabasas adds,

It’s a pure joy to be surrounded by a bunch of cool, kick ass Los Angelenos. [...] The smell of summer, yummy food, and cannabis, combined with the titter of laughter and the catcalls that erupt when the film starts makes you feel so happy to be alive. Alive and surrounded by the dead...doesn’t that make you feel double happy to be alive??! Does for

me. The palm trees backlit by the lights of Hollywood just make it feel like you're more in a movie than watching one!

Yelpers also review and comment on their experiences of various entertainment venues around Los Angeles, including many that feature outdoor entertainment or classic films. The Hollywood Bowl sets a longstanding precedent for bringing a picnic dinner to enjoy with a performance under the stars. The Greek Theater at Griffith Park is another outdoor concert venue, but guests are prohibited from bringing their own food. The nonprofit organization Arts Fighting Cancer screens outdoor summer movies at the Santa Monica Drive-In at the Pier, which plays on the Cinespia slogan of screenings “below (and above) the stars” to claim “movies over the water and under the stars” (*Santa Monica Pier*). As the economic and cultural center for the film industry, the city has an extensive offering of classic films at historic theaters and museums. The Silent Film Theatre, located a mere three miles from Hollywood Forever, has long been a popular site for screening classic films. Brothers Dan and Sammy Harkham recently took ownership of the theater and reopened it in October 2007. Under the moniker Cinefamily, the venue's expanded schedule includes international fare not typically screened in the U.S. as well as tribute series honoring filmmaker Les Blank, actor Charles Bronson, cinema stuntmen, or blacklisted actors and directors. Those who attend and participate in Cinespia would likely agree with Cinefamily's assertion that “like campfires, sporting events and church services, we believe that movies work best as social experiences. They are more meaningful, funnier and scarier when shared with others” (*Cinefamily*).

Cinespia is not unique in offering outdoor entertainment or classic movies; in fact, Angelenos are well-practiced in enjoying both. What makes the film series distinctive is its location at Hollywood Forever. Cemeteries have played host to performances of live music and plays, but Cinespia is the first film series to find its home in a cemetery. Diana, a longtime visitor and fan of Hollywood Forever, considers the impact Cinespia might have on those with family members buried at Hollywood Forever. “I brought my nephew here to the movies a couple of times. And I asked him, ‘I wonder how we would feel if we had loved ones here, how we would feel about the movies.’ He says, ‘Well, they do keep the place clean and up to date. So if I was the dead person, I would be happy.’”

For those with loved ones interred at the cemetery during Jules Roth’s reign, the improvements to the cemetery, funded in part through Cinespia,<sup>5</sup> are certainly welcome. Karina A. and Selby J., who both have family members buried at the cemetery, posted reviews of Hollywood Forever on Yelp. Selby writes, “I have never seen a movie here. I have never participated in any of the entertainment functions frequently held here. But I did arrange my younger brother’s funeral. He was only 38 at the time.” Selby goes on to praise Hollywood Forever’s professionalism, and does not indicate any discomfort with Cinespia or other events at the cemetery. Similarly, Karina writes that she “didn’t even know these events existed until Yelp.com, but I did bury my great grandmother and my grandfather here. [...] No matter what religion you are, you will have an appropriate funeral with the traditions of your family. Plus your family is buried with celebrities and have a view of the Hollywood sign” ([www.yelp.com](http://www.yelp.com)). Funerals and choice of burial location are indeed for the living, as we want our loved ones to be buried and

remembered well. Karina shows her appreciation for the prestige that comes with burial in a celebrity cemetery. That hundreds of people use the cemetery where her family members are buried as social space does not stand in the way of her positive perspective.

Cinespia not only creates a means for visitors to feel comfortable in the cemetery, it also establishes a sense of place for those visitors. As art curator and cultural critic Lucy Lippard argues, when memory is associated with a particular space, a sense of place is established. A significant thread in Lippard's work is that while memory is indeed rooted in place, it takes lived experience to turn space into place. As with any other space, visitors must spend time developing a relationship with Hollywood Forever in order for that transformation to occur. The cemetery becomes vested with meaning, and returning to it allows the visitor to engage memory in an embodied manner. With these emotional ties to Hollywood Forever, a sense of place develops for Cinespia fans and alters their relationship with the cemetery.

Every Saturday night throughout the summer, Hollywood Forever is a different space: there are ways that the film defines the space in which it is shown. The screening of teen comedy *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* created a different atmosphere than the dark drama *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975) did the following Saturday. Because Cinespia screens classic films and cult classics, watching a film at the cemetery is always an experience of the simultaneity of the past and the present. Hollywood Forever, then, is a space of multiple temporalities. Yet for those who attend Cinespia, there are material ways in which the experience of the cemetery is always the same: the feel of the grass beneath you, the familiar layout of the mausoleums and tombstones, or

the Hollywood sign in the hills in the distance. The memories of whatever film one saw earlier in the summer or during a previous summer do work toward creating a sense of place for the visitor returning to Hollywood Forever.

### **Cinespia, Nostalgia, and the Drive-in**

Running alongside the novelty of Cinespia is the resurrection of traditions: not only does the film series recall the way in which families would picnic in rural cemeteries, it also recalls the drive-in movie theater. Like the drive-in, the pleasures of Cinespia far exceed merely watching a movie. In a 1982 survey of drive-in audiences, Bruce Austin found that “to see the movie” accounted for only 7.5 percent of the reasons for attending the drive-in. Affordability and comfort versus the walk-in theater, privacy, having fun, and being outdoors were all considered more significant factors than the film itself (91). At the time of Austin’s survey, the drive-in was already in significant decline on the U.S. landscape: from a peak of 4,063 drive-in theaters in 1958 (Fass, par. 5), the number of drive-ins fell from 2,507 in 1987 to only 910 nationwide by 1990 (“A Brief Overview”). Yet the drive-in remains a part of the cultural imaginary, and has been re-presented to a younger audience through mediated experiences such as *Grease*, *The Outsiders*, and several video games including *SimCity 2000* and *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* that feature drive-in scenarios. Nostalgia for the drive-in is rooted in a yearning for an idyllic communal filmgoing experience, in which each individual or group occupies their own private space within the context of a larger public setting. This experience was not available to, and is subsequently idealized for, most members of

Generation X, generally defined as those born between 1964 and 1980 and largely representative of those who attend Cinespia. Svetlana Boym's explanation in *The Future of Nostalgia* provides insight into how the cemetery, not previously a site for moviegoing, can take the place of the drive-in theater:

At first glance, nostalgia is a longing for a place, but actually it is a yearning for a different time—the time of our childhood, the slower rhythms of our dreams. In a broader sense, nostalgia is a rebellion against the modern idea of time, the time of history and progress. The nostalgic desires to obliterate history and turn it into private or collective mythology, to revisit time like space, refusing to surrender to the irreversibility of time that plagues the human condition. (xv)

To see Cinespia as emulating the drive-in is to understand the desire to “revisit time like space,” rather than to seek out a particular space in which a feeling of the past is situated. As teenagers and twentysomethings, GenXers saw the transformation of broadcast television to cable, the format shift from audio cassette to CD, and the decline of the drive-in accompanied by the proliferation of multiplex theaters, often attached to shopping malls. With its small seats and cramped screening rooms, the multiplex is convenient and suburban, and only remotely recalls the rich history of moviegoing-as-event, whether at the picture palace or the drive-in.

There are no longer any drive-in theaters in Los Angeles proper. Built in 1955, the Vineland Drive-In in City of Industry is the last vintage drive-in theater in the county, accommodating as many as 1,700 cars for first-run features year round. In a 2004 feature

story about the Vineland in the *Los Angeles Times*, Duane Noriyuki reports that the drive-in experience has seen some changes.

Those rattly metal speakers that hung on poles are a thing of the past, replaced by Dolby surround sound through the radio. Another change is that the playgrounds at the base of the screens are gone. [...] Other than that, it's much the same experience, not unlike tailgate parties outside a football stadium as people set up lawn chairs and blankets or convert the back seats of their vans to outdoor seating. (par. 14)

Noriyuki notes that “the lure of the colossal screen and the tang of popcorn give drive-ins their appeal. And it's still a good place for making out” (par. 16).

Whether the appeal is for the larger-than-life screen, retro-style concession stands, or a romantic dalliance, a drive-in revival is underway. Enthusiasts-turned-operators are using innovative means to recreate the bygone experience. According to *Forbes* magazine, 88 drive-ins have either reopened or been built from the ground up since the 1990s (Fass, par. 6). At the Orange County Fairgrounds in Costa Mesa, 45 miles south of Los Angeles, acres of open land and a 65-by-33-foot inflatable screen bring the Star-Vu Drive-In to life. The makeshift drive-in, which opened in May 2007, hosts a maximum of 300 cars. More impromptu drive-ins dot the landscape of Los Angeles, inspired by the Santa Cruz Drive-In collective. More of a walk-in or bike-in than a drive-in, the Santa Cruz initiative uses mobile technologies to create a temporary screening space. Organized via e-mail, members of the collective gather in designated spaces and project films for free. This reclamation of public space is intended to subvert the consumer culture in



which the city is saturated. According to its website, “Guerilla Drive-In recognized years ago that in our city, a community focused on art and connection, there is no place to meet in public that is unmediated by commerce. [...] If you want to meet friends or strangers at night, your only option is to dive into the stream of commerce, bars, cafes, restaurants, or movies” (“Start Your Own...”). The Guerilla Drive-In creates a friendly and free alternative.

The gatherings in Santa Cruz inspired MobMov, or mobile movie, “the drive in that drives in.” The concept of MobMov is similar to that of a traditional drive-in, but the film is projected from a parked vehicle and audio is carried on an FM radio frequency. HollywoodMobMov began in 2005 and has held a few screenings in parking lots around the city. Like the formation of a flash mob, potential participants are informed via e-mail when a screening is scheduled and where it will occur (*HollywoodMobMov*). The locations are deliberately random, and the ephemerality of the event is in part what makes it appealing. Like Cinespia, a trace of the event remains in the memory of those who attend; the space is marked as one in which a clandestine pleasure took place although no physical evidence remains.

In the summer of 2007, Angel City Drive-In began screening films in the parking lot of the Alexandria Hotel in downtown Los Angeles, currently under renovation. Built in 1906, the hotel provided residence for many film stars in the early years of the industry and was the site chosen by Douglas Fairbanks, Mary Pickford, D.W. Griffith, and Charlie Chaplin to announce the formation of United Artists in 1919 (“Hotel Alexandria Rehab”). The Alexandria signals the rise of downtown gentrification, transforming a classic yet

rundown landmark hotel into studio lofts for hip Angelenos. The Angel City Drive-In screens many of the same cult classics shown at Cinespia over the years, and complements its screenings with car hop service by members of the roller derby team Angel City Derby Girls as well as Hot Dog on a Stick, the popular snack first sold on Venice Beach in 1946. These features, and the location, situate the series as a uniquely Los Angeles experience, yet different from the Hollywood experience of Cinespia. Morgan Highby Night, one of the founders of Angel City Drive-In, describes his venue as “D.I.Y. punk rock because it’s part of downtown. It’s still a bit dangerous here, a little scummy. We try to make it safe and professional, but those elements are undeniable” (Wappler, par. 4). The seediness of downtown is part of the draw for Angel City, and is not unlike the somewhat industrial neighborhood which now surrounds Hollywood Forever. Both venues create an oasis for entertainment and social engagement. Cinespia, Angel City Drive-In, and MobMov situate moviegoing in an out-of-the-ordinary setting, creating appeal based in part on a temporary repurposing of public space.

The pleasures of this repurposing are akin to Michel de Certeau’s metaphor of apartment dwellers in his explanation of tactics, that which “insinuates itself into the other’s place, fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety, without being able to keep it at a distance” (489) in the process of consumption. Consumers do not necessarily make use of products—media productions, urban streets and buildings, or items at the grocery store—in the way they are intended but rather adapt those products for their own best purposes. “This mutation makes the text habitable, like a rented apartment,” de Certeau writes. “It transforms another person’s property into a space borrowed for a

moment by a transient. Renters make comparable changes in an apartment they furnish with their acts and memories,” in the same way we move through public spaces, following our own personalized trajectories and gathering memories as we go (489).

The flash mob is certainly tactical, in de Certeau’s terms. Bill Wasik, a senior editor at *Harper’s Magazine* and inventor of the flash mob writes:

The basic hypothesis behind the Mob Project was as follows: seeing how all culture in New York was demonstrably commingled with scenesterism, the appeal of concerts and plays and readings and gallery shows deriving less from the work itself than from the social opportunities the work might engender, it should theoretically be possible to create an art project consisting of pure scene—meaning the scene would be the entire point of the work, and indeed would itself constitute the work (58).

Part of the excitement for MobMov, Cinespia, and Angel City is the scene itself, although none of the gatherings are, as Wasik describes, “pure scene.” Nonetheless, the social gathering, to whatever degree it is organized, makes these temporary sites far more engaging than the multiplex.

With the growing popularity of Netflix, cable and satellite television, and the burgeoning market for home theater technology, watching movies at home can be a convenient and high-quality alternative to the multiplex. What is missing, of course, is the company of others and the pleasure of cinema as a shared experience. Surely a comedy seems funnier when others laugh along with us, and home viewing denies the pleasure of enjoying a film with a group of people in a communal setting. The social

experience of Cinespia, constituted in part by chance encounters with strangers, is one you cannot get in your living room, regardless of how many friends you have over to watch.

### **What We Watch**

When Cinespia began at Hollywood Forever, John Wyatt intended to provide an opportunity for film buffs to view more obscure, seldom screened Hollywood classics. Cinespia's mission statement, posted on its website shortly after it went live in 2003, states that the film society was "created to bring together the community of film enthusiasts in Los Angeles. We are convinced that Angelenos are still enthusiastic about cinema's great films, including those outside the normal repertory. We are dedicated to showing unusual films in unusual places" ("Mission"). Hollywood Forever is an unusual place for screening a film, yet over the years Cinespia's fare has become increasingly mainstream. A few unconventional movies appear on the schedule each season along with a growing number of contemporary films and cult classics. This change in the repertoire deters some moviegoers from attending, while others are drawn specifically to watch the mainstream movies that number among their favorites. As Cinespia has grown in popularity—in part by screening cult classics, leading to sellouts at the cemetery—those who have attended often are again split on their response. Some moviegoers enjoy the large crowds, while others prefer a more intimate gathering of film fans.

Cinespia's 2002 season included the unusual among its fare: *Purple Noon* (*Plein Soleil*), based on Patricia Highsmith's novel *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, and *Eyes Without a Face* (*Les Yeux Sans Visage*), which was part of the Fringe Fest for the Silver Lake Film

Festival, a showcase for independent film. Both are French thrillers originally released in 1960. Depending on the visitor's perspective, one could say that in its initial offerings, Cinespia used the cemetery as a sinister backdrop for frightening films, or conversely, that the beauty and serenity of the cemetery makes a horror film less frightening, particularly as the city lights keep the cemetery from becoming as dark as a theater would be. As Wyatt said in a 2004 interview with Pepperdine University's *Graphic* newspaper, "I love that there's a lot of Hollywood history and beautiful architecture at the cemetery. The surroundings are quiet, serene and natural. It's the perfect atmosphere to watch classic films" (Barge, par. 8).

Classic film noir, from *Double Indemnity* (1944) to *Detour* (1945), is standard Cinespia fare, and every season also has included a film directed by Alfred Hitchcock. The frequency of Hitchcock screenings led many to the mistaken belief that the renowned director is buried at Hollywood Forever,<sup>6</sup> such as a blogger in Los Angeles who writes, "the main lawn is tombstone-free, but with a turn of my head, I spotted Hitchcock's grave in the area behind us" ("Star-struck"). Director John Huston and actor Peter Lorre are, however, interred in the cemetery, and the 2006 season opened with a screening of *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) as a tribute to both Hollywood legends. Despite the number of actors and directors buried at Hollywood Forever who played important roles in cinema history, few are featured in the Cinespia schedule. The film series does reflect its sense of place by including films about Hollywood in its repertoire. The 2007 season opened with Robert Altman's *The Player* (1992), in which Tim Robbins stars as a producer who believes he is being blackmailed by a writer whose script he rejected. The self-reflective

pleasure of Hollywood insiders at this screening was enhanced by a scene that was shot at Hollywood Forever and brought a rousing reception from the crowd (*Yelp.com*). The classic Robert Aldrich film *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* (1962) was screened later in the season, and the perennial favorite *Sunset Boulevard* (1950) was shown in 2003 and again in 2005. Each of these films critiques the Hollywood system and includes insider jokes that are appealing to the many members of the industry who enjoy Cinespia for a date or gathering among friends. As film critic Danny Peary writes about *Sunset Boulevard*, “What better locale for a ‘ghost’ story than Hollywood, a town built on illusions and delusions, where people grow old but remain young on celluloid, where people become has-beens before they’ve made it” (328). Hollywood Forever preserves these illusions, in which film stars come back to life, in essence, against the wall of the Cathedral Mausoleum.

Cinema can provide other pleasures of engagement and cultural lessons. *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964), screened during the 2006 season, offers a satirical glimpse into the paranoia and threat of nuclear annihilation that plagued the Cold War era. The political commentary inherent in *Dr. Strangelove* teaches contemporary audiences about the past while also giving the critical viewer a means to use the past for purposes in the present, comparing the militaristic scenarios of the Cold War to global politics today. The satiric sensibilities of *Dr. Strangelove* can be read as analogous to various contemporary circumstances, from the panic over weapons of mass destruction to the proliferation of totalitarianism and militaristic ideologies. Yet these pedagogical aspects take nothing away from the sheer

comedic pleasure of the film.

That Cinespia itself can educate audiences about film history is one of its benefits for Wyatt. He says that many younger moviegoers “don’t know these classic films. I’ve had people [at Cinespia screenings] tell me they’ve never watched a black-and-white film before” (Epstein, par. 3). Cinespia screens classics from Hollywood’s Golden Age, including the screwball comedies *Bringing Up Baby* (1938), starring Katherine Hepburn and Cary Grant, and Frank Capra’s *It Happened One Night* (1934) with Clark Gable and Claudette Colbert. These films portray a worldview and have an aesthetic that offers insight into both cinema history and cultural history. Jan, who moved to Los Angeles to pursue a career in acting, says Hollywood Forever “is perfect to watch old classics.” He finds these films appealing because “it seems like they don’t script it so much. It’s that old fashioned beauty that I like. The new stuff today, there’s too much special effects that kind of destroy movies in some ways. I’d love to make a black-and-white movie that takes place in the ‘50s or ‘40s, and try to keep everything real.” This classic film fan implies that there is a feeling of authenticity associated with the straightforward narrative and production of old black-and-white films, in contrast with the high production value of many contemporary films.

A classic film like *Rebel Without a Cause*, screened during the 2007 season at Cinespia, depicts the teen angst and alienation that was a relatively new cultural phenomenon when the film was released in 1955 but has since become standard cultural fare (*American Graffiti* [1973], *Breakfast Club* [1985] and *Dead Poets Society* [1989] are just a few examples). Writing in 1964, Stuart Hall and Paddy Whannel describe the

relationship between youth culture and the media, arguing that while many teenagers generally feel misunderstood, media culture enhances this feeling by producing texts that show teenagers *as* isolated and misunderstood. For a generation, then, a sense of “group isolation” materializes, in which teen angst becomes a common bond through media consumption (62). Teen films become a powerful generational connection and marker. Thanks to cable television and home video, the teen movies of one generation, like *Rebel Without a Cause* and *Grease* (1978), can have resonance and relevance for generations that follow.<sup>7</sup> The sense that a film can serve as a marker for a certain time in one’s life, speaking to and speaking for a particular cohort, invites the social experience of moviegoing Cinespia provides. Diana notes that “a lot of those movies are all accessible by rental, or on cable, but to see it here is a great novelty. I think you could show anything here.” Another frequent visitor to Cinespia adds, “the point of the films in the cemetery is the atmosphere. I could see those films any time; the point is being in the cemetery.”<sup>8</sup>

In a broad sense, there are two paths to Cinespia: one taken by those who love the cemetery and find their way to the movies; the other taken by those who love the movies—and the communal experience of moviegoing—and end up at the cemetery. For cemetery hobbyists and celebrity gravers, Cinespia began as an opportunity to showcase the culturally significant space they hold dear while also raising funds for the restoration of the cemetery. Among the community of celebrity gravers, Cinespia is a natural extension of their relationship to the cemetery, “especially for Hollywood Forever,” says Mark. “Cemeteries are for the living. Death and historical remembrance do not have to be



morbid. Fun is not incompatible with respect for those who have gone before.”<sup>9</sup>

Much has changed since Cinespia took up residence at Hollywood Forever. As Lisa, a grave hunter, points out, “The crowds used to be made up of people who had an interest in old films and/or a love of that cemetery; now it seems that it’s just the ‘in’ thing to do and a bunch of disrespectful drunkards show up. And it’s way oversold. Way too crowded.” When she went to see *Treasure of the Sierra Madre* at the beginning of the 2005 season, Lisa found it disappointing that “the organizers and most of the crowd had no idea that director John Huston was buried a few feet away from the screening” (personal correspondence). Cinespia now appeals to a younger audience as intent on re-experiencing the films they love as on being exposed to the history of Hollywood cinema.<sup>10</sup> Contemporary cult classics now appear frequently on the schedule, changing the atmosphere of screenings as well as the audience that finds them appealing. Film critic Danny Peary is widely credited with popularizing the term “cult classic” in his 1981 book *Cult Movies: The Classics, the Sleepers, the Weird, and the Wonderful*. For this first book—a second and third followed—Peary chose one hundred films that garner, for various reasons, a group of passionate fans who have seen these films enough times to be familiar with every bit of dialogue and will happily engage in lengthy discussions of their merits. Cult classics are typically rejected by critics, earn little at the box office on initial release, and yet are cherished by those who believe they are among a privileged few who find something extraordinary in them. Especially appealing for fans is the community that forms around cult classics. “There is nothing more exciting than discovering you are

not the only person obsessed with a picture critics hate, the public stays away from en masse, and film texts ignore,” Peary says (xiii).

Several films that Peary includes in *Cult Movies* have been shown at the cemetery, including *The Searchers*, *The Red Shoes*, *Detour*, and *Rebel Without a Cause*. The first contemporary cult classic shown at the cemetery was *Pee-wee’s Big Adventure* (1985), and its annual screening is a highlight of the season. Paul Reubens developed the character Pee-wee Herman—a quirky, childlike man who always wears the same suit and bowtie—while he was a member of the improvisational comedy troupe The Groundlings. Following the success of the film, Reubens developed the Saturday morning children’s program *Pee-wee’s Playhouse*. The series aired on CBS from 1986 to 1991 and attracted a large college-age audience in addition to children. At the 2005 Cinespia screening of the film, Reubens phoned in an introduction, which John Wyatt broadcast over the public address system. In 2006, *Pee-wee’s Big Adventure* sold out, and many disappointed fans were turned away at the cemetery gates. Those who arrived in time to be admitted were treated to a cast reunion, as Paul Reubens, E.G. Daily, and other members of the cast were in attendance. A blogger who calls herself Cat wrote enthusiastically about the screening:

Now the gates opened up at 7:30 and there was already a huge crowd, and I mean huge! It was going to be a sell out night. [...] So when we were all together we enjoyed our picnic and right at 9pm they started the show...with some introductions at first...Paul Reubens, Pee-wee himself was there! Everyone stood up and cheered. He was so cool, was pretty

excited to be there. [...] Seeing the movie was so much fun. This was one of the best crowds to watch with too. When Pee-wee was in Texas and sings everyone watching clapped along and sang “Deep in the Heart of Texas.” We had our own fun reciting lines amongst ourselves. (“Pee Wee”)

The familiarity with the script and scenes, and the shared experience of clapping along with “Deep in the Heart of Texas” reinforce and reflect the feelings of being part of an exceptional minority that is typical of cult fans. It is a performative celebration of cult fandom.

Along with cult classics, Cinespia includes more contemporary films that have earned critical acclaim and are considered among the best American films. The American Film Institute, for example, includes *Chinatown* (1974), *Taxi Driver* (1976), and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* (1975), all of which were screened at Cinespia, on its 2007 list of the top 100 films. A blogger named Sara posted a meme<sup>11</sup> of the American Film Institute top 100 films in October 2007. She notes that she has seen 55 percent of the films, adding that “if it hadn’t been for Cinespia, it would have been much lower” (“Movie Meme”). The cultural work of Cinespia extends into the second half of the twentieth century, exposing audiences to more recent films that are deemed as significant as the important movies from the 1930s and 1940s.

As Trisha L. says on Yelp.com, “You can get any of the movies from Netflix, but the \$10 to see it here is worth the experience (at least once!).” One’s experience depends on the film being screened, and there is a difference in the experience of watching a

screwball comedy and watching a horror film. Horror films have become an end-of-season tradition for Cinespia, and there are many Cinespia fans who find the genre particularly thrilling and prefer it to the “tamer” fare offered on the schedule. Horror film fans enjoy the opportunity to confront the unknown and the supernatural, and to engage in the suspense of plot and scene for which the genre is known. While there is relief from terror at the end of the film, part of the appeal for horror fans is the lingering images and fear that are difficult to forget. Walking past standing tombstones and mausoleums on the way back to one’s car after screening a horror film at Cinespia can intensify the willing viewer’s suspension of disbelief.

During its third season of screenings, Cinespia was honored as one of the best entertainment experiences in Los Angeles. A brief description of the film series ends by noting, “There are limits, however. When Wyatt proposed a salute to horror director George A. Romero with a screening of *Dawn of the Dead*, Cassity ruled that zombie films in a cemetery pushed the boundaries of good taste just a little too far” (“Alfresco”). Three years later, however, *Dawn of the Dead* closed the 2006 season. The preview of the film posted on the Cinespia website and distributed via e-mail positions the film as more of an intellectual endeavor than a frightening excursion into the world of the undead: “A blend of humor, thoughtful social commentary and nail-biting suspense, Romero’s masterpiece far surpasses the ordinary boundaries of the genre. [...] Hailed by theorists for its social insight and beloved by horror fans, *Dawn* is truly a unique vision which resonates to this day.” Romero’s first film in the series, *Night of the Living Dead*, opens in a cemetery in which the dead begin to come back to life, ultimately to search for living

humans who will be their cannibalistic prey. Originally released in 1968, *Night of the Living Dead* was added to the National Film Registry in 1999. Each year, the National Film Preservation Board selects 25 films for the Registry that are deemed to be “culturally, historically or aesthetically” significant and thus worthy of preservation for future generations (National Film Registry). Despite the recognized significance of Romero’s work, some Cinespia fans agree with Cassity’s assertion that horror films are not appropriate for Hollywood Forever. “I thought that the organization was created to give us a chance to see some films that wouldn’t normally get seen publicly, on a ‘big screen.’ I’m disappointed that they’ve decided to go the route of *The Exorcist* and *Dawn of the Dead*,” says one moviegoer. “I know it’s a fine line, but I believe those films cross it. The audience doesn’t seem to have an appreciation for the historical nature of this venue.”<sup>12</sup>

Whether Cinespia fans are drawn to screenings because of their interest in a particular film or genre or because they enjoy the social aspects of movies at the cemetery, the growing popularity of the film series results in more frequent sellouts. On several Saturday nights, people who wait in line, either on the small patch of lawn that fronts Santa Monica Boulevard or in their cars, stretching out onto the road, were turned away because the crowd reached its capacity of 2,700. Posting on Cinespia’s MySpace page in June 2007, Danny asks, “Is *Harold and Maude* really that big of a draw? We arrived 2.5 hours before the movie and couldn’t even find room in the line outside the gates!” Following the 2006 screening of *Psycho*, a Cinespia MySpace friend named Laine was harsher in his critique:

Having to arrive 3 hrs before a movie is insane and forcing hundreds of people to wait single file is worse than going thru airport security—made much worse because at the end of the airport line at least you know you’re getting on your flight. All of my friends were turned away last night while cars that just pulled up drove past. Either pre-sell tickets, open 2 or 3 lines for people on foot, or don’t allow cars at all. This event is a total mess.

Like a visit to Disneyland, or a high profile nightclub or restaurant, standing in line is now part of the culture of Cinespia. Those who wait on the grass read, play cards, send text messages on their cell phones, or catch up with friends. The large crowds are a deterrent for some filmgoers who enjoyed the early seasons of Cinespia, before the cemetery became one of Los Angeles’ hip hangouts. Mark says, “I would like to see better crowd management. Also more obscure, niche films. I stopped attending because the ordeal of attending finally outweighed the coolness.”<sup>13</sup> Reviewing Cinespia on *Yelp.com*, Doug M. writes,

Not to get all cocky and ‘back-in-the-day’ on you, but before the whole world and their drunk sister started going to this thing, it was the best event in Los Angeles. Now it’s overcrowded and the movies aren’t as obscure as they used to be. I mean c’mon, who hasn’t seen *The Birds*? I don’t think they let you into Los Angeles if you don’t pass your Hitchcock 101. Where are the amazing Italian Sci-fi joints, or the insanely campy film noirs?

Lisa concurs, noting that once she went to Cinespia she “loved it even more, until it got to be the ‘in’ thing to do in LA. There used to be a comfortable-sized gathering of people who respect cemeteries and appreciate classic films. I quit going last year because it has turned into a circus; its popularity has ruined its original appeal.”<sup>14</sup> For Diana, however, the inconvenience of the crowd does not keep her from attending Cinespia. “I tell people all the time they have to do this at least one time. Even though it’s getting really crowded, I have my own method of being in the last row, and as the credits are rolling I grab my stuff and I get in my car and I go. But it’s like trying to leave a concert. I tell everyone they need to experience this at least one time. It’s so beautiful and it’s such a novelty. I don’t want anyone to miss it.”

### **Beyond Cinespia**

As the Valentino memorial screening inspired John Wyatt, so has Cinespia inspired others to use the Fairbanks Lawn as a screening site. In 2005 and again in 2006, Johnny Ramone’s widow Linda and longtime Ramones artistic director Arturo Vega organized a prostate cancer benefit at Hollywood Forever with a summer screening of the 1979 cult classic *Rock ‘n’ Roll High School*. With its eccentric characters, awkward dialogue, and the absurd scenario in which cheerleader and Ramones fan Riff Randall meets the band, who then come to Vince Lombardi High and join Randall and her friends in blowing up the school, *Rock ‘n’ Roll High School* seemed destined for cult classic status. In an unusual marketing strategy, New World Pictures chose to release the film as a midnight movie rather than a regular first-run schedule, in the hope of enhancing

audiences' perceptions of it as a cult classic (Peary 299). In that cult status arises from audience response to a film, this strategy could have potentially backfired, were it not for the cultish fan following the Ramones had already achieved prior to the film's release.

At the cemetery, the screening of *Rock 'n' Roll High School* commemorates the lives of Johnny and Dee Dee Ramone and allows fans to celebrate the originality and innovation of the influential punk band. Within this fan community, each Ramones event also provides ample opportunity for celebrity sightings and autographs. Among those who have been in attendance to honor Johnny and Dee Dee Ramone and to share their reminiscences are former bandmate Marky Ramone; musician Henry Rollins and Red Hot Chili Peppers members Flea and John Frusciante; actors PJ Soles, Clint Howard, and Mary Woronov who appeared in *Rock 'n' Roll High School*; director Allan Arkush; and disc jockey Rodney Bingenheimer, often referred to as "the Mayor of the Sunset Strip."

The 2007 Ramones benefit featured the premier of the documentary film *Too Tough to Die*, produced by Mandy Stein, the daughter of Sire Records founder Seymour Stein and former Ramones manager Linda Stein. Initially the project was focused on the Ramones thirtieth anniversary tribute concert, held in Los Angeles in September 2004. Johnny Ramone died just three days after the concert, and Stein expanded the film to include the dedication of Ramone's cenotaph at Hollywood Forever in January 2005. The dedication, which was open to the public, was a star-studded event attended by actors Nicolas Cage and Vincent Gallo, Pearl Jam front man Eddie Vedder, Lisa-Marie Presley, Henry Rollins and Grammy-winning producer Rick Rubin.



Johnny Ramone, an ardent Republican, was inspired to have the bronze statue created while watching the funeral services for Ronald Reagan from his bed at Cedars-Sinai Hospital, where he was undergoing cancer treatment. The cenotaph's design was based on a small statue that was a gift to Ramone from musician Rob Zombie. To have a \$100,000 life-sized effigy of oneself erected in the cemetery can be seen as egomaniacal, but in his opening remarks at the dedication, Tyler Cassity encouraged a different perspective. "It is clear to me that this statue is not an act of narcissism, but a gift to his family, his friends, his fans and all those who loved him," Cassity said (*Ramonesworld*<sup>15</sup>). The cenotaph attracts fans to Hollywood Forever, and the annual Ramones events make the cemetery a pilgrimage destination, more so than any other Ramones-related site. As Graceland is for Elvis Presley and Père Lachaise is for Jim Morrison, so Hollywood Forever is for Johnny Ramone. The screenings are a site for the performance of fandom and participation in punk culture, enhancing the significance of Ramone's memorial for returning visitors. Shortly after the dedication of the memorial, Arturo Vega returned to Hollywood Forever for the opportunity to reflect on the legacy of the Ramones. Writing on his website *Ramonesworld.com*, Vega says,

I wanted to enjoy the sculpture in a more private way, but being a Sunday made it more likely than not, that there would be fans around. I liked that idea too. The day was bright and beautiful and Johnny looked resplendent. For a second an image of him on a stage bathed in yellow light crossed my mind. As the Ramones lighting director for 20 years of touring, I have a lot of those images imprinted on my brain. Looking up to the statue, its

power and beauty made it clear: Johnny's fame and glory aside, the statue stands its ground as a work of art. The artist, Wayne Toth, was a friend of Johnny's and was successful in capturing the dynamics of Johnny as a man, and as a musician. The fans around the statue were of all ages: teenagers, people in their 20's and 30's, and parents with their children, explaining what Ramone had played what instrument. More than ever, I felt it was confirmed that the Ramones had become a cultural institution.

The prominent placement of Johnny Ramone's cenotaph makes the Ramones a cultural institution in perpetuity. The statue is located on the edge of the Garden of Legends, across from the Fairbanks sarcophagus and the Cathedral Mausoleum, and stands out on the landscape for tourists looking for celebrity gravesites at Hollywood Forever. As Vega describes how visitors retell the stories of the Ramones to their friends and children, the cenotaph prompts the circulation of these narratives into the culture beyond the cemetery gates.

With the popularity of both Cinespia and the Ramones tributes, Hollywood Forever has become a cinematic space and is used often for premieres and screenings, particularly when the cemetery is an appropriate venue for a film or television show. The final episode of the HBO series *Six Feet Under* was screened at Hollywood Forever in August 2005; fittingly, Tyler Cassity served as a consultant to the series. ABC's series *Pushing Daisies* held its premiere at Hollywood Forever in 2007. The quirky series features Ned, a pie baker, who has the gift of bringing the dead back to life, but only for a mere sixty seconds.

The independent film *Expiration Date*, in which a 25-year-old man prepares for his death based on his expectation of a family curse, had its premiere at the cemetery in September 2006. *The Tripper*, a parodic slasher film written by and starring David Arquette, had its launch at the cemetery in 2007. Arquette says, “I grew up right down the street on Melrose and Gower. We always knew about the cemetery. My older brothers and sisters would sneak in and run around in it” (“David Arquette...”). Among those who attend Cinespia are former and current Hollywood residents who, like the Arquettes, use the cemetery for leisure space. Sandy, who lives within walking distance of Hollywood Forever, thinks of the cemetery as her neighborhood park. Where she once thought cemeteries were “a waste of space,” she wishes that more cemeteries offered the kind of welcoming, serene greenspace she finds at Hollywood Forever.

Joe Sehee, the former public relations manager for the cemetery, notes that “Hollywood has a shortage of open space. The community needs more public places. Besides movies, we’ve held music concerts, book readings, weddings and other events, so it’s really become a vibrant place” (Barge, par. 14).

Similarly, Jay Boileau, executive vice president for Forever Enterprises and a childhood friend of Tyler Cassity, told the *Los Angeles Times* in a May 2007 interview, “Part of our business plan to save a bankrupt cemetery was to make it a cultural center. To bring people back by hosting a variety of events” (Lee, par. 22). Hollywood Forever’s notion of a cultural center is expansive, including not only historical tours and summer performances of *Hamlet* but also a series of events held by the heavy metal band Korn. The band kicked off its 2007 Family Values Tour in April of that year with a party held

in the Cathedral Mausoleum. At the event, Korn lead vocalist Jonathan Davis, who is also a former coroner's assistant said, "We just show up, brother. You're having a party in the cemetery and it's like OK, cool. We did it last year, too. It's a cool place to throw parties. Not a lot of people get to party in a cemetery" (Miller, par. 3). When Korn previously held a news conference at Hollywood Forever to announce its tour in support of the album *See You on the Other Side*, band members arrived at the cemetery in a hearse. In the absence of a casket, two members of the band gleefully hopped out of the back of the hearse.

Korn is not the first metal band to use Hollywood Forever as social space. In 2001, the thrash metal band Slayer held a listening party for the album *God Hates Us All* at Hollywood Forever. The executive producer of the album is Rick Rubin, who has a long history with the cemetery. Rubin co-founded Def Jam Records with Russell Simmons in 1984. When he discovered the word "def" was one of the new words scheduled for inclusion in the 1993 edition of Webster's dictionary, Rubin bought a burial plot at Hollywood Memorial Park and organized a funeral for "def." Rev. Al Sharpton presided and delivered the eulogy, explaining the rationale for the funeral by asserting that def meant "more than excellent. Like, def-iantly excellent with a bang. Now the bang is out of def. It has lost its exclusivity to the in def-iant crowd. It died of terminal acceptance" (Keister 241). Rick Rubin's relationship to the cemetery offers evidence that Hollywood Forever has a long history as a space where the solemnity of funereal practices does not exclude the possibility for the whimsical or the social uses in place through Cinespia.

Cinespia creates a temporary but repeating sense of public space at Hollywood Forever. Through the sense of belonging that arises from enjoying the cemetery and staking out “your spot” on the lawn, visitors develop their own personal sense of place and a lasting association with Hollywood Forever. The film series takes its place among filmgoing traditions that include picture palaces, drive-ins, and the suburban multiplex. While many viewers leave behind public viewing for the intimate and private home theater, DVD player, or laptop, Cinespia is a venue that offers a new and unusual screening experience. The quirky nature of Cinespia, and its location in the cemetery, attracts viewers who many not necessarily be motivated to attend primarily by virtue of the film being screened on any particular night. For others, a Saturday night at the cemetery is driven by the desire to see a favorite film—often a cult classic—at the cemetery or in the company of others who share an appreciation for that film. Some go to Cinespia for the experience itself, as one would go to a particular club or coffeehouse where the ambience, the music, and the clientele create a comfortable sense of belonging. As Cinespia has grown in popularity, some participants who enjoyed the scene, as well as those who enjoyed the intimacy of a smaller gathering in the historic space of the cemetery, are disenchanted.

As many of the films screened at Cinespia are cult classics, the role of the audience is different from that in a traditional movie theater. Rather than an exclusively individual, interior viewing experience, the choice of films often deliberately creates an environment in which people participate. The ringing of a cell phone in a movie theater elicits irritation from other viewers, where the audible comment from an audience

member at Cinespia often results in laughter and additional comments that are only temporarily disruptive. But the disruption is framed as part of what it means to be a particular kind of audience that is participatory rather than passive. Building on the experience of Cinespia, participatory audiences now gather at the cemetery for a variety of events, often focused on premiering television series, films, and new musical releases. Many of these events capitalize on the relationship between these cultural productions and the cemetery as a site where, quite plainly, the dead are buried.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all quotes in this chapter are drawn from interviews conducted at Hollywood Forever Cemetery in August 2006, October 2006, and July 2007.

<sup>2</sup> This comment is derived from a survey I created and posted on *SurveyMonkey.com*.

<sup>3</sup> When citing posts from blogs, *MySpace.com*, and *Yelp.com*, I have corrected typographical errors and formatted the titles of films and television series in accordance with MLA style for readability.

<sup>4</sup> This comment is derived from a survey I created and posted on *SurveyMonkey.com*.

<sup>5</sup> With a capacity of 2,700 on the Fairbanks Lawn, Cinespia typically sees attendance between 1,500 and 2,000 every Saturday night, yielding between \$15,000 and \$20,000. A portion of the proceeds are donated to the cemetery for upkeep and repair.

<sup>6</sup> According to *Findagrave.com*, following his death in 1980, Hitchcock was cremated and his ashes scattered over the Pacific Ocean.

<sup>7</sup> As of the end of the 2007 season, *Rebel Without a Cause* is the only teen film listed here that has been screened by Cinespia.

<sup>8</sup> This comment is derived from a survey I created and posted on *SurveyMonkey.com*.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> When Cinespia's MySpace friends were invited to post suggestions for films they wanted to see at the cemetery, *Harold and Maude*, *The Big Lebowski*, *National Lampoon's Vacation*, and *This Is Spinal Tap* were among the films with repeat recommendations.

<sup>11</sup> Among the blogging community, a meme is an idea, list of questions, or personal survey that bloggers will link to, post on their sites, or "tag" another blogger with, requesting his or her reply or comment.

<sup>12</sup> This comment is derived from a survey I created and posted on *SurveyMonkey.com*.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Arturo Vega, longtime friend and artistic director for the Ramones, runs the “official Ramones” website, [www.Ramonesworld.com](http://www.Ramonesworld.com). As Vega organizes and participates in events honoring the Ramones at Hollywood Forever, the website includes photographs and narratives from these events.



## Chapter 5

### Skeletons, Marigolds, and Sugar Skulls

In an interview in the HBO documentary *The Young and the Dead*, Tyler Cassity says cemeterians typically don't welcome Halloween parties: the possibility of inappropriate or offensive behavior by celebrants is considered too significant a risk. Yet because of relationships Hollywood Forever developed with the local business community, Cassity relented, and in 1999 the cemetery hosted a Halloween fundraiser for the Hollywood Chamber of Commerce. The All Hallows Eve celebration is now an annual event for the Chamber. "After the past year, and being out here, and the way they presented it to me, I just thought, 'Well, people want to come here on Halloween. There must be a reason,'" Cassity says. (*The Young and the Dead*). As celebrants in hundreds of communities create mock graveyards on their front lawns, and trick-or-treaters dress as ghouls and zombies, the cemetery seems the ideal place for a Halloween event. However, the public occasion for which Hollywood Forever attracts a tremendous audience is not Halloween but the traditional Mexican holiday Dia de los Muertos, or Day of the Dead.<sup>1</sup> Like Hollywood Forever, Dia de los Muertos celebrates the dead, inviting them back to spend time among the living on this day when, as it is said, the veil between the worlds of the living and the dead is thinnest.

The roots of Dia de los Muertos extend back to the Aztecs and other indigenous pre-Hispanic cultures. The traditional holiday was so deeply ingrained in Aztec culture that it withstood the invasion and cultural imposition of the Spaniards, and continues to be celebrated today. With the forced conversion to Catholicism, the once month-long celebration of Dias de los Muertos became associated with All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day, which fall on November 1 and 2 respectively. Although dates vary among different locales, in many Mexican communities celebrations on November 1 honor children who have died while those who died in adulthood are honored on November 2. Dia de los Muertos often functions more like a family reunion than a day of mourning. Families build altars at home and decorate graves at the cemetery, paying tribute and extending a welcome to their dearly departed. The thousands who visit Hollywood Forever do not have the existing personal relationships one finds in a community cemetery where residents and others who have moved away come together on Dia de los Muertos to clean the graves of their loved ones, yet a feeling of warmth and personal connection develops as those who have built altars reminisce about their loved ones, sharing stories with strangers of lives lived. On the blog "Kat's Tales," an initially reluctant altarist writes about the experience of commemorating her father at Hollywood Forever:

We cavorted with skeletons, admired the dedicated and commercialized Ramones fans, cleared the path for hordes of Aztek [sic] dancers and performance artists, feasted on homemade tamales and reminisced about our father to thousands of visitors. Once we started, it became easy to talk about him. There were so many quirks that made up his sparkling

personality. [...] Invariably, his Ted Williams t-shirt on display sparked the question “Did he get to see them win?” and guests were disappointed that he hadn’t until we pointed out a ticket from Fenway where we illegally spread his ashes. (“Celebrating the Dead”)

The celebration of Dia de los Muertos at Hollywood Forever allows Kat and hundreds of others to create a space in which they can recall their dearly departed affectionately, outside of their intimate circles of mourning. The public act of commemoration significantly enables those who build altars, as well as those who visit and talk with them, to process their private grief. Mike Syzmanski explains how taking his two young sons to the Dia de los Muertos celebration at Hollywood Forever provided an emotional release for his family.

It was when my dad was really in failing health. It was an amazing celebration, the Mexican celebration of life. It’s really not the day of the dead, it’s the day of life and remembrance. They realized that every booth represented a life and that the people there were relatives or friends or people that knew the people they were celebrating. And it was so healthy. It was such a good healthy attitude that this wave of depression that was on our household about my dad, who was dying, was lifted.<sup>2</sup>

Anxious about the impending death of their grandfather, the children were relieved to see others joyfully recall and commemorate their loved ones. Knowing that grief would not have a permanent hold on their lives enabled the boys to be less apprehensive about the unfamiliar emotional terrain they were facing.

Like traditional Mexican and Mexican-American altars, those constructed at Hollywood Forever include candles, marigolds, incense (*copal*), skulls (*Calaveras*), and skeletons (*Calacas*). The sweet scent of marigolds and copal is said to attract the attention of the dead; the combined odor is also said to be similar to the odor of human bones (*La Ofrenda*). Photographs of the dead are typically included, as well as food offerings of *pan de muertos* (bread of the dead), candy, soda, and favorite foods to entice the dead by recalling the pleasures of living. Juanita Garciagodoy reports that in the weeks leading up to Dia de los Muertos, Mexican bakeries begin baking *pan de muertos*, “a light, sweet yeast bread [...] made in round loaves and decorated with balls and strips of dough in the form of a skull and crossbones” (15). The bright colors of flowers, blankets, garlands, *papel picados* (folded tissue paper cut into designs), and other decorative elements render the altars as welcoming and celebratory rather than mournful. The spirit of Dia de los Muertos often tends to be whimsical and humorous, as there is no morbidity or fear of death in Mexican cultures that believe death is a part of life. This is not to say that there is no sense of mourning; rather that mourning can be bittersweet. The Spanish word *ofrenda* is often used to refer to Dia de los Muertos altar offerings because of its rich connotation. An artist in Mexico City, interviewed for the documentary *La Ofrenda: The Days of the Dead* says, “The word *ofrenda* has a very special meaning in our Indian culture and in all cultures. The word *ofrenda* means love, and love has no price.” Love is an inherent aspect of building the altar and preparing for Dia de los Muertos because it is time spent thinking about, talking about, and creating something for a loved one. Building an altar takes time, which becomes time-out-of-time in which one

is engaged in the past, steeped in memory. This immersion is similar to Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's concept of flow, a state of optimal experience in which "concentration is so intense that there is no attention left over to think about anything irrelevant, or to worry about problems. Self-consciousness disappears, and the sense of time is distorted" (71). When the continuity of clock-time is temporarily suspended, the stories of the past saturate the present.

Dia de los Muertos celebrations in Los Angeles are among the largest in the nation, as nearly thirty percent of the city's population is comprised of individuals of Mexican descent (areaconect). Los Angeles has a long history of celebrating the holiday. Self Help Graphics & Art, a nationally-recognized gallery and art center in East Los Angeles, held its first Dia de los Muertos celebration in 1972 and has influenced the evolution of the city's observance of the holiday for 35 years. More than 3,000 Angelenos participate in Self Help's procession and blessing of the altars, and contribute to a community altar ("Dia de los Muertos"). Workshops and classes are offered leading up to Dia de los Muertos, focused on educating children and the rest of the community through creating *calavera* masks, paper flowers, and other crafts used in the celebration. Through this creative, embodied experience, those who attend workshops become participants in Self Help Graphics' commemoration, tying themselves into the procession and the altar and becoming part of this community of celebrants.

Events throughout the city feature live music, performances of traditional dance, altars, processions, artwork, and food. Exhibitions and workshops are held at art galleries, community centers, restaurants, and in neighborhoods in the greater Los Angeles area.

First organized in 1999, Festival de la Gente (Festival of the People) is an annual Dia de los Muertos celebration held on the Sixth Street Bridge, the landmark bridge linking downtown Los Angeles with Boyle Heights in East Los Angeles. With significant corporate and media sponsorship and an estimated 70,000 visitors over two days, Festival de la Gente is the largest Dia de los Muertos event in the city. Hollywood Forever's celebration, then, is one of many, similar to the way many groups within a community organize their own Fourth of July festivities. But it is the only cemetery in the city that organizes an official Dia de los Muertos event. The appeal of inviting the dead to visit with their living relatives reflects Hollywood Forever's philosophy that the focus of the cemetery and the funeral should be on what Tyler and Brent Cassity refer to as the "dash between the dates" of birth and death. As a holiday that remembers the dead and sees continuity in life lived, Dia de los Muertos is fittingly celebrated at Hollywood Forever.

The cemetery's celebration is organized primarily from within the Latino community and is sponsored by Spanish-language media outlets including W Radio 690, La Nueva 101.9 and newspapers *La Presna de Los Angeles* and *El Oaxaqueño*, along with Cerveza Tecate and the Mexican restaurant chain El Gallo Giro. Members of the large Oaxacan community who live in the neighborhood surrounding Hollywood Forever participate as altarists and performers (Quinones, par. 15). Yet many of those who build altars and attend Dia de los Muertos are non-Latinos who are adopting and adapting the practices of another culture for their own purposes. If those outside of the Latino community embrace the idea that the dead still have an active presence in the everyday lives of the living, does their act of cultural appropriation do harm to the traditions of Dia

de los Muertos? In a multiethnic city like Los Angeles, where people from diverse cultures and nations are learning to live together, can celebrating Dia de los Muertos create a common ground in which understanding across cultures can flourish?

This chapter looks closely at the Dia de los Muertos celebration at Hollywood Forever and is informed significantly by interviews with individuals who created altars and with visitors to the event, as well as my own participation and observation. Each person or family who builds an altar does so for uniquely personal reasons, and not all draw on the historical traditions of Dia de los Muertos. Considering the creative aspects of the celebration shows how the artistic approaches to commemoration embraced by Hollywood Forever make it a fitting site for Dia de los Muertos. This chapter also looks at the various motivations for building an altar and what the altarists may intend to communicate beyond inviting a visit from their dead. Finally, the cultural gap between Dia de los Muertos and Halloween, and between Mexican tradition and the dominant culture, will be addressed.

### **Inspiring the Creatives**

The night before the 2006 Dia de los Muertos celebration, Arturo Vega is building an altar to honor the members of the Ramones who have died. The altar is on the small expanse of grass next to the cenotaph memorializing Johnny Ramone; along with Johnny and Dee Dee Ramone, Vega is honoring Joey Ramone, who died in 2001 and is buried in Lyndhurst, New Jersey. Vega is accompanied by Fayette Hauser, a founding member of the cross-dressing performance troupe the Cockettes, who is now a costume designer and

photographer. Vega and Hauser both knew the Ramones in the band's earlier years: Hauser performed comedy routines at CBGB, where the Ramones first played, and Vega's apartment in New York City was a gathering place for the band and their friends. Shortly after the Ramones began playing together, Dee Dee and Joey Ramone both found themselves homeless and would often stay at Vega's loft. In his memoir *Lobotomy: Surviving the Ramones*, Dee Dee Ramone describes Vega as "some kind of a mad, but very talented, artist. And very cool too. He saw punk as some sort of a brand new canvas to splash paint on. He became the Ramones lighting director, T-shirt designer, and graphic artist and toured with the band for a long time" (97-8). As a close friend and artistic director for the band, Vega carries on the Ramones' legacy through his *Ramonesworld* website, through events at Hollywood Forever, and as an often-interviewed expert on the band and its history.

Altars typically include the foods and drinks enjoyed by those being remembered, and the chocolate soft drink Yoo-hoo, a Ramones favorite, was featured prominently as an offering at the first Ramones altar in 2005. Like other traditional altars, the Ramones were honored with candles, marigolds, skulls, and *copal*. On his website, Vega writes that he was "very excited to be able to do something that united Johnny, Joey and Dee Dee in front of thousands of old and new fans. I didn't know what to expect and the scope of the festival took me by surprise, [...] more than 10,000 spectators, dozens of performers singing and dancing and an atmosphere of wild carnival all over the place" (*Ramoneworld.com*). Visitors thronged the market stalls to purchase authentic Dia de los Muertos souvenirs and Mexican artworks, and many Ramones fans left room in their



shopping bags for t-shirts. The Ramones t-shirt, particularly the shirt prominently featuring the logo designed by Vega, is an iconic item in the rock-and-roll wardrobe. David Giffels, in his essay “Shirt-Worthy” published in *The New York Times*, argues that “there is only one acceptable way to own a Ramones T-shirt. This is to have attended a Ramones concert, sweated, bled, transcended and then purchased one at a merchandise table en route to the concert-hall exit” (par. 1). While such a marker of authenticity is no longer available, purchasing the Ramones t-shirt from Arturo Vega at the Dia de los Muertos altar honoring Johnny, Dee Dee, and Joey is likely the next best thing. Vega also sold Dia de los Muertos festival t-shirts with artwork drawn by the three members of the Ramones being commemorated.

For the 2006 Ramones altar, life-sized photographs of Johnny, Dee Dee, and Joey Ramone surround Johnny’s cenotaph. Each photograph is printed on black cloth, brightly colored with wild red, blue, and orange designs. Small display tables placed at the foot of each photograph are covered with candles, skulls, and personal mementos. Several black banners emblazoned with the Ramones logo and the phrase “Hey Ho Let’s Go” flutter in the breeze. As the hook from the Ramones song “Blitzkrieg Bop,” “Hey Ho Let’s Go” became a call to action for fans and a rallying cry for punk rock. The song’s power to incite an enthusiastic crowd response was noted by journalist Frederic D. Schwarz, who recounts the birth and subsequent popularity of punk rock by pointing out that “once known only to a handful of fringe characters in New York’s demimonde, [“Blitzkrieg Bop”] can be heard on the PA system at baseball games” (par. 7).

Throughout the day and into the night, fans pay their respects at the Ramones altar. As the strains of “I Want to Be Sedated” mix with the sounds from nearby musical and dance performances, the space surrounding the altars for Johnny, Dee Dee, and Joey takes on a bittersweet atmosphere. Like Vega, fans are excited by the opportunity to pay homage to the artists they admire yet wistful to reflect not only on their contribution to punk culture but also their untimely deaths. Music, especially in a subculture like punk, is closely linked to identity formation, and fans feel a personal connection to the musicians whose creative work and public personae offered powerful models to emulate.

For Fayette Hauser, the Ramones altar and Johnny Ramone’s cenotaph are the manifestation of Hollywood Forever’s willingness to encourage creative methods of commemoration. A long history of unusual monuments precedes Cassity’s purchase of and influence over the cemetery: beyond the typical standing monuments are the memorial for Tyrone Power, a white granite bench with a book propped on one end; the elaborate Fairbanks sarcophagus; and the gravemarker of Carl Bigsby, which is an exact scale replica of an Atlas rocket. Bigsby, who died in 1959, had no relationship to the space program beyond seeing it as a metaphor for his own successes. Etched on the marker is the following explanation: “The Atlas, pioneer in space, here symbolizes the lifetime activities of Carl Morgan Bigsby, a recognized leader in many phases of the graphic arts. He, too, was a pioneer.” The whimsical memorial was one of many that charmed Hauser when she would visit the cemetery with friends in the 1980s.

“When I first moved here,” she says, “we used to come here all the time because it had all the statuary. We used to take pictures here. [...] We used to play here, like 20 years ago.

We liked it because it was old Hollywood. The old film stars are here, and the silent film stars, and there was great statuary.”

When Hauser’s dear friend Tomata du Plenty (born David Xavier Harrigan) died in 2000, Hollywood Forever immediately came to mind as the appropriate place for his interment. Hauser and du Plenty had a long history together, having both been members of the Cockettes and the Seattle-based performance troupe Ze Whiz Kidz, sharing an apartment, and then moving with other former Cockettes to New York, where they performed at CBGB and other clubs. Du Plenty went on to form the punk rock band the Screemers, and is also known for his work as a painter, playwright, and performance artist. The Columbarium was one of du Plenty and Hauser’s favorite places at Hollywood Forever, and his ashes are now inurned in a niche there. She says that designing the niche helped her to cope with du Plenty’s death.

It was part of the grieving process for me in that I loved him so deeply and it was tragic and sudden when he died. It took me a month to do it, to figure it out, to get it all together. Because you know they open [the niche] once, and you put it in, and that’s it. So I really had to think it through. You can’t fuss around with it. There’s no fiddling. I did a lot of thinking about it. I found an antique box for him, and he was an artist, so I decoupage his artwork on it. There’s pictures of him on it, because he also had a band that was really popular—he had a lot of different artistic careers.

Du Plenty's niche is similar in spirit to the altars that line the main roadways of the cemetery for Dia de los Muertos. Against a backdrop of rich red satiny cloth, shot through with strands of gold, are six photographs of du Plenty depicting various incarnations of his creative work. The artwork Hauser chose to decorate the black antique box she found is provocative and colorful, reflecting du Plenty's personality and creative endeavors as a means of commemoration.

Like Fayette Hauser, Alex Rodriguez revels in the creativity of Dia de los Muertos. He first heard about the celebration at Hollywood Forever from friends who were building an altar, and he wanted to work with them. Since his friends had nearly completed their work, Rodriguez says, "I made my own altar and put it on a backpack and walked around with it on a backpack." He created altars at the cemetery with them in subsequent years, but in 2006, Dia de los Muertos was different for him, as his mother had recently died. Building an altar to welcome her back was a catharsis for Rodriguez. "It's definitely a way to start the healing process of getting past it and seeing it as more than just a passing. It's definitely about a celebration. It's about the love," Rodriguez says. He notes that his sister has struggled with her grief, and felt concerned about the emotional weight of building an altar. But Rodriguez encouraged her, saying that "it's not about so much sadness. It's really about the creative dance. I've been working so hard for us to represent my mom, so come and have fun with it, because that's what we're going to be doing. And as you can see I'm surrounded by the kindest people in the world."

The elaborate altars created by Rodriguez's group are panoramic in the wealth of objects included and the evocative ways these objects tell the stories of those being

remembered. The altar for Acension “Chona” Saldibar invites her back to the world of the living with Butterfinger candy bars, Orange Crush, a bottle of Budweiser beer, glittery masks, candles, and a Cover Girl makeup compact and lipstick. Other altars in the group feature photographs in colorful frames, oranges, palm fronds, red votive candles, purple and orange *papel picado*, and *pan de muertos*. The visual effect is overwhelming. Rodriguez describes the altars as “layers and layers of love, color, texture, culture. It’s amazing. I’m so glad these people have brought it all together. Because the face of Los Angeles is changing, and this is a big part of it.” Rodriguez sees Dia de los Muertos at Hollywood Forever increasing the cultural capital of Latinos in the city. These celebrations offer a new perspective on death and commemoration that is refreshing and helpful for people in the Anglo community who struggle with their inherited cultural rites surrounding death and dying. Poet and literary critic Sandra Gilbert concisely describes the shortcomings of contemporary attitudes when she reflects on the sudden death of her husband in 1991. She writes, “I found myself confronting the shock of bereavement at a historical moment when death was in some sense unspeakable and grief—or anyway the expression of grief—was at best an embarrassment, at worst a social solecism or scandal” (xix).

Jay, a former Hollywood resident, draws a comparison between his relationship to the cemetery and his newfound enthusiasm for Dia de los Muertos. Like many who live in the area and see Hollywood Forever as a quiet space of seclusion, the cemetery was for Jay “like a little park. There could be all this maniacal stuff going on, but you come here and no matter what, it’s quiet. In the middle of Hollywood, which is noisy and chaotic,

you find this really peaceful place. And I think the first few times I came here, I was absolutely disturbed by being in a cemetery. And then sort of just walking around, I got adjusted to it. And then of course, with this kind of celebration, I just love it.” The process of growing comfortable with spending time in the cemetery is akin to coming to terms with the perspective that “it’s all one long journey—living, dying and it seems like the Mexican culture has that understood,” Jay says. His enthusiasm for Dia de los Muertos began after being invited to a longstanding neighborhood party. “I never really knew what it was about. But since then I’ve sort of got very much transformed or converted. And I’ve heard for the past few years that there’s some big deal here [at the cemetery] but I always hear about it two days after it happened. So this year we accidentally heard about it yesterday. And this is amazing. I’m blown away. It’s gorgeous.” Along with the neighborhood party, Jay’s family also participated in the Dia de los Muertos celebration at his daughter’s preschool. “My father passed away a few years ago and we went to this party last year. I didn’t understand much about it, but they said bring pictures and items that he enjoyed. My father used to repair television sets. We brought the old TV tubes and some food he liked, and his photograph. So we just put it on [the altar]. They did it at her preschool also, so we brought the same picture and the same items of her grandfather.” Whether through Hollywood Forever, the preschool, or friends in the neighborhood, Jay and his family have adopted the Mexican tradition by finding a place on the calendar to recall their dearly departed. Dia de los Muertos also enables Jay to tell his daughter stories about her grandfather, a kind of discussion we may not often make space for in the course of our everyday lives.

Among the altarists are Anglos for whom Dia de los Muertos does not necessarily transform their attitudes, as it did for Jay; rather, it is an opportunity for the public performance of and participation in a system of beliefs open to celebrating the lives of the dead. The altar-builder for the City of Angels altar is dressed as an angel, with white wings, a halo, and a benevolent smile. A thick trail of bright marigolds extends from the road to the foot of her altar, where the angel reads aloud the prayers left by visitors. After having her prayer read, Cindy explains that “the prayer that I made is for a kind, sexy, loving husband. She said that we have all wished for that at one time or another in our lives. And she repeated it very loudly so that it would go out to the universe, and it would be heard and answered right away.” Cindy brings a New Age perspective to Dia de los Muertos, one that is affirmed for her as she walks through the cemetery.<sup>3</sup> “I just find it very deep,” she says. “There’s something that resonated very deep with me and connected with the afterlife and the underworld, and everyone sort of honoring that. I think that’s important.” The resonance Cindy describes connects her not only to the event but also to Hollywood Forever. The space is imbued with a gentle and loving feeling for her that she can access whenever she might visit the cemetery again. Geographer Karen Till posits that we are drawn back to places of both personal and cultural memory as we seek a meaningful connection to the past: “When we return to a place, remember an experience in a place, and perform a rendition of the past through a place, we may feel haunted by that which appears not to be there in material space but is, in fact, a powerful presence” (13). Spending time at and with Hollywood Forever, the psychical and

emotional traces that haunt this space transform it, such that we belong to it and it belongs to us.

Whether one lives in the neighborhood or is an occasional visitor to Los Angeles, places where we feel this sense of belonging take on aspects of what Lucy Lippard describes as “our own ‘local’—entwined with personal memory, known or unknown histories, marks made in the land that provoke and evoke. [...] It is about connections, what surrounds it, what formed it, what happened there, what will happen there” (7). We seek out the places that feel “local” because we feel a connection to the space, which is familiar and, as Lippard points out, replete with memory. Memory and familiarity also enable us to feel a connection to ourselves in a place where we can navigate the space, locating a favorite gravemarker or comfortable corner to sit and watch the ducks. This deep attachment to place draws visitors to return to Hollywood Forever, whether for events at the cemetery, to enjoy their time alone, or to share the space with close friends or family. Wendy, a celebrity graver, says of Hollywood Forever, “It is the first place I go when I get to Hollywood. [...] It feels like home. I used to take my girls and they would ‘tap dance’ in the Bugsy Siegel mausoleum<sup>4</sup> with all the caution tape because the stained glass ceilings were falling in” (personal correspondence). For the cemetery to feel like home requires the memorable experiences and sense of belonging that come with spending time there.

The celebrity ties to Hollywood Forever carry over to Dia de los Muertos as well. A creative approach to ideas of what comprises family inspires some altarists to pay tribute to and invite back the celebrities they admire. Celebrity altars are especially fitting



for Hollywood Forever, where fans make pilgrimages throughout the year to spend time at the final resting places of actors, musicians, and entertainers significant to them. Sparrow Morgan, founder of the Fairbanks Memorial celebration at Hollywood Forever, chose a “Don Juan” theme for her 2006 Dia de los Muertos altar, honoring Douglas Fairbanks, Sr., John Barrymore, and Errol Flynn, each of whom portrayed the adventurous lover in film. Morgan, whose father was a film editor, grew up in the entertainment industry and has an expansive sense of family based in part on cultural influence. She told the *Los Angeles Times*, “In Hollywood, we have a tendency to adopt other people’s legacies, because we don’t have much of a history of our own. I feel these people are our ancestors, like they are my family” (Quinones, par. 6). Through mediated encounters, celebrities both living and dead populate our everyday lives, leading many, like Morgan, to feel a familial affinity with them. As those who build altars in memory of their loved ones have the opportunity to share stories of their lives with visitors to the cemetery, so did Sparrow Morgan tell the captivating histories of these actors who played significant roles in the early years of the film industry. Her tribute is also a performance of fandom that stitches her into the afterlife of Fairbanks, Flynn, and Barrymore. For those who are not familiar with the actors or have not heard their stories, Morgan functions almost like a medium, communicating on behalf of the dead.

Like Morgan, Sandy and Matt use Dia de los Muertos to celebrate the lives of film stars and have built altars at Hollywood Forever for several years. While they usually discard the items used, Matt recalls that when they created an altar for Rudolph Valentino, two young boys asked for Valentino photographs at the end of the night. Matt

gladly gave them the pictures, and was surprised when they returned, asking for more.

When the boys returned for a third time, one of them offered Matt two cigars that his father had sent in appreciation. Within Dia de los Muertos traditions, this gifting is analogous to the way in which children will bring food from their family altars to their godparents or other family members after the dead have visited and departed.

Garciagodoy explains that “often the godchildren are charged with taking these baskets [of food the dead have left] to their godparents with whom they may eat before returning home, the baskets filled anew with some of the delicacies that were on the godparents’ altar” (14). Not only is a tradition evoked, but the children also take home photographs of Valentino as a souvenir. The Latin Lover enters the cultural imaginary and occupies a place in the landscape of memory that includes Dia de los Muertos. We make sense of the world and our place in it through lived experience and through mediated encounters, which intermingle at the cemetery where so many media figures are represented and commemorated. For the boys, the Valentino photographs function as a material marker of their experience at the cemetery—one that includes participating in commemoration of their family’s loved ones, enjoying the spectacle of dance and music, and, by virtue of exchanging gifts with Matt, Rudolph Valentino himself. Their world is populated by these objects and performances, and they will understand themselves in part through their roles in the day’s events.

## Honoring the Family

The traditional practice of Dia de los Muertos is rooted in the family, and the celebration at Hollywood Forever is no exception. What is different, however, is that few altarists have family members buried in this cemetery. For many, Hollywood Forever is a surrogate space, enabling them to create altars in a cemetery although they cannot be in the presence of their loved ones' mortal remains. The individuals interred near the places where altars are built often become part of a family or group's commemoration. Gabriel, who has participated in Hollywood Forever's Dia de los Muertos events for seven years, feels a special responsibility for the person buried beside his altar, although he does not know anything about the person beyond the name on the tombstone. His group made sure the gravemaker was visible and planned to decorate it with flowers for the celebration. "That's very important, no matter who they are. Maybe they don't have family to come. And they can enjoy all the food [left as *ofrendas*] and wonderful people. The tamales."

While cleaning the graves and building the altar, the family reminisce about their dearly departed, spending time together and with the present absence of the person being commemorated. Gabriel says, "I think the most important thing is the sharing of good moments we had with people that passed away. It's very funny because we're like, 'Oh, I remember when my grandmother would do this and this, and she loved Coca-Cola.' And everybody talks about something that happened. Everybody is sharing the same emotion. It's a beautiful moment. Some of them passed years and years ago, and everyone remembers. And they usually say the funny things." Dia de los Muertos creates a context for storytelling as a customary part of the festivities. In these families, children who were

born after their forbears died can learn their family history and consequently learn more about themselves. In her ethnographic study *Days of Death, Days of Life: Ritual in the Popular Culture of Oaxaca*, Kristin Norget relates a series of fables about Dia de los Muertos in which the living suffer emotional hardship after failing to leave *ofrendas* for the dead. "Proper observation of the Day of the Dead is extremely important, according to such tales, not only for the well-being of the dead and the emotional health of their family members, but also for the memory and conscience of the community," Norget concludes (190).

Although they are participating in Hollywood Forever's celebration for the first time, Sue and her husband are committed to instilling a sense of tradition in their daughters. Sue is an exception among the altarists, in that her mother, who died when Sue was 11 years old, is buried at Hollywood Forever. "My mom is buried here, right here," she says, gesturing at her mother's gravemarker. "We were raised in L.A. [My husband is] Guatemalan, I'm Salvadorian. Basically, we have no heritage. We were raised American. Everything was money, money. Until we realized we're stealing from our children and not giving them their heritage. So this is a way to reconnect them and reconnect ourselves to what we came from and who we came from, and why we should be proud of who we are." Sue, her brother, and her uncle each came to the cemetery over the years to tend to her mother's grave and to pay their respects, but Dia de los Muertos was not a part of her upbringing. Part of being "raised American," as Sue says, is that death is not something to be discussed casually. She notes that when she contacted family members to learn more about her mother's favorite things in order to include them in the

altar, they were uncomfortable with her questions: “They asked, ‘Why are you bringing this up?’ And I’m like, ‘What am I bringing up? I’m just looking.’ I’m hungry. Now that I’m a parent, and my kids are not aware. I have nothing. We looked up the history of what [Dia de los Muertos] was. So basically I’m putting here the foods that she liked. She loved flowers, and I know these are not the flowers to use for Dia de los Muertos. And I’m thinking, why am I going to do what everybody else does? I’m going to do what my mom liked.”

Sue intends to educate her daughters about this Latino tradition and to extend these lessons to the broader community. As visitors stop at their altar, her husband reads stories aloud for small children, who are encouraged to color pictures with crayons at the altar. “If it’s light, they can color, and if not, then they can take it home. That way their parents can continue teaching them at home. Everybody keeps saying speaking Spanish is bad, but it’s not. Learning another language is beautiful,” Sue adds. “A child learns by doing things. If they can color the pictures, and if they can see things, they’ll remember: I did this, and this is our tradition.”

On the other side of the cemetery, near the Garden of Legends, Victoria and her sister Vanessa, both in the early twenties, share with Sue a desire to reconnect with their heritage through Dia de los Muertos. Having made a rather spontaneous decision to participate in the celebration at Hollywood Forever, they created an altar in honor of their great-grandparents in less than a week’s time. Yet the painted wood, dyed leaves, and hand-painted skulls used in the altar are anything but makeshift. Their rationale for participating is firmly established, Victoria explains:

We decided to do a memorial for our great-grandparents because we're Mexican-American and we don't speak Spanish. We've lived here for a while. And I think a lot of Mexican-American people [...] just don't realize the struggles that other people have made for them. And today we have so many opportunities. I'm so grateful I can get a college education, and I can do anything I want to do with my life. But they were just such simple people and they were just trying to survive. Their struggles have been so amazing. And that's why we decided to do it for them. They did all the struggling and now we get to live fantastic lives.

Victoria and Vanessa's tribute extends beyond their own family to include members of the community who have also made sacrifices for their children and grandchildren. Distinguishing between private and public altars in Mexico City, Garcigodoy notes that "people are invited to build them outside of their true context to educate the residents of Mexico City about the traditions of the rest of the country and to rekindle a sense of national pride and solidarity with fellow citizens" (34). For altarists at Hollywood Forever like Victoria and Vanessa, their participation in Dia de los Muertos serves a similar purpose, seeking a connection to other immigrant families. In a multiethnic community and neighborhood, among those interred at Hollywood Forever are immigrants and first-generation Americans of Armenian, Russian, Thai, and Polish descent, many of whom have family stories that mirror Victoria and Vanessa's.

A different kind of immigrant story is presented in the nearby altar designed by Jose and his girlfriend Cecilia, whose families are both from Oaxaca. Jose has retained

close ties to his Mexican heritage, and the altar at Hollywood Forever is the extension of the family altar built in his parents' home for Dia de los Muertos every year. Creating the home altar typically includes each member of the family giving their time and effort, and the altar at the cemetery engages the entire family as well. Jose explains that “our families got together and contributed all of these different elements. The corn, the beans, the squash, and the bread, my dad made. The figures—Cecilia, my girlfriend—her mom and her dad helped us put it together. The corn stalk and the sugar cane we got from our families who have grown them in the backyard. So it's that time to pick them so we are putting them to good use here.” He notes that the experience of creating an altar is life-affirming, in that it acknowledges the spiritual continuity of the family's dearly departed. “Part of putting up the altar is that death is not something to be feared. It's part of life. And with that, you remember people. They never leave you if you keep them in your memories and building an altar means keeping them in mind. Part of the tradition of building an altar is that all the foods, pictures, incense, and flowers—all of that is bringing their spirit back.” For a public altar, the affirmation extends beyond the family to include the thousands who visit the cemetery and partake of the spiritual aspects of Dia de los Muertos. Jose says that death is “part of life. It's a cycle, and with this it shows people that it's part of what's expected, and not to be feared.”

The fear Jose describes extends itself culturally in a desire to “do away with” our dead; after a prescribed time of mourning is completed, we are expected to leave the dead in the past. Looking at photographs and watching videos of our loved ones, or even visiting the grave frequently, is thought of as an indulgence. Engaging to excess with the

intimate dead is frowned upon as an indication that one is living in the past and not properly coping with death. While indulging ourselves with memories of our dearly departed is scorned, the constant present absence of dead celebrities is unquestioned. Performance theorist Diana Taylor uses the death and funeral of Diana Spencer as an example of the lively afterlife of celebrity: “The remains, in this spectacle, take on a life of their own—so much so that one tabloid photo montage has Di looking on at her own funeral from the corner with a bittersweet smile, one more witness to an event that has overtaken her” (142). Taylor argues that “politically and symbolically, we haven’t seen the end of her,” as Diana’s image continues to be socially productive after her death (142). What might be gained if we allow the stories and images of our loved ones to circulate after death? We can learn a sense of continuity within our families and within the cultures we are part of. Rather than thinking of the past as a series of events, images, and narratives, we can place ourselves in the trajectory from the past into the present by placing our forbears within those narratives. As Victoria points out, honoring her great-grandparents gives her the opportunity to savor the goodness in her life and express gratitude for the sacrifices they made. For Kat, who hesitated to build an altar, sharing stories and photographs of her father at Dia de los Muertos enabled her to remember him as an idiosyncratic, fun-loving man. We can, like Sue, learn more about ourselves by learning about our grandparents and great-grandparents, and pass those stories on to another generation.



## Celebrating Community

The Dia de los Muertos celebration at Hollywood Forever is a performance of cultural memory; altars that commemorate various celebrities, artists, and loved ones keep these individuals, their histories, and their acts in circulation. Traditional Dia de los Muertos celebrations similarly keep the ancestors alive for the family, but at Hollywood Forever the notion of community extends beyond family to include the consuming public who visit the cemetery for this event. Histories of Latino culture, both personal and public, are communicated through the display of altars, performances of dance and music, and an art exhibition in the Cathedral Mausoleum. Diana Taylor would argue that this display is essential to locating the presence and impact of Latino culture in the United States. She reminds us that

Latino/as became the largest minority in the United States, though no one seemed to notice. They, like [television astrologer] Walter [Mercado], are depicted as completely invisible, unlocatable, and/or utterly performatic. They still drop out of most discussions on race. [...] Who knows who Latino/as are or what they have accomplished in the United States? Which archives house their histories, writings, and artistic achievements?" (123)

As a public event attended by thousands, Hollywood Forever's Dia de los Muertos celebration enables access to those archives that are personal, familial, and often hidden from view. Individuals, objects, and traditions are plucked from the archive and situated, as Taylor posits, in "a repertoire performed through dance, theatre, song, ritual,

witnessing, healing practices, memory paths, and the many other forms of repeatable behaviors as something that cannot be housed or contained in the archive” (36-37).

Jose and Cecilia’s altar commemorates their grandparents, and in so doing also addresses the Oaxacan traditions of Dia de los Muertos, using the object world to tell a history. The altar represents three different time periods, Jose says. “The first is pre-Columbian, and the middle is colonial, and then the last is the present time. It’s three periods here to show how it’s been carried on through the years, where the theme is bringing food, flowers. With the middle period is more Catholicism, more saints. And the period is the merging of all—the pre-Columbian and the colonial into the present, all of those elements coming together in the present.” This history is prominently featured in the discourse surrounding Dia de los Muertos, in part because Mexican beliefs regarding death and the afterlife are so different from those of other faiths, especially Christianity. Efforts are also made to distinguish Dia de los Muertos from Halloween, which occurs at the same time of year but does not have the same purpose or history. Jose says the altar allows his family to “show part of our culture, part of our heritage, the traditions that we’ve carried on from the pre-Columbian times to now and how they’ve evolved.”

For the first seven years of Dia de los Muertos at Hollywood Forever, cemetery superintendent Alberto Hernandez was part of the event production staff and has seen the celebration grow from twenty altars and a few hundred people to more than 100 altars and 10,000 visitors. Hernandez took 2006 to enjoy the festivities, and felt that he was missing a sense of community until he invited a group from the Mexican state of Nayarit to create an altar. More than forty people gave their creative energy to create an

enormous white pyramid, each layer of which is covered with colorful skulls, *papel picado*, flowers, food, candles, and personal objects. Hernandez describes the altar as “representing the three generations—like when you’re a baby, and then when you’re an adult and you grow older, and then you die. So they have seven levels, and every level represents everything from when you’re born to when you pass away. It’s an original altar for Nayarit and everything is made by hand. Every single detail, made by hand, by the original, indigenous Nayarit.” During the Dia de los Muertos celebration, a shaman from Nayarit will come to bless the altar and light ceremonial incense. As individuals with connections to Nayarit, some who live in Mexico and some who live in Los Angeles, come together at Hollywood Forever, it is to affirm their sense of community and the traditional practices they share. They are focused on the families that comprise that community, and extending their shared beliefs to the next generation. Although the festivities will continue well into the night, Hernandez says “most of the people bring their family, because they don’t want to leave them at home, and they want the little children to learn. In the future when we pass away, the little children will continue the same tradition. That’s the reason, and this is the most important thing: family.”

Anita also uses an Atzec temple for the design for her altar; a solo project, it is smaller in scale yet significant in inspiration. *Calaveras* and *pan de muerto* are prominently featured, and each step of the pyramid is adorned with red, orange, and yellow marigolds, leading up to two black-and-white photographs. These are the son and daughter of Anita’s friend Maria, who suggested that Anita join the community of artists and celebrants building altars at Hollywood Forever. “Maria thought it was something I

might like to do because I was creative. She basically gave me a nudge to do something, rather than sit at home. So it was her idea to get me involved in something that would be community-based. It sort of took on a life of its own. She's coming tomorrow," Anita says the evening before the cemetery's Dia de los Muertos festivities. "She knows there's an altar being built but she doesn't know anything about what it looks like. What I tried to do was incorporate her culture. Her family originally came from Mexico, so I made an Aztec temple to honor the ancient culture." Through Anita's gift of building an altar to commemorate Maria's children, community is doubly embraced; Anita honors Maria's community while simultaneously experiencing a sense of community with other altarists. Glancing around at the surrounding altars and the Janitzio Lake Stage (the water and land surrounding the mausoleum of philanthropist William A. Clark Jr. is used as performance space during Dia de los Muertos) behind her altar, Anita feels a sense of belonging, sharing a common spirit with the other altarists and with the cemetery itself. She has not visited Hollywood Forever before participating in Dia de los Muertos, and delights in the space. "I love it. I want to live here!" she says.

Reflecting on Anita's comments, Charles has his own observations about community. Like Anita, Charles has not been to the cemetery before although he lives nearby. "I never had much reason to," he says. Yet in his decision to attend Dia de los Muertos, he realizes the cemetery is a place to engage, rather than a place to shun. "As I was driving up here this evening, I was thinking about how it's a community place in actuality. That there are these events going on here is actually kind of an interesting thing to be incorporated into civic life." As an architect, Charles sees and feels the space of the

cemetery through a different lens than most. Surprised by what he discovers in the cemetery, he describes it as “a cool place to get different feelings that we don’t normally touch on. But it’s a pretty place too. It’s like a park. Nice open space. Space, light, and air. Beyond that, there’s meaning here. It’s like a monument, you know? Literally speaking, it has meaning to our little city.” This meaning, for Charles, evolves from the sense of history and community he experiences. “I think you can feel it. If you go to European cities, like Rome, you’re sitting in something like this. Because Rome is like a giant archeological gravesite. It’s kind of similar here, because there’s a certain feeling in here. And that feeling, it’s like a memory. A memory of something that’s collective.”

What Charles describes as collective memory is more of an emotional affect than a way of knowing, a residual trace of pastness. The feeling is “archeological” in that it reflects layers of time and history, spanning more than 100 years at Hollywood Forever. Stories and histories intermingle on the landscape: Bianca Halstead and Dee Dee Ramone, for example, each are interred a few steps from Cecil B. DeMille. The simultaneity of these various lives and careers, and the cultural artifacts they created, is contrary to our usual way of understanding time and its passage. It follows naturally that Charles feels steeped in the past; many pasts are present at once. The celebration of Dia de los Muertos enhances one’s awareness of cultural memory as additional layers of the past are added when altarists create their own vivid and visible stories for the celebration. “People do not always know what ideas they share with others, or even whether they share any ideas at all,” Barry Schwartz argues in his study of how the cultural memory of Abraham Lincoln changes over time. “Commemorative ritual [...] makes consensus

explicit” (918). For those who fear their ongoing engagement with personal memories of their loved ones could be seen as indulgent, Dia de los Muertos can begin to normalize the idea that the dead remain an active part of the world of the living.

### **Evoking the Political and Social**

At Hollywood Forever, and at Dia de los Muertos celebrations elsewhere, public altars acknowledge and bring attention to social and political issues. In Mexico City, Juanita Garciagodoy writes, a group of sex workers constructed an altar near Alameda Park, the centuries-old civic space in the city center. She notes that the altarists included the traditional elements of the *ofrenda*, “confirm[ing] the Mexican identification of those who created and those who are honored by the ofrenda. Politically, the fact that these individuals are making an offering to their dead identifies them with their audience” (35). Like the sex workers in Mexico City, Kelly’s motivation for her altar at Hollywood Forever is borne of both a desire to identify with visitors and to strike a chord of human compassion. Honoring U.S. soldiers killed in Iraq, the altar includes a makeshift flag-draped casket, fresh fruit, candles, *Calaveras*, and framed photographs of soldiers in uniform. A large display board lists the names and pictures of more than 2,700 soldiers who have died. Kelly did not expect to build this altar; although she previously had not been to the cemetery’s celebration, she planned on a fun-filled evening with friends at Hollywood Forever. “On the news I heard that there were 19 victims just this month. So I started to do a little research and come to find out there’s been like 2,700 since 2003. I wasn’t planning on participating in this event until I got involved with that. I thought I

was just going to show up looking fabulous with all my friends, being a spectator, until I heard that.”

After three days of researching names and locating photographs, Kelly began to realize the poignancy of her project. The pictures of soldiers are quite small, as there are so many images to arrange on the board. “It’s really sad when you have to wonder if you have enough paper in your copier for the names, or if you have enough ink in your copier. And that’s when it kind of caught my breath and caught my chest. Because I’ve never honestly thought about the soldiers.” In the process of researching, printing, and arranging the names and images of fallen soldiers, Kelly was struck by their sacrifices. “They’re just beautiful, gleaming faces, so young and fresh and just breathless now,” she says. Kelly’s intentions in creating this altar stem from being personally moved by the death toll as reported in the media; she has no personal connection to any members of the armed forces. Yet the altar performs crucial cultural work by transforming her individual experience into a site for contemplation. Cultural critic Mieke Bal draws a distinction between trauma and cultural narrative memory by pointing out that “traumatic memory has no social component,” while “narrative memory fundamentally serves a social function” (x). In Bal’s view, trauma is integrated into cultural memory through the act of bearing witness. *Ofrendas* allow visitors to witness the trauma of loss experienced by others, integrating that trauma into cultural memory. The act of creating *ofrendas* is typically situated in the relationship between the altarists and the individuals they are commemorating, yet the comprehensive performance of multiple acts of memory, located

in a specific place and time, can leave the visitor with a sense of the importance of remembering those who have died.

Jenna's altar also remembers a group of individuals, with a specific purpose in mind: to point to the dangers of drug addiction. A multicolored banner announcing "Sex, Drugs, Rock 'n' Roll" streams above a long table covered with a pink cloth. Two dozen small picture boxes, painted in a variety of colors, are arranged on the table. Each box commemorates a public figure from the rock-and-roll scene whose death was linked to drug addiction. A small black box contains a *calaca* representing Sid Vicious, bassist for the Sex Pistols, who died of a heroin overdose in 1979. Atop this box is a pink octagonal box with a skeleton splayed on the floor beside a tiny bathroom sink; this box commemorates Vicious' girlfriend, Nancy Spungen, who died four months before he did.<sup>5</sup> Small framed biographies are arranged next to each box. A box for River Phoenix is on one side of the memorials for Vicious and Spungen; a box for Kurt Cobain is on the other. Jenna notes that "when we're younger, we think that all these rock stars are so cool and drugs are so glamorous. And so this was kind of a fun way of showing what really happens at the end of it." Because of the bright, colorful boxes and frames she uses, appropriate to Dia de los Muertos, Jenna feels the anti-drug message may be effective in this context because "it's a bit more playfully done where it's not shoving it down your throat."

The altar was inspired by Jenna's own sobriety and by two friends within the recovery community for whom she made a separate altar nearby. One is Jenna's friend Maureen Nolan, who was sober for seven years and died after a battle with cancer in



2004. The other is the novelist Hubert Selby, Jr., the author of *Last Exit to Brooklyn* and *Requiem for a Dream*, who overcame his addiction to painkillers and heroin some thirty years before his death. “He had been sick for a lot of years,” Jenna explains. “He died in his 70s. So people that I knew who knew him for twenty, thirty years—it’s always been a thing, like Cubby<sup>6</sup> is dying. But it took really like fifty more years of him living to die. Then my friend got cancer, and he started to watch her come around. And everyone knew she had cancer, but she was living and it really inspired him; that he’s got to stop thinking that he’s dying. Well, the weird thing is that they both did die [within months of each other], but they kind of both taught each other how to live again.” In paying tribute to those who helped her gain sobriety, Jenna hopes to “get people thinking” about the consequences of drug addiction.

The 2007 Dia de los Muertos celebration allowed the family of actor Don Adams to get input from fans and visitors on the choice of statuary to mark Adams’ grave. The selection of a gravemarker would typically be a highly personal decision, as seen in Fayette Hauser’s design of Tomata du Plenty’s niche in the Columbarium, yet there was dissent among Adams’ family members about whether his final resting place should reflect his public or private persona. Adams died in September 2005, yet his grave remained unmarked for more than two years. He played Maxwell Smart, also known as Agent 86, in the Cold War spy comedy *Get Smart* (1965-70). The series parodied the high tech devices and gadgets of the James Bond movies, such as the telephone embedded in Smart’s shoe on which he would awkwardly answer calls. Each episode of

*Get Smart* included a variety of gadgets, but the shoe phone is likely the most memorable. Writing on the Hollywood Underground listserv, Robyn recounts,

I was most excited about meeting up with a friend of Don Adams' family. Apparently, he's been unmarked for the last two years due to family disagreement of how to mark his grave. He still isn't officially marked, but this family friend sat with the two markers at the grave all evening talking to people. One side of the family ordered a large angel for the grave and the other side of the family commissioned a bust of Don talking to his shoe! So, both were at the gravesite just for the evening. ("Day of the Dead at Hollywood Forever")

Robyn notes in a later post that the members of the family who commissioned the "shoe bust" felt that Adams would prefer to be commemorated for his role as Agent 86. A photograph posted by Tony Scott (who also authored a comprehensive survey of celebrities interred at Hollywood Forever) on *Findagrave.com* a few weeks after Dia de los Muertos shows that the family chose the angel rather than the shoe bust as a gravemarker. Family members know tourists and fans will visit Adams' grave among the many other stops on the celebrity tour of Hollywood Forever. Even among Los Angeles' celebrity-friendly cemeteries, it is difficult to imagine a scenario in which family members would seek public input on how to commemorate a loved one. This is testament to the ways Hollywood Forever is used as social space, and conversations about how to memorialize a celebrity can readily occur in a space where visitors are accustomed to talking openly with casual passersby.

## Cultural Crossings

Because Dia de los Muertos and Halloween fall on consecutive days, there is a tendency in the U.S. to conflate the two: among the hundreds who have had their faces painted with skeleton makeup at Dia de los Muertos, hundreds more arrive at Hollywood Forever in Halloween costumes. While the idea of a festive celebration and dressing up in costumes is part of both holidays, the meaning and social uses of Dia de los Muertos are quite different from Halloween. Lack of knowledge about and misunderstanding of Dia de los Muertos were evident when Yahoo! posted a link to “Everything You’ve Ever Wanted to Know about the Day of the Dead...but Have Been too Afraid to Ask” on its home page on November 1, 2007 (Ozaeta). Written in English, the article is a link from the Spanish-language site on which Yahoo! partners with Telemundo to provide news and online services. After presenting a broad explanation of Dia de los Muertos, the article ends with an invitation for discussion, and more than 800 comments are posted. The author describes the Day of the Dead as a Mexican holiday, and many posts are from readers from other nations who celebrate this holiday or have similar practices in which the dead are honored. While many express interest in Dia de los Muertos, the anonymity of an online post allows some readers to bluntly express their discomfort with the holiday. Several readers responded with anger to a comment by “Justjessica718”: “Dumb asses...Don’t you know dead people can’t see or hear anymore! THEY’RE DEAD! LET THEM REST IN PEACE, IDIOTS!” “Victronia” echoes this perspective, in more gentle terms: “It was a nice sentiment, until you got to the part where they leave things on their grave...like bottles of liquor and toys...and pillows. Flowers, I get, the other stuff...what,

are they going to dig themselves out and have a party?" These posters demonstrate an inability to understand another culture's outlook on death, or even to consider the symbolic return of the dead to the world of the living. The discomfort with death that appears in the dominant U.S. culture makes the idea of Dia de los Muertos unfathomable for some readers. The celebration at Hollywood Forever can serve a pedagogical function<sup>7</sup>, educating both Latinos and non-Latinos about the traditions of recalling the dead that span centuries.

The merging of Halloween and Dia de los Muertos troubles many in Mexican communities as well. Writer and broadcaster Greg Palmer traveled to the city of Tzintzuntzan and the island of Uranden in Mexico as part of his PBS series and subsequent book *Death: The Trip of Lifetime*. While observing Dia de los Muertos celebrations in both communities, Palmer found traditions being threatened by commercialism. He notes,

Across Mexico, especially in the urban areas, there are complaints each year that the Day of the Dead is being overwhelmed by Halloween. Children go trick-or-treating now in Mexico City, wearing Batman suits and similar costumes that have as little to do with the Dead as the plastic habiliments worn by the kids in my neighborhood. But what Mexican traditionalists really regret is that belief in the power and presence of ancestors during this festival is disappearing along with the traditions. (72)

In his essay, Palmer critiques the infestation of tourists into Mexican villages who lack reverence for the villagers, their ancestors, and the traditions that bring them to the

cemetery on this night. He also notes that some cynics argue that the pre-Columbian roots of the holiday are a façade created for tourist hype, and therefore not deserving of veneration. Nonetheless, the relationship between Dia de los Muertos and tourism should not be ignored. Villagers, however, do not create a cultural display for the benefit of visitors and their dollars; rather, government officials promoting tourism have packaged tradition as spectacle.

The celebration at Hollywood Forever is subject to similar critiques. On *Yelp.com*, a poster named Jason G., who helps design and create the community altar organized by Self Help Graphics, sees Hollywood Forever’s celebration as a spectacle rather than an authentic Mexican commemoration. Focusing on the importance of “showing the proper respect to the cemetery,” Jason G. argues that the Hollywood Forever is “turning it into something else and portraying it as a ‘Mexican Halloween.’” Yet Alberto Hernandez sees the similarities, rather than the differences, between Halloween and Dia de los Muertos in the cemetery’s celebration. Noting how many Anglo families build altars at Hollywood Forever, Hernandez says, “I love it, because they are embracing this thing and it is amazing how they do. For the Americans, I really enjoy it because it is beautiful to see another community try to do what our roots are. For me it is a pleasure. The same way I do Halloween. I enjoy it, but I do it in a different way,” he says. Hernandez stresses the playful aspects of Halloween, dressing up as a lizard with the intent of entertaining trick-or-treaters. “When the kids come, I give them candy. It is similar [to Dia de los Muertos] because people are giving—you’re giving them bread, you’re giving food to somebody

that has already passed away. For Halloween, you are giving to people who are alive, but it is the same kind of meaning, sharing things with other people.”

Although Hollywood Forever’s celebration is organized primarily by Latinos, the event may be seen as a spectacle and an instance of cultural appropriation due to the relative lack of Mexican-Americans interred at the cemetery. As Alex Rodriguez points out, “most people aren’t from here. There’s a lot of first generation. Most of the altars don’t have family here. Because who can afford to be here in this day and age? Certainly not the Latino community.” The desire to reestablish the cultural prestige of Hollywood Forever creates a sense of exclusivity, leaving the general public to assume a gravesite at this cemetery would be unaffordable. In October 2007, the *Los Angeles Times* reported a national average of \$6,500 for funeral costs (Colker). As Jessica Mitford points out in *The American Way of Death*, the “cost of a funeral is the third-largest expenditure, after a house and a car, in the life of an ordinary American family” (25). Shortly after taking ownership of the cemetery, Tyler Cassity launched an aggressive advertising campaign offering a simple burial for as low as \$998 (Pelisek, par. 2). Today, Hollywood Forever’s complete burial packages begin at \$1850, and the cemetery is committed to offering the best possible price for its services. Hollywood Forever’s general price list pledges that “if anyone in the Los Angeles area offers a lower price than ours—we guarantee to provide the same funeral service and lower that price by an additional 10%” (“General Price List”). In a time of grief, one is unlikely to comparison shop for a cemetery plot as one would for an automobile or home appliance, yet the pre-planning of one’s funeral, initially made popular by Hubert Eaton at Forest Lawn almost a century ago, is

increasingly commonplace. A poll conducted by Harris Interactive in 2005 showed that 47 percent of those surveyed intended to plan their own funerals (Colker). Yet those intentions do not always come to fruition, as purchasing a burial plot or niche, or planning for cremation, means confronting one's own mortality, often leading to the postponement of such a task.

Although the Hollywood Chamber of Commerce Halloween fundraiser and the Dia de los Muertos celebration are both relatively new to Hollywood Forever, the Art Deco Society of Los Angeles began conducting annual Halloween tours there in 1984. The well-attended tours are conducted by costumed docents stationed at various gravesites who explain the historical and architectural importance of the cemetery and its permanent residents. "Practically all of Hollywood's history can be revisited here," said Frank Cooper, the Art Deco Society board member who initiated the annual tour (Biederman, par. 1), and the historical appeal takes precedence over the spookiness associated with holding the tour at Halloween. The Art Deco Society is not the only organization to use Halloween as a time to invite visitors to learn more about cemetery history. Prominent cemeteries including Oakland Cemetery in Atlanta, St. Louis #2 in New Orleans, Laurel Hill in Philadelphia, and Brooklyn's Green-Wood Cemetery customize their tours for Halloween presentations, when more visitors typically join the tours. Smaller cemeteries also leverage the Halloween season to bring visitors to tour the grounds. In Pascagoula, Mississippi, for example, the Historic Preservation Commission led a tour of Krebs Cemetery on Halloween night, using costumed volunteers to relate the history of Pascagoula through the stories of those interred in the cemetery (Roley).

Despite the popularity of Halloween tours, few cemeteries organize official Dia de los Muertos events. Forest Hills Cemetery in Jamaica Plain near Boston hosts a celebration with dance, music, and a community altar; the cemetery also holds a non-denomination Lantern Festival, based on Hindu traditions, each summer (“Archive”). Old City Cemetery is located in Brownsville, at the southernmost tip of Texas and just a few miles north of Matamoros, Mexico. The annual Dia de los Muertos event at this cemetery, organized by the Brownsville Historical Association, is one of the longest-running celebrations in the area (“Written in Stone”). Hollywood Forever’s was the first, and is certainly still the largest, celebration held at a cemetery. In its 2007 listing of Dia de los Muertos events, *LAist.com* notes that the celebration at Hollywood Forever “has perhaps become *the* Dia de los Muertos festival in Los Angeles” (“Dia de los Muertos Events” par. 3, emphasis original). The cemetery’s celebration wins favor from some for precisely the same reasons others find it offensive: Hollywood Forever draws on ancient practices while also incorporating new rituals and expanding the celebration to include a multicultural approach. Critics of Hollywood Forever who see the cemetery appropriating another culture’s traditions for its own purposes are not incorrect, but this appropriation can result in a positive reflection of celebrating the dead and inviting the dearly departed to spend time among the living. In his opening remarks at the 2005 Dia de los Muertos celebration, Tyler Cassity spoke of “a 3,000 year old tradition united with a five year old tradition,” asserting a distinction between the ancient rituals and the contemporary festivities at the cemetery. He concluded his remarks by noting that “only good can come of that” (*Hollywood Forever Presents...*). Hollywood Forever readily benefits by



extending itself as a good corporate citizen that invites the Latino community to come together to celebrate a significant holiday. As Dia de los Muertos celebrations occur elsewhere in Los Angeles, the cemetery is not offering a unique service but does provide a unique setting which is appropriate to commemorative acts that recall the lives of the dead.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Day of the Dead celebrations occur in Bolivia, Paraguay, Colombia, Guatemala, and the Philippines, as well as in other nations. Since the Latino population of Los Angeles is primarily of Mexican descent and many participants in Hollywood Forever's celebration represent particular communities in Mexico, Dia de los Muertos is referred to here as a Mexican holiday, adopting the customs of Mexican origin.

<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all quotes in this chapter are drawn from interviews conducted at Hollywood Forever Cemetery in August 2006, October 2006, and July 2007.

<sup>3</sup> New Age belief systems draw on traditions from a variety of cultures and religions, including Buddhism, Paganism, Shamanism and Wicca. Since the category "New Age" includes such various practices, there is no definitive perspective on death that is associated with New Ageism, yet many believe in reincarnation, life-after-death, and a spiritual enlightenment that can result from near-death experiences.

<sup>4</sup> Benjamin "Bugsy" Siegel is interred in the Beth Olam Mausoleum.

<sup>5</sup> Nancy Spungen and Sid Vicious, both heroin addicts, were living at the Chelsea Hotel in New York City at the time of her death. Spungen's body was found on the bathroom floor; the cause of death was a single stab wound to the abdomen. Vicious was arrested on murder charges, but died four months later, before standing trial. For detailed discussion of their lives and deaths, see *Sid Vicious: Rock 'n' Roll Star* by Malcolm Butt (London: Plexus Publishing, 2005), *Sid Vicious: No One is Innocent* by Alan Parker (London: Orion, 2007), *And I Don't Want to Live This Life: A Mother's Story of Her Daughter's Murder* by Deborah Spungen (New York: Ballantine, 1996), and the film *Sid and Nancy* (Dir. Alex Cox. Samuel Goldwyn Co., 1986).

<sup>6</sup> Selby retained his childhood nickname, Cubby, throughout his life.

<sup>7</sup> Chicana artist Carmen Lomas Garza, whose installation work includes several exhibitions of Dia de los Muertos altars, sees a pedagogical aspect to her art. Growing up in South Texas, she saw that Mexican-American children like herself often were not taught the history of Mexico and Mexican culture. Not only was her heritage not part of the public school curriculum, but Lomas Garza was aware that many families, in their efforts to assimilate, chose not to focus on their cultural traditions. In her installations, she includes objects that recall her childhood experiences and she encourages other altarists to do the same. "Memories of the things you grew up with, when incorporated into your altar, enable others to recall their own history," Lomas Garza says (Homenaje).

## Chapter 6

### Transforming Forever

From the beginning, Hollywood Forever was synonymous with Tyler Cassity, the savvy entrepreneur who bought the cemetery off the auction block in 1998 for a mere \$375,000. Many feared that the city would take over maintenance of the bankrupt cemetery, but then, in a manner befitting Hollywood, a young stranger came to town and saved the cemetery from its impending dismal future. Cassity quickly garnered media attention as the wunderkind rebel intent on transforming the conservative death care industry. Articles in *Time*, *Variety*, and the *New York Times* were followed by HBO's 2000 documentary film *The Young and the Dead*. Repeatedly cast as thoughtful and sensitive, Cassity's public persona blends Midwestern substance with Hollywood style. He has been described as "a GQ-ish sort with rock-star stubble who wears sunglasses indoors, [and] has cultural feelers well tuned for the business" (Brown, par. 14). This apparent duality serves Cassity well, as social events at the cemetery seem less outlandish when the person behind them has not only cultural capital but also credibility: since Tyler's childhood, the Cassity family has owned funeral homes, cemeteries, and sold pre-need funeral planning services. The now-fabled story of Tyler Cassity finding an audio cassette of his grandmother's voice three years after her death<sup>1</sup> that led to the creation of

LifeStories could best come to fruition in a family able to leverage its resources within the death care industry. As the owner of Hollywood Forever, Cassity brought his family heritage and his sense of style to attract interest and confidence from the business community, the entertainment industry, and the Los Angeles culturati.

In his comprehensive history of the Rudolph Valentino memorial services, Tracy Terhune describes Cassity's first appearance before the longtime attendees of the annual event: "Tyler Cassity stepped out from the sidelines and took the podium to officially open the service. Blessed with striking good looks and a voice to match, Cassity projected a warmth and easy demeanor as he spoke, putting everyone instantly at ease" (189). Although he is now deeply engaged with the eco-driven Forever Fernwood cemetery in Marin County, Cassity remains president of Forever Enterprises and is largely seen as the public figurehead of Hollywood Forever. He once again offered the opening remarks at the 2006 Valentino memorial service. Yet in the subsequent months, when visitors and tour groups at Hollywood Forever began to experience restrictions on their behavior, it seemed the antithesis of the fan-friendly, tourist-welcoming space Tyler Cassity created.

Although tourists can purchase a map of celebrity gravesites at the cemetery's flower shop,<sup>2</sup> during the summer of 2007, several visitors were stopped by security guards while photographing celebrity graves. Among frequent visitors to Hollywood Forever, such oversight and prohibition is unheard of, as the cemetery is widely praised for its liberal and inviting attitude toward tourists. Amateur film historian Karie Bible, who also plays the role of Hollywood Forever's official "Lady in Black" at the annual

Rudolph Valentino memorial service, began offering tours at the cemetery in 2002. Bible now conducts the official cemetery tour, offered on Saturday afternoons. Along with her warnings to turn off portable electronic devices and to be courteous toward mourners the tour group might encounter, Bible cautions her clients that the cemetery has imposed restrictions on photography. She implores visitors that any photographs they might take must be for personal use only.

Writing on the website *Roadside America* in August 2007, Karen Nordyke notes, “I used to visit this cemetery frequently to photograph the grave sites of the famous. On my last trip I was told they no longer allow photography. I tried to argue my case to the powers that be but didn’t get anywhere...I was very disappointed” (“Hollywood Forever”). Nordyke’s disappointment echoes among the celebrity graving community. Mark, who “fell head over heels” for the neglected, decrepit cemetery shortly before Forever Enterprises purchased it, said the cemetery always “seemed like ‘home’” (personal correspondence). Mark reports that in October 2007 he too was confronted by cemetery security. “I was leaning down to take a picture of Peter Lorre (someone had left a cool note for him), when a guard scurried up sternly. He said, ‘you know we do not allow any pictures here! Only of celebrities!’ I pointed, and said, ‘Peter Lorre IS a celebrity.’ He shrugged and let me take a picture, but not without an evil glare.” Not only does Mark feel unwelcome, as he describes, but he is being harassed for doing something that is nowhere explicitly detailed as being against Hollywood Forever’s policies. Neither the cemetery’s website nor employees in the flower shop warn visitors of the ban on photography.

Steve Goldstein, whose website *Beneath Los Angeles* includes hundreds of original photographs from several cemeteries in the area, was also confronted by a uniformed security guard while shooting a personal video at Hollywood Forever. “I am among those who have loved the place since way back in the Roth days, when I used to feel like time had stood still there and Fairbanks was covered in moss,” Goldstein says. “Where I used to feel entitled [as a property owner] I now feel I’m being watched, and not in a good way. It is still a long way from the policies of Forest Lawn, but still, it is a step in the wrong direction” (personal correspondence).

As Karen McHale notes on her *Hollywood Underground* website, most of the mausoleums at Forest Lawn are considered private and “there are cameras watching the whole thing” (“Forest Lawn”). Visitors to Forest Lawn feel fortunate to get even a glimpse of some celebrity graves, especially those that are deliberately placed off limits to the curious public. Living in a surveillance society, ubiquitous security cameras are intended to ensure our safety while they simultaneously invade our privacy in public spaces<sup>3</sup>. The absence of surveillance at Hollywood Forever, in contrast to Forest Lawn, was closely linked to the pleasure of spending time there. Scott Michaels describes the intimacy many experience at the celebrity cemetery: “And here I am, all by myself with Rudolph Valentino. It’s kind of an odd kind of feeling to think that this person was a megastar [...] There’s something to be said about that. Really, getting within six feet of your favorite stars, and they can’t get away,” he says with a chuckle. “It’s absolutely your private moment with them” (Interview). If visitors to Hollywood Forever now sense that they are under surveillance, that pleasure is outside the realm of possibility.

The new restrictions on photography in the cemetery may be related to the *Cemetery Golf* video produced by conceptual artist Marc Horowitz. In the video, which is less than two minutes long, Horowitz tries out what he sees as a potential business enterprise, combining a cemetery and a golf course: “You have all the underutilized land, and the natural obstacles like tombstones and trees and the occasional pond,” Horowitz says in the video introduction. “You could make millions” (*Cemetery Golf*). He invites other visitors at the cemetery to join him in a game of cemetery golf in which the ball bounces off several tombstones and lawn gravemarkers. The video was posted on Horowitz’s blog, [www.ineedtostopsoon.com](http://www.ineedtostopsoon.com). On March 17, 2006, Horowitz received a cease and desist letter from Hollywood Forever, noting that his portrayal of the cemetery infringes on the rights of the cemetery and cemetery property owners. The letter states, “You have been denied access to the cemetery on at least one occasion when you attempted to film. Apparently you misrepresented yourself to gain access for the filming of ‘Cemetery Golf.’” Horowitz posted the letter from Hollywood Forever on his blog, along with his own comment: “I just received this letter in an e-mail from The Hollywood Forever Cemetery. Hell, they show movies there every Friday and make a mint, and people get wasted and run all over the tombstones. This has so much less impact and has never made me a dime” (Horowitz). Despite being instructed by Hollywood Forever to remove the video from his blog site and destroy all copies, *Cemetery Golf* was posted on YouTube in February 2007.<sup>4</sup> Although Forever Enterprises takes offense at Horowitz’s video, Forever Bellerive Cemetery in Creve Coeur, Missouri, promotes its “championship caliber golf green” on the grounds. Depicted on the

cemetery's website as an open course with a sand trap and water trap surrounded by family mausoleums, Forever Bellerive offers "Premium Memorial Estate locations [...] on a first reserved basis" ("Forever Bellerive"). There is a difference, of course, between teeing off on a green set aside for golf and crafting your own course among the tombstones.

Horowitz's response to the letter from Hollywood Forever raises a significant question about public use of the cemetery space. Cinespia is a carnivalesque event in which the revelers are given control of the cemetery, but only by degrees. The space of Cinespia is limited to the Fairbanks Lawn, and security guards are watchful of anyone who strays beyond the designated perimeter. One cemetery hobbyist tells the story of wanting to commemorate John Huston by placing a candle at his grave on a night when the Cinespia feature film was *The Maltese Falcon*, which Huston directed. A guard on duty near the Garden of Legends forbade her passage, and failed to understand the significance of her commemorative act. Yet Cinespia founder John Wyatt sees the pleasure of the film series in precisely this conjunction. "For me, it's about the excitement of showing a John Huston movie a stone's throw from where he's buried," Wyatt says (Lee, par. 12). In trying to prevent visitors from "run[ning] all over the tombstones," Hollywood Forever's security forces restrict the experience in a way similar to the prohibition of making photographs of celebrity graves during the day.

Those with a vested interest in Hollywood Forever, from property owners to cemetery enthusiasts, feel that the improvements to the cemetery have been extraordinary—it is essentially saved—but wonder, at what cost to their ability to enjoy



its historical value? The Hollywood business community could not fathom how Forever Enterprises would fund the multimillion dollar restoration of the cemetery, and business owners can only be pleased to have a valuable asset reestablished in the neighborhood. Regardless of the social and cultural impact of the cemetery's transformation, Cassity has clearly met one goal in turning the once-bankrupt cemetery into a profitable venture.

### **Life (and Death) Online**

In early 2007, the Hollywood Forever website was updated, transforming its online image from a celebrity cemetery to a corporate entity offering an array of death care services. The page describing the history of Hollywood Forever once told the story of a culturally significant site that was the “cemetery of choice for the founders of Hollywood’s great studios” that “had fallen into disrepair and bankruptcy” and was now experiencing a “much-needed renaissance.” Clicking on the “History” link now opens a page that tells the corporate history of Forever Enterprises, beginning with LifeStories and moving through the acquisition of the cemetery properties in Missouri and California that comprise the corporation’s holdings. A photo montage including images of Rudolph Valentino, Douglas Fairbanks, Sr., and Jayne Mansfield, tagged “The Magic of Hollywood,” no longer appears on the website.

Changes to the cemetery’s website are indicative of Forever Enterprises’ desire to align Hollywood Forever with the corporate identity of its other properties.<sup>5</sup> After nearly ten years, Hollywood Forever no longer depends on the “star factor” to sell property. Potential customers who are drawn to Hollywood Forever for its celebrity appeal have

other points of access for engagement, especially through participation in commemorative events that employ the cemetery for social space. Websites for celebrities interred at the cemetery, and for events held at the cemetery, link to the cemetery's site from their own. On Hollywood Forever's website, however, there is little evidence of any of the social events that are held at the cemetery. Dia de los Muertos, the Ramones cancer benefit, and the first Cinespia screening of the year are all listed on the cemetery's calendar of events, but the cemetery does not promote itself online as a tourist attraction or as the site for public events going on throughout the year. The website is targeted to a potential customer shopping for a burial plot, crypt, or niche. As Cassity told *LA Weekly* in 2000, "Many people think it is just for stars. It is a huge misconception. A cemetery serves people in the five-to-10-mile radius around it" (Pelisek, par. 10). The residents of Hollywood seeking a funeral home and cemetery are a significant audience too, more concerned with funeral planning and pre-arrangement than with the latest Cinespia screening.

### **Where Kitsch is Cool**

Maila Nurmi, known for her role as television horror film hostess Vampira, died in January 2008. Friends of Nurmi initiated efforts to have her interred at Hollywood Forever, raising funds not only for her burial but also for a statue at her gravesite, inspired by Johnny Ramone's cenotaph. The renewed cultural cache of the cemetery makes it the obvious choice, particularly as Hollywood Forever is associated with old Hollywood camp. Nurmi had a cameo in *Plan 9 from Outer Space* (1959), and Paul

Marco, who played Patrolman Kelton in the cult classic film, was interred at Hollywood Forever in 2006. Haunted Hollywood tour guide Aaron Rosenberg was friends with Marco, and brought him to Hollywood Forever. Rosenberg recounts,

My friend Tom Demille used to do the tours here and I came with my friend Paul Marco from *Plan 9 from Outer Space*, who is now buried in the corner. [...] He was the last person to kill Bela Lugosi<sup>6</sup> in a movie, *Plan 9 from Outer Space*, and it was one of his big wishes to be buried here at Hollywood Forever. Just like ever since I've known him. And he has this song called 'Somebody Walked Over My Grave' and he ended up in the corner over there, right next to the Paramount wall. (Interview)

Nurmi also has a connection to Tomata du Plenty, whose ashes are in a niche in the Columbarium. According to a memorial website for du Plenty, he “coaxed 50s TV horror-movie hostess Vampira out of retirement, and featured her in several performances and films” (“Tribute...”).

While Cassity once wished for the likes of Frank Sinatra to choose Hollywood Forever as their final resting place (Spindler, par. 14) (Sinatra is buried at Desert Memorial Park in Cathedral City), the cemetery has a “B list” appeal that makes it particularly charming for those with nostalgia for old Hollywood. While it may never have the cultural capital of Forest Lawn or Holy Cross, the events hosted by the cemetery create a unique sense of place for tourists, visitors, and fans. How visitors develop relationships with the space of the cemetery changes as their experiences change: longtime celebrity gravers who have toured, strolled, photographed, commemorated, and

celebrated at Hollywood Forever now mourn the loss of the intimate sense of belonging once experienced there. Yet like a forgotten classic film star cast in a new role past her prime, Hollywood Forever is gaining new fans and admirers eager to learn its history and appreciate its beauty anew.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> According to various news stories and publicity materials generated by Forever Enterprises, the concept for Lifestories occurred to Tyler Cassity at the age of 13, when he discovered an audiotape he had made before his grandmother's death. Hearing her voice, he realized that audio, video, and still photographs are powerful ways to recall the dead, and could be incorporated effectively into funerals and commemorative practices. See, for example, "Online, the dead do tell tales," in *Wired* magazine (31 Oct. 2002), "A Resting Place to Die For?" (*New York Times Sunday Magazine*, 15 Nov. 1998), and "Meeting Your (Film) Maker" (*Time* 10 July 2000: 65-6).

<sup>2</sup> In addition to the map of celebrity gravesites, which can be purchased for \$5.00, the flower shop at the entrance to the cemetery sells a variety of books that address Hollywood Forever as a celebrity cemetery. These include Mark Masek's *Hollywood Remains to be Seen: A Guide to the Movie Stars' Final Homes* (Nashville: Cumberland House, 2001), Tracy Terhune's *Valentino Forever: The History of the Valentino Memorial Services* (Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse, 2004), and Hollywood Forever's own publication, *The Official Directory: Welcome to a Visit with 135 Stars and Founders of Historic Hollywood*.

<sup>3</sup> For a detailed discussion of the culture of surveillance, see, for example, John McGrath's *Loving Big Brother* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

<sup>4</sup> The *Cemetery Golf* video was posted by a YouTube member using the moniker "topshelf." No personal identification is attached to this member's account, but Horowitz may have posted *Cemetery Golf* anonymously to avoid further repercussions from Hollywood Forever. An ABC News interview with Horowitz, who stars in Nissan's "7 Days in a Sentra" advertising campaign, was posted by "topshelf" as well. Horowitz is referred to in third person in the text accompanying the *Cemetery Golf* video: "This is a video done by Marc Horowitz. I've had it for a while and just thought I'd post it. He goes on a game of golf at the infamous Hollywood Forever Cemetery and actually tees off Johnny Ramone's grave. Crazy man! I saw this on direct TV the other night too" (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WyNMiAe93Ik>).

<sup>5</sup> Forever Fernwood is the exception, since green burial, which is still regarded as unconventional, has a specific demographic audience. Fernwood's website has a clean and natural feel, graphically highlighting the practices of natural burial.

<sup>6</sup> Bela Lugosi, who died in 1956, is interred at Holy Cross Cemetery in Culver City, California.

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