Hollywood forever: Culture, celebrity, and the cemetery

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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.

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