Nowhere Man: John Lennon and Spectral Liminality

When the famous die, the media adopts an embalming process that allows stars and celebrities to remain present within visual culture. Through the repetition of familiar photographs, recordings and footage, stars are resurrected in a media afterlife, often preserved within familiar associations and identities. The star phenomenon is dependent on recognisability and star personas are constructed through a series of associations and characteristics that have been repeated throughout their career\(^1\). This process is perpetuated after their demise and the circulation of their image at its most recognisable guarantees that the deceased remain visible. In a procedure that recalls that of the taxidermist, the dead are restored within media examples, maintaining a ‘living’ presence despite ontological absence\(^2\).

Deceased stars therefore retain a posthumous visibility within visual culture, mummified within images of their living incarnation and it is possible to argue that their deaths are essentially erased in the media. Elliott’s (1999) study of John Lennon notes a displacement in the aftermath of his murder, where the media’s replaying of archive recordings and footage preoccupied with his living entity suggests a denial of his death\(^3\). I have identified elsewhere this process at work in media coverage of dead stars including George Best and Princess Diana(2010)\(^4\) and Michael Jackson (2012)\(^5\). Whilst not denying a traditional recycling of Lennon’s image that continues to occur in media representations since his demise, this chapter will specifically investigate an alternative perspective on Lennon’s image and in the process, highlight the notion that posthumous images of dead stars can encapsulate tensions concerning the recognition of death within visual culture.

\(^1\) Dyer, *Stars* 
\(^2\) Davies, *Technological Taxidermy: Recognising Faces in Celebrity Death*, 
\(^3\) Elliott *The Mourning of John Lennon* 
\(^4\) Davies, *Technological Taxidermy* 
\(^5\) Davies *No Mere Mortal? Re-Materialising Michael Jackson in Death*
When star images are circulated posthumously, recognisable images that were frequently recycled during their lifetime form the foundation of their persona in the wake of their death. This reinforces particular associations that are synonymous with an embalming procedure. The embalming process is an integral component of socio-cultural rituals of death in the West, generating an acceptable manner of visualising the dead in its reconstruction of a lifelike appearance. Embalming guarantees that the dead remain recognisable when viewed, preserving the integrity of the cadaver and “humanising” the corpse. This exercise regulates the abject qualities of the corpse in its propensity to disintegrate and decompose, providing a disavowal of the reality that “the corpse is no longer a secure, bounded body”. Davis (2004) suggests that the face is used to “conceal the presence of death” in image cultures. Death is conspicuous in the threat to individual identity manifested in the loss of somatic form - a reminder of the instability of material embodiment. Embalming therefore is symptomatic of the need to acknowledge death only within restricted parameters, synonymous with the erasing of any suggestion of corporeal disintegration. The process of embalming in order to maintain a recognisable identity that is threatened in death is consistent with fetishism, a condition that seeks to disavow traumatic perceptions of abject embodiment. There is compulsion to sanction death through the reiteration of a living entity, substituting absence with presence and thereby restoring the unruly soma that threatens to disintegrate with an illusion of stable embodiment.

Drawing upon the paradox of presence and absence within media examples when the famous die, this chapter argues for a lack of displacement and concealment of death in examples of Lennon’s posthumous persona. Unlike many posthumous images of Lennon that recycle existing photographs and footage of him alive, a process that suggests “the dark void

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6 Aries, *Western Attitudes Toward Death From the Middle Ages to the Present*, Schilling, *The Body and Social Theory*,
7 Schilling, *The Body and Social Theory*
8 Howarth, *Death and Dying A Sociological Introduction*, 187
9 Hallam in Howarth, *Death and Dying*, 186
10 Davis, *The Face on the Screen: Death, Recognition and Spectatorship*, 107
12 Aries, *Western Attitudes Toward Death*
13 Freud, *Fetishism*
generated by Lennon’s absence is for many of us, too threatening”\textsuperscript{14}, this study draws attention to examples that have creatively prevented a preservation of his image. These examples provide an alternative representation of the deceased star, one that encourages a visual foregrounding of death through a denial of traditional embalming signifiers.

This chapter will reflect on John Lennon’s posthumous media persona and will identify recurring tropes that emerge in a range of visual culture examples appearing since his death. These case studies have been selected primarily because they draw upon existing photographs and footage of Lennon alive, in keeping with traditional media constructions of the dead, but remodel this footage thereby reconfiguring Lennon’s familiar identity in the process. It is the creative process of selecting, editing and doctoring Lennon’s image that is of interest here and this chapter outlines the implications of these reinterpretations. Questions also arise about the relationship between representations of dead stars and socio-cultural traditions of aesthetically documenting the deceased.

In the process of tracing the visibility of death in the following examples, this investigation will also suggest that it is possible to preserve a recognisable star persona whilst enhancing a media identity that incorporates the aesthetics of death. In order to argue that discourses signifying death are prominent within Lennon’s persona after his murder, it is essential to ascertain how death’s presence is manifested visually within portraiture, photography and the moving image. If Lennon is reconstructed to incorporate allegorical motifs that represent death, in what form do these appear?

Motifs signifying the presence of death within visual culture can be investigated by drawing upon Freud’s (1919) essay on the Uncanny\textsuperscript{15}, which examines the trope of liminality in relation the dead. Freud equates the ‘uncanny’ with an uneasiness that he attributes to a

\textsuperscript{14} Elliott, *The Mourning of John Lennon*, 153

\textsuperscript{15} Freud, *The Uncanny*
psychological positioning of the dead, “our unconscious has as little use now as it ever had for the idea of its own mortality”\textsuperscript{16}. A disavowal of death’s reality manifested in a fetishised embalming of images of the deceased results in the return of the repressed\textsuperscript{17}. Corporeal disintegration that is perpetuated within psychological and socio-cultural death rituals gradually re-surface and can destabilise the fetish in the process. Motifs that characterise the uncanny therefore emerge as a consequence of the desire to suppress the realities of death and cultural artefacts are embedded with tropes that encourage uncanny responses\textsuperscript{18}. Liminal identities and the questioning of binaries between life and death, animate and inanimate, presence and absence and the familiar and unfamiliar characterise the uncanny\textsuperscript{19}. Bronfen and Goodwin (1993) note that “the cadaverous presence is such that it simultaneously occupies two places, the here and nowhere”\textsuperscript{20}, and this is a reminder that the foregrounding of death within visual culture centres upon “an experience of liminality”\textsuperscript{21}.

The notion of Lennon as “here and nowhere”\textsuperscript{22} can be investigated within discourses of disembodiment - Lennon can be viewed as inhabiting an intermediary space in relation to motifs of somatic disintegration. The abject dimensions of the corpse are aesthetically evoked through motifs of Lennon’s ‘incompleteness’. Portraits, photographs and moving images routinely position Lennon’s face within an ontological liminality, suggesting an incomplete somatic form and a face that is struggling to remain ‘whole’ within the frame. This can be interpreted as an allegory for the deteriorating cadaver and this investigation argues therefore that death is present visually within the construction of Lennon as a partial subject (and object) in his posthumous media existence. Visual motifs that evoke intermediary spaces and somatic disintegration highlight a spectral identity for Lennon, thereby nurturing an uncanny presence within these images.

\textsuperscript{16} Freud, \textit{The Uncanny} 148
\textsuperscript{17} ibid
\textsuperscript{18} ibid
\textsuperscript{19} ibid
\textsuperscript{20} Bronfen, Goodwin, \textit{Death and Representation} , 12
\textsuperscript{21} Royle, \textit{The Uncanny} , 2
\textsuperscript{22} Bronfen, Goodwin, 12
“it’s getting hard to be someone” : Liminal faces and spaces in the still image

Barthes (1980) maintained that at the heart of the still image is a confrontation with mortality suggesting that all photographs resonate with death. The process of reducing an animate figure to a frozen image, evokes an aesthetic embalming of the subject. The photographic process captures the essence of mortality by reminding us of the transition from animate to inanimate being, “the living image of a dead thing”. The paradox of the photographic process is highlighted by its providing a document of a life that once existed, but at the same time, removing the essence of life and mortifying the subject.

The correlation between the photographic medium and death is also acknowledged in Bazin’s (2005) study where he introduces visual culture’s preoccupation with “embalming the dead”. He maintains that there’s a “mummy complex” evident within photography, illustrated by the “disturbing presence of lives halted at a set moment in their duration”. The embalming process synonymous with photography is especially apparent in media coverage of the famous when they die, a process that I have identified previously as “technological taxidermy”.

Whilst Barthes attests to the presence of death within the photographic image and the subsequent confrontation with mortality, Bazin considers the comforting qualities of the mummification of the living within this process. The preservation of the subject “enshrouded as it were in an instant, as the bodies of insects are preserved intact out of the distant past, in amber” disavows the reality of death by nurturing an image of the ontological form rendered

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23 Barthes, Camera Lucida
24 Ibid., 79
25 Bazin, What is Cinema? Volume 1, 9
26 Ibid
27 Ibid, 14
28 Davies, Technological Taxidermy
29 Bazin., 14
“intact”, one that “preserves artificially his bodily appearance”\textsuperscript{30}. This is achieved through the repetition of photographs of the living that reinforces their presence within media formats, akin to the function of the taxidermist who “uses artifice and reconstruction in order to make the dead look alive”\textsuperscript{31}. The psychological effect of this process serves as a reminder of the relationship between a supposed acceptance of death and the concept of fetishism. The presence of the deceased manifested in the circulation of images of them in their lifelike incarnations, therefore offers a comforting restoration of embodiment that disavows absence. However, when original photographs of subjects provide the source material for artists, there is an inevitable modification of the preserved image within the creative process. This modification has implications not only for the embalming nature of the photograph but also the notion of cultural taxidermy and the fetishistic recovery of a lifelike incarnation.

Adapting existing photographs of Lennon is commonplace in artists’ portraits of the musician since his death. The decision to remodel familiar stills of Lennon’s face guarantees that the spectator will recognise the star by recalling the ‘original’ photograph. Despite creating a familiar impression of Lennon whilst alive, many artists choose to reconfigure Lennon’s face thereby ‘doctoring’ the original image. It is in the concept of re-interpretation, in the ‘added bits’ so to speak, that uncanny motifs emerge. The following examples will be deconstructed as evidence of recurring images of Lennon that offer alternative representations within posthumous imagery.

Jay Russell has revisited \textit{The Beatles}\textsuperscript{32} album inner sleeve photograph of Lennon\textsuperscript{33}. It is immediately noticeable that the singer’s face is highlighted as partially absent within the frame. The original photograph’s shadow cast across Lennon’s left cheek, has assumed

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid, 9
\textsuperscript{31} Tobing-Rony, \textit{The Third Eye: Race, Cinema and Ethnographic Spectacle}, 14
\textsuperscript{32} The Beatles, \textit{The Beatles}, 1968.
\textsuperscript{33} Russell, J (date unknown) \textit{John Lennon}. : http://antonysgallery.com/media/gallery/image369.jpg (accessed 14/1/2013)
another identity in Russell’s painting, as the artist suggests the gradual diminishment of Lennon’s features. The flesh of the face lacks any distinguishable form and deteriorates into darkness. The left side of his face is absent of flesh entirely and the lens of his glasses is hovering precariously over ‘nothingness’.

It appears as though Lennon’s face is disintegrating into the surrounding abyss. This recalls Van Alphen’s (1992) concept of the “bodyscape” that he attributed to Francis Bacon’s recurring representations of the body. The “bodyscape” trope refers to a lack of a distinguishable division between the physical body and its surrounding landscape, a lack of a decipherable space “in which the body can be framed or embedded”. In Russell’s painting, Lennon lacks a clearly defined ‘framing’ that separates the physical from its backdrop. His flesh is integrated into the darkness, recalling Van Alphen’s discussion of how “space surrounding the body comes to hold bodily qualities into which the body decomposes. Lack of self is represented by a lack of shape”. It is the ‘lack of self’ illustrated in the interweaving of the face and the space that operates here as a visual motif of death. The ‘bodyscape’ trope in Russell’s painting therefore, can be seen as a signifier of Lennon’s somatic deterioration in death. The recognisable ‘self’ is diminishing. It would seem that the death of the star is preventing a return to a whole somatic form as Lennon’s identity is positioned as partly present and partly absent.

The trope of liminal embodiment has evoked a tension between presence and absence that represents a challenge to the traditional embalming processes of the photograph. The reconfiguration of Lennon’s recognisable face nurtures an uncanny presence that positions his identity as both instantly recognisable from existing photographs, but modified to establish a new identity emerging from this familiar form.

34 Van Alphens, *Francis Bacon and the Loss of Self*,
35 Ibid, 147
36 Ibid, 162
The motifs that emerge in Russell’s portrait are exacerbated in the creative decision to reinterpret and reconfigure existing photographs of Lennon. These original documents of Lennon alive, embalmed through the technologies of photography, establish a familiarity within the spectator and evoke a response from recognising the image in a previous context. Freud identified tensions between the familiar and unfamiliar as a mark of the uncanny\(^{37}\) and Russell’s modifications to recognisable images of Lennon’s face succeed in rendering the familiar face less comforting by reinterpreting the original image and evoking a sense of the unfamiliar in the process. Russell reinterprets Lennon’s image as art rather than photograph and the transition into portrait offers a space to reconfigure Lennon beyond the traditional repetition of the original picture.

The use of recognisable photographs of Lennon that have been revised to evoke a spectral significance achieved through the familiar rendered unfamiliar is also a technique adopted by Ralph Ueltzhoeffer. His ‘text portrait’ (2006)\(^{38}\), a monochrome still of Lennon is partially obscured by biographical details written in German. Nevertheless, his recognisable features and iconic round spectacles infiltrate the typography. The black background creates the impression of the face emerging from the darkness. Shadows across his left side obscure the majority of the left eye socket, cheek and mouth and, as in Russell’s portrait, his face lacks form on this side. This creates the impression once again, that Lennon’s face has collapsed into the surrounding space. Ueltzhoeffer’s portrait offers a recognisable, but fragmented face that appears to be caught within a liminal space. The text appears to prevent Lennon from ‘becoming’ completely into the space, evoking a spectral otherness reminiscent of the uncanny. His face assumes a spectral quality and incorporates aesthetic tropes that document his somatic absence. This seems to be the case when posthumous portraits draw upon existing photographs and painted recreations. Within these visual motifs of a disintegrating face

\(^{37}\)Freud, The Uncanny

retreating into the darkness - a spectral hovering between presence and absence - there is a consistent allegorical evocation of the uncanny. Posthumous reconfigurations of Lennon that involve creative interpretations of prior photographs therefore permit a space for emerging meanings rather than the preoccupation with repeating familiar images of the star ad infinitum.

In each the portraits identified so far, familiarity has been established through the artists’ reconfiguration of existing photographs of Lennon and thereby incorporating motifs that can be viewed as signifiers of a spectral identity and the presence of the uncanny within posthumous imagery. The trope of incomplete embodiment synonymous with the unruly somatic form of the cadaver is encapsulated in posthumous images that promote one of the most substantial characteristics of his media persona. Lennon’s most iconic identifiers are his round rimmed spectacles and it is notable how often representations prioritise their presence, illustrating a familiar presence for the star whilst inscribing an uneasiness by obscuring or entirely omitting his eyes.

Lennon’s glasses are an integral feature of his recognisable star persona. and particularly pertinent in posthumous imagery. If the round glasses evoke a recognisable individuality for Lennon, they perform a similar function in posthumous portraiture. Lennon’s glasses permit a correlation between the familiar star persona and his material demise. They are the essential ingredient that assumes an iconic presence, retaining a familiarity from recollections of Lennon alive. In the examples provided in this chapter, regardless of the disintegrating facial features, the glasses provide a familiar identity for Lennon and function as yet another foregrounding of an uncanny presence. They convey more than an iconic signifier of his recognisability. They actually accentuate his diminishing embodiment. In each of these examples, spectacles frame the dark voids of his missing eyes. The glasses become necessary to reiterate an identifiable presence in absence for the star.
Liminality is established through the motif of the glasses without eyes, thereby reinforcing an uncanny unease at Lennon being both present and absent simultaneously. This idea is furthered in posthumous examples where Lennon’s spectacles assume the core identity of the star. Yoko Ono’s *Seasons of Glass* (1981) album sleeve marks a crucial stage in the posthumous star’s media identity in this respect. Zizek (2006) notes that a feature of the uncanny is the “autonomous partial object” that can be illustrated in props, voices or bodily organs that assume an independent identity beyond the soma. Lennon’s ontological demise is often highlighted by reducing his identity to an inorganic object in the form of his spectacles that become a synecdoche that continues to be reiterated after his death.

Released a year after the murder, *Seasons of Glass* is a mournful contemplation of life without her husband. Lennon’s absence is the prevailing theme and evident in the cover image of his bloodstained glasses that were worn as he died. The authenticity invoked by the blood and Ono’s decision to foreground his death so viscerally was particularly controversial. Ono violates the boundaries of what is considered palatable in documenting the dead, “People are offended by the glasses and the blood? The glasses are a tiny part of what happened…his whole body was bloody…that’s the reality”.

There is a conscious decision on the artist’s part to not only allow the spectacles to provide an indexical presence of the dead star, thereby evoking his recognisable presence through his absent embodiment, but also to foreground his mortal form in the inclusion of the dried blood smeared across the lens of the glasses. This abject materiality of the body functions as a foregrounding of the reality of his death and disavows the comforting embalming process that is considered appropriate when the deceased are envisaged within visual culture. As Elliott (1999) suggests, “the shocking collision of glasses and blood…simply brought death too close to home”.

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41 Ono, in Elliott, *The Mourning of John Lennon*, 151

42 Ibid, 152
If some posthumous images evoke a gradual deterioration of Lennon’s wholeness, the
*Seasons of Glass* photograph erases his face entirely, leaving the last remnants of the
recognisable persona signified by the spectacles. Ono’s image therefore consigns Lennon to
the realms of the uncanny in its “commingling of the familiar and unfamiliar”⁴³ and the
unsettling tension provided in the dissolution of distinctions between organic embodiment
and inorganic object. The spectacles are interwoven with a sense of liminal identity, Lennon’s
face is notably absent but his recognisable form remains within the frame via an inorganic
surrogate. Nevertheless, the effigy is shrouded in an organic identifier in the blood-stained
lens that encapsulates violence and death. The glasses indicate Ono’s mourning process
manifested in a hyper-investment in the “lost object” that “persists in the psyche”⁴⁴. The
puncturing of the life/death, presence/absence and organic/inorganic binary within this image
encapsulates the complexities of the act of grieving.

The American film poster for the documentary *The US v John Lennon* (2006)⁴⁵ also
reinforces this with its foregrounding of the familiar round-rimmed glasses, offering a motif
for Lennon’s missing face. His absence is once again accentuated by the presence of the
spectacles. Zizek (2006) suggests that the ‘partial object’ has consumed the “core of the
personality”⁴⁶ in its return as an indicator of the uncanny, and this is evident in this film
poster. Lennon’s eyewear without eyes continues to reappear after his death, the glasses
return as an indicator of his ontological absence and elicit the spectral presence of the object
that has no eyes, framing only an empty space. His ‘incompleteness’ is addressed
aesthetically. The spectacles therefore confirm his absence whilst simultaneously functioning
as an indicator of his well-established persona.

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⁴³ Royle, *The Uncanny*, 1
⁴⁴ Freud, *Mourning and Melancholia*, 312
⁴⁵ *The U.S vs John Lennon* (2006) Film. Directed by Leaf, D; Scheinfeld, J. USA. Lionsgate :
http://www.empiremovies.com/movie/the-us-vs-john-lennon/11230/poster/01 (accessed 14/1/2013)
The paradox of Lennon’s recognisable presence despite his somatic absence, reiterates the uncanniness of these images. This is evident in the tensions evoked through Lennon’s familiar persona that has been reconfigured to assume ambiguous qualities. Lennon’s liminal faces and spaces elicit discomfort in the process acknowledging Lennon’s identity within the frame but confronting only a partial presence for the star.

Of course, Lennon’s recognisable appearance signified by the round-rimmed glasses, is only a component of the star’s familiar persona. In a study of his posthumous image, it is necessary to investigate how his identity is constructed in the media that generated his initial fame – aural and visual performances of his music. Whilst the still image is an integral component of the circulation of a star persona, Ellis (1992) has suggested that print-based images offer the “promise” of a more substantial star incarnation evident in the moving image performance. According to Ellis, the pleasures inherent in the star system are nurtured by promotional and publicity materials but are only consummated when the star assumes a living entity in the moving image “the synthesis of voice, body and motion”. In keeping with Barthes (2000) concept of the photo-effect that renders a subject’s presence in absence, Ellis suggests that the moving image restores the illusion of a complete embodied presence in contrast to the fragmented identity conveyed in the still image.

“help me get my feet back on the ground” : Between movement and stasis in the moving image

Acknowledging the connotations of embalming the dead within the still image, Bazin (2005) championed cinema’s innovative abilities to restore life to the deceased. Death is seemingly

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47 Dyer, Stars
48 Ellis, Visible Fictions; Cinema, Television, Video, p108
49 Ibid, p93
50 Barthes, Camera Lucida
51 Bazin, What is Cinema?
overcome when the deceased return in animate form on celluloid. Bazin’s claims of the mummification process that Barthes (2000) identified as synonymous with the inanimate pose of the photograph are eroded within the technological apparatus of film. This potentially reiterates a fetishistic disavowal of death in the reanimation of the deceased. If Barthes (2000) maintained that the photograph mortifies the living, then the moving image resurrects the dead, restoring the appearance of life.

An investigation of moving image footage of Lennon constructed posthumously would naturally therefore assume a comforting reassurance of Lennon’s living presence as fans revisit concert footage, television interviews, recordings and music videos, “just as the cinema animates its still frames, so it brings back to life, in perfect fossil form, anyone it has ever recorded” 52. It would seem that the suggestion of an uncanny liminality identified in posthumous still images is successfully counteracted when moving image technology comes into play. Lennon’s partial embodiment and uncanny signifiers are surely diminished when footage of the star captured during his lifetime is revisited since his death. Whilst the moving image might quell anxieties related to death’s presence, Mulvey (2006) asserts a correlation between this medium and an uneasiness arising from the return of the deceased. She maintains that film perpetuates a “technological uncanny” 53 that can be characterised in cinema’s ability to generate a spectral presence in the tension between movement and stasis.

In the following posthumous moving images of John Lennon, uncanny qualities emerge that question the restoration of the deceased in “fossil form” and “preserved intact” 54. Fischer’s (2004) suggestion of cinema’s similarity to “cryogenics; the act of freezing live (but dying) individuals in order to thaw them out later” 55 reiterates the traditional focus (and pleasure) of posthumous regeneration of the star persona. However, like the previous still images

52 Mulvey, Death 24 x a Second : Stillness and the Moving Image, 17
53 Ibid, 36
54 Bazin, What is Cinema, 14
55 Fischer, Marlene : Modernity, Mortality and the Biopic , 31
identified in the previous section, this study will consider the construction of an uncanny presence emerging visually and aurally that potentially sabotages any illusion of a thawing procedure that restores a reassuring presence of the deceased. The music video for the posthumously released Woman and The Beatles Free as a Bird recording and accompanying music video will illustrate that Lennon continues to be positioned in relation to partial embodiment, within an intermediary location.

According to Mulvey’s (2006) study, the ‘mechanics’ of cinema, particularly techniques such as the freeze frame and slow motion, evoke the presence of death within the cinematic frame. The freezing of the image mortifies the subject, “the inanimate image is drained of movement, the commonly accepted sign of life” . The interweaving of stills and moving images of Lennon is evident in the video for Lennon’s song Woman, foregrounding Lennon’s uncanny presence that emerges through the trope of movement and stasis.

Compiled by Yoko Ono in the immediate wake of his death, this video is constructed as a mourning ritual. Ono consciously foregrounds Lennon’s absence with footage of her and Lennon strolling around New York, followed immediately by images of her sat alone in the same location after his death. The togetherness of many of the photographs and moving images of the couple is juxtaposed poignantly with the loss and loneliness of just her positioning within the frame.

Like her Seasons of Glass cover, this video offers an uncomfortable confrontation with Lennon’s death. Within the montage of still images from the family album, she has included a newspaper front cover documenting his death with a close-up of Ono’s grieving expression at

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56 John Lennon, Woman, 1981
57 The Beatles, Free as a Bird, 1995
58 Mulvey, Death 24 x a Second, 22
the scene. Similarly she includes the final photograph of him alive, signing his autograph at
the request of his murderer. This is another example of a text constructed as an act of
mourning foregrounding the need to acknowledge the reality of his death. It seems critical for
Ono that photographs of Lennon alive are interwoven with reminders of his fate. She
dissolves a close-up of Lennon first encountered on the inner sleeve of the Imagine album 60,
with a post-mortem photo of him lying in the same position. The tension between life and
death is erased visually through this dissolve. This tension will recur throughout the video as
Ono employs moving image technology to suggest Lennon’s posthumous liminality. The
illusion of life through Lennon’s movement is halted abruptly by a freeze frame technique
that fossilises Lennon within the frame, generating a symbolic motif of his death. In keeping
with Mulvey’s (2006) observations, the dead are resurrected within the cinematic space when
movement is restored to the image previously embalmed. After a montage of photographs,
Lennon is once again viewed walking in Central Park. The restoration of movement following
static stills, highlights the presence of the uncanny “aroused by the confusion between the
animate and the inanimate ... associated with death and the return of the dead” 61

 Whilst Lennon is restored to life in the footage provided, the montages of stills that invade the
moving image are a reminder of his ontological demise. When movement and stasis are
integrated into posthumous materials, this aesthetic fusion places him ‘in-between’ life and
death. The tension that emerges in the juxtaposition of photographs and moving image
footage highlights Ono’s melancholic reflections that paradoxically confront and deny
Lennon’s ontological demise at the same time.

 Whilst intermediary spaces between presence and absence are evoked through movement and
stasis in many moving image tributes to Lennon, it is also possible to discover further
developments on liminal identity in posthumous media examples of the ex-Beatle. The

60 John Lennon, Imagine, 1971
61 Mulvey, Death 24 x a Second, 60
suggestion of Lennon’s disembodiment is evident in The Beatles 1995 single\textsuperscript{62} and accompanying video \textit{Free as a Bird}\textsuperscript{63}. The aural recording and music video succeed in foregrounding Lennon-as-spectre, particularly in the symbolic ‘location’ generated by his vocal contribution.

When The Beatles reformed in 1995 with a new release, it was an opportunity to resurrect the past and create the illusion of a nostalgic ‘wholeness’, displacing the reality of a tragic murder by restoring a sense of the ‘complete’ Fab Four. This was made possible by Ono’s donation of a Lennon composition recorded in its ‘first draft’ in 1977. The remaining Beatles, with the help of Jeff Lynne in the production seat, infused the track with their own creative contributions in order to generate a newly-composed venture\textsuperscript{64}. The track symbolises a unified wholeness; we hear Lennon’s voice interwoven with his former colleagues for the first time since the band’s split in 1970. It is almost as if Lennon’s absence has been restored and he has returned to perform in the 90s. McCartney emphasises a sense of this ‘comforting’ unity in the recording of the track, suggesting “it was like the old days. Because John’s voice is there then it’s the four of us – we can really say it is The Beatles, we’re all together”\textsuperscript{65}.

Elliott (1999) maintains that the \textit{Free as a Bird} project erases Lennon’s death, suggesting the musician’s return to the land of the living\textsuperscript{66}. The apparent resurrection of Lennon through the inclusion of his ‘living’ voice would seem to reinforce a preserved, embalmed embodiment for the performer at last. However, challenging the notion that Lennon’s living presence is foregrounded aurally and aesthetically, this chapter is proposing that \textit{Free as a Bird} is in fact, infused with an uncanny presence instead, and that it is the inclusion of Lennon’s vocals that paradoxically highlight his somatic absence. Lennon’s disembodied voice presents a

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
  \item The Beatles, \textit{Free as a Bird}, 1995
  \item The Beatles (1995) \textit{Free as a Bird}. Directed by Pytka, J (04.26). Music Video [online] : \url{http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UqHjXF1gUWU} (accessed 14/1/2013)
  \item Burn, \textit{Refab Four: The Beatles for Sale in the Age of Music Video}
  \item Paul McCartney, \textit{The Guardian}, 1995
  \item Elliott, \textit{The Mourning of John Lennon}
\end{itemize}
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heightened confrontation with an uncanny presence in its rupture of the threshold between absence and presence, life and death.

Partly due to technological advancements since Lennon’s death, *Free as a Bird* does not provide a nostalgic illusion of ‘completeness’ in the return of the Fab Four. Aurally, it is quite evident that the fab three have recorded together and the fourth voice is most certainly not present in the corresponding location. Like the previous examples’ spectrality, ‘*Free as a Bird*’ locates Lennon’s voice in yet another liminal space, one that cannot be conveniently identified in the ‘here and now’. Recalling the phrase “This is Not Here” - the words ingrained in the door-frame of Lennon’s Ascot home - Lennon’s voice is present (we recognise it within the song) but at the same time ‘not quite there’ either. It is a “voice without a place”\(^{67}\). The stereo studio-based technology succeeds in establishing a spatial dichotomy and division between Lennon and McCartney’s voices. Burns (1999) describes Lennon’s voice as “tinny and faraway, a function of the poor quality of the original cassette” noting the “macabre implication”\(^{68}\).

The differences in both singers’ voices apparent in all Beatles recordings are amplified here as Lennon’s higher-pitched ‘thinner’ sounding timbre contrasts with McCartney’s lower-pitched vocals reiterating a spatial opposition. In other words, McCartney’s voice, assisted by advancements in recording technology, possesses more definition and seems ‘nearer’ to the listener than Lennon’s. This recalls Chion’s (1994) work on Materialising Sound Indices\(^{69}\) relating to recording techniques such as the singer’s distance from the microphone, that “pull the scene toward the material and concrete”\(^{70}\). McCartney’s vocals are therefore sharply contrasted to Lennon’s, reiterating the deceased’s absence from the space of the recording studio. His voice appears to be floating above McCartney’s, lacking his bandmate’s

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\(^{67}\) Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*, 27

\(^{68}\) Burns, *Refab Four: The Beatles For Sale*, 180

\(^{69}\) Chion, *Audio Vision : Sound on Screen*

\(^{70}\) Ibid, 114
grounded quality. This evokes a liminal location for Lennon whose voice assumes spectral connotations when heard in relation to his bandmate, and suggests a transient entity who cannot be contained within a definitive location. As Chion notes further, the ‘sparsity’ of the MSI’s can connote the impression of the protagonist as “ethereal, abstract and fluid”.

Lennon’s voice therefore evokes a disembodied presence. The sense of an aural ‘floating’ which hovers above the location of the remaining Beatles, provides a formless quality which can be interpreted as Lennon lacking a secure somatic substance in which to confine his voice. Recalling what Chion (1999) terms the “acousmetre”, a voice “seeking a place to settle”, Lennon’s voice is unable to be ‘lodged” within a corresponding body.

Chion’s work on the acousmetre in cinema is particularly pertinent in an analysis of the ‘Free as a Bird’ video. Transferring the disembodied voice into the visual domain accentuates the spectral tropes relating to Lennon’s identity. Visual footage of The Beatles would naturally assist in ‘grounding’ Lennon’s voice to a recognisable body within the frame, allowing us to relate the seemingly spectral vocals to images of Lennon on screen, therefore complying with Chion’s process of “de-acousmatization”. This process “says here is your body, you’ll be there and not elsewhere”. Whilst footage of the band is indeed prevalent throughout the video, ‘de-acousmatization’ is not permitted. Lennon’s body, like those of his colleagues, is frequently framed in a fragmented manner, with partial views of his face and body as he enters and exits the scene. He is often displayed hovering on the periphery of the frame, not ‘complete’ enough to assume a substantial entity centre-stage. Footage of the Fab Four constantly moving in and out of the space conveys a transient fluidity that reiterates Lennon’s vocal disembodiment. Chion’s acousmetre therefore dominates. An aerial steadicam shot, sweeping like a bird, unsuccessfully attempts to land amongst the Liverpool streets,

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71 ibid
72 Chion, The Voice in Cinema, 23
73 Ibid, 27
74 ibid
frequently seeking refuge in the skies above. Lennon’s voice accompanies these motifs of liminality, recalling Chion’s notion of the body unable to be “inscribed in a concrete identifiable space”\textsuperscript{75}. Lennon’s voice is “in exile”\textsuperscript{76} and this motif of disembodiment evokes Zizek’s “autonomous partial object”\textsuperscript{77}, a voice that exists independently of a somatic source, thereby confirming an uncanny identity encompassing a liminal locale.

“nowhere man, can you see me at all?” : Retaining familiarity in death

Posthumous constructions of Lennon’s identity within visual culture often offer a reconfigured yet recognisable persona for the deceased star. This chapter has suggested that familiar tropes associated with him are combined frequently with motifs signifying his ontological absence. His presence within these examples is merely partial – he is never permitted to fully encompass the frame. Each example encourages a reading that implicates Lennon as a spectral figure, a transient being located within a liminal space. Whilst there are significant examples to support Elliott’s (1999) ‘displacement’ of Lennon’s death onto images of him alive, this chapter has advocated an alternative representation of Lennon’s posthumous visual identity.

According to Dyer (1986), stars “articulate aspects of living in contemporary society”\textsuperscript{78} and this chapter has considered how the posthumous representation of a deceased star can encapsulate socio-cultural preoccupations with death. A star persona perseveres within media and visual culture, assuming an independent entity beyond the biological lifespan of the individual. Characteristics that inform the posthumous reassembling of the persona have been the emphasis of this discussion. Rather than merely being reminders of the recognisable identity that was circulated prior to death – nurturing nostalgic reflections on their

\textsuperscript{75} Ibid, 51
\textsuperscript{76} Ibid, 52
\textsuperscript{77} Sophie Fiennes, Director, \textit{The Pervert’s Guide to Cinema}, 2006
\textsuperscript{78} Dyer, \textit{Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society}, 8
contribution to culture and society during their lifetime – posthumous representations of stars are embedded with tensions regarding corporeal absence.

If stars encapsulate typical attitudes that emerge about being human, then their images naturally encompass prevailing attitudes about death. Questions have arisen in this chapter about the proximity of death and the aesthetics of the dead body within visual culture, highlighting palatable parameters in the visualising of the deceased. Posthumous images of dead stars have the ability to resurrect and provide a continued presence in absence for the deceased. In a fetishistic restoration of their living incarnation so the star’s recognisability is preserved and the reality of their demise is obscured. It is tempting to view the lack of embalming procedures outlined in these examples as a confrontation with reality and a challenge to fetishistic disavowal. Unlike texts that provide an illusion of embodiment - a figure captured “in the hold of life”80, this discussion would appear to refute Bazin’s notion of the “mummy complex” that secures “the preservation of life by a representation of life”81. Whilst tropes of liminality and disembodiment evoke an uncanniness within these examples that potentially foreground the reality of Lennon’s absence, each image nevertheless succeeds in retaining a recognisability, illustrating a need to reiterate components of his familiar identity. Even whilst reworking Lennon to foreground his untimely demise, there is an attempt to “keep up appearances in the face of the reality of death”82, to an extent. There is a tension between the desire to confront Lennon’s absence and a longing to hold on to him by securing a recognisable presence for him within these posthumous texts. This ambiguity is manifested in the trope of liminal embodiment that paradoxically evokes an uncanny unease but also functions as a comforting antidote to the reality of his somatic absence.

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79 ibid
80 Bazin, *What is Cinema*, 9
81 Ibid, 10
82 Ibid, 9
A desire to acknowledge the reality of his death and a need to retain a familiar identity is perhaps a consequence of the tragic injustice of his death. Lennon’s murder is far from typical of rock star deaths from hedonistic lifestyles. He was not the agent of his own destruction and the shocking circumstances of his murder have inflected his persona with a traumatic, melancholic sensibility. This could explain the prevalence of uncanny traces that are documented in the artistic reconstructions of his image in these examples. The circumstances of Lennon’s demise have certainly generated contemplations within the creative process of death’s formlessness and subsequent anxieties have emerged. Arguably, the notion of an incomplete, liminal embodiment permits an iconic identity for the dead star, encouraging Lennon-as-spectre to roam within a range of cultural spaces, ripe for reconfiguration at any given time.

Images used in this paper


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