

Technological Taxidermy : Recognisable faces in celebrity deaths

Abstract

In contemporary celebrity culture it would appear that there is a media obsession with exposing all facets of lifestyles pertaining to the famous. It is not surprising therefore, that a similar preoccupation is evident when the famous die and narratives surrounding the deaths of Jade Goody, Farrah Fawcett and Michael Jackson in 2009 alone, are sources of continued fascination within visual culture.

This paper investigates how death is made visible whilst documenting dead celebrities and questions whether the camera discloses all facets relating to the presence of death. Using news coverage of George Best's death in November 2005 and Princess Diana in September 1997, this study highlights an embalming process that is the essence of most media coverage when celebrities die. In order to develop these issues, the study will also deconstruct the visibility of the celebrity corpse in the postmortem image of Marilyn Monroe, Diana's spectral resurrection in the promotional image of The Queen (Frears, 2006) and examine the aesthetic representation of Jade Goody's face-in-death.

Contrary to Foltyn's (2008) premise that the corpse has become "the star of the show" (p153) within media representations, this study suggests that when celebrities die, it is generally their living incarnation that assumes centre stage in media coverage. The authentic face of death is primarily displaced in favour of a recognisable famous visage that assumes characteristics of the immortal.

Keywords: death; celebrity; visual culture; recognisable faces; embalming

Introduction

The Media offers a space in which death is particularly visible (Walter, Littlewood & Pickering, 1995) and this paper investigates this premise highlighting issues of visibility in media images of famous figures. With an emphasis on the aesthetic tropes signifying celebrity death, this study examines recognisable faces and the embalming process that is prevalent within media texts. Noys (2005) suggests there's a "strange simultaneous invisibility and visibility of death in modern culture" (p4) and through an analysis of images of George Best, Princess Diana, Marilyn Monroe and Jade Goody, this paper asks how media representations 'make visible' death's features. It also seeks to address what precisely, if anything, remains 'invisible' when celebrity deaths are on display in the public domain.

Foltyn (2008) maintains that there's an extreme relaxing of the death taboo when a celebrity death is documented. If traditionally there are boundaries relating to the visibility of the dead within Western culture, (Aries, 1976; Gorer 1965) it would seem these are removed when the famous die. She suggests there's an obsessive need to 'see everything' when a famous figure dies, attesting to the breaking of boundaries from fictional to factual modes as she cites the popularity of US crime dramas that make visible the cadaver to the public. The prominence of the corpse in the forensic laboratory of these dramas, leads to a similar voyeuristic fascination with the dead bodies of celebrities. Foltyn notes the interest in viewing the corpse of James Brown,

Saddam Hussein's death aired online, and the forensic approach taken by the tabloid press to Anna Nicole Smith's death.

As celebrities have generated a significant cultural presence when alive, Foltyn notes that their deaths become equally fascinating, "it is natural that people should crave a last look – or a new kind of look – at their dead bodies" (p156). She suggests that the "celebrity corpse" permits the public to "collectively stare death in the face" (p169).

When Foltyn uses James Brown's corpse-on-tour as an example of the visibility of the cadaver, it is questionable how far this suggests an erosion of a taboo relating to the spectacle of the corpse. This was hardly a forensic –style probing, it presented a traditional embalmed body in a casket. A vision of Elvis published on the cover of the *National Enquirer* (August 1977) offered a similar spectacle of the dead star. Both open casket close-ups highlight the acceptable visibility of a corpse in its recognisable reconstruction of very 'lifelike' singers sleeping peacefully. In the case of Elvis, it is notable how aesthetically pleasing the star looked compared to the deteriorating bloated physique of his final months. The spectacle of physical excess and decay of his final years, had been replaced with an embalmed aesthetic of his youthful prime.

This paper argues that when celebrities die, even if their corpse is made visible within the media, there is primarily a prioritising of their recognisable features. The public are at ease with a vision of the celebrity corpse when the face retains its familiarity. Even when stars fail to die during their youthful prime, as is the case of George Best and most recently Farrah Fawcett amongst others, media coverage will adopt a

process of embalming their most recognisable image, that which is synonymous with the pinnacle of their fame.

Whilst not denying Foltyn's premise that the "corpse count has gone up" (p154), most obviously in fiction, it is less evident that the 'presence' of the corpse signifies a relaxing of taboos. When the famous die, there is certainly a media forensic investigation and regeneration of narratives surrounding the death, particularly apparent in the death of Jade Goody in March 2009 and Michael Jackson in June 2009. However, despite the relentless publicity surrounding celebrity deaths, the spectacle of the famous corpse is very rarely witnessed in its ontological authenticity. If the deteriorating somatic features are captured for a salacious 'peeping tom', these images are relegated to internet sites rather than available within mainstream media. If we are frequently able to "stare death in the face" (p169), what does death's visage really look like in mainstream visual culture? Is there "a new kind of look" (p156) for the dead famous or are we gawping at a very recognisable face that resembles the same one that they possessed before death called? Whilst the media are making visible narratives relating to celebrity death, there is often a denial of the face of death. This denial resembles a process of technological taxidermy that embalms the star identity within a fixed persona, and encourages the repetition of this image beyond the grave. For example, despite Farrah Fawcett's visible deterioration in her battle with cancer, aired on US television during 2009, her death brought about a restoration of the face that had become almost unrecognisable during her final months. This was achieved for example, by the British media in the reporting of her death with accompanying pin-up photographs of her during the 1970s.

Davis (2004) maintains that death offers a confrontation with an unrecognisable face, a concept that forces us unwillingly to address our own mortality. She observes that “the face is employed throughout the image-cultures of contemporary media to conceal the powers of death,” (p107), this is primarily manifested in the ‘displaced’ aesthetics of the dead/dying. This paper seeks to investigate this process of displacement in media coverage and consider examples when this process is less evident, in the case of Marilyn Monroe, Princess Diana and Jade Goody.

If the media offers a very visible space in which to confront and contemplate death, there is no doubt that transferring death into the realms of a visual medium, a space that will aesthetically re-present the event of dying, is potentially problematic. As Sobchack notes, its “unknowable” nature makes death “beyond the limits of coding and culture” (cited in Petley, 2005 p182) How can death be ‘coded’ therefore within a set of visual signifiers that enable a visible presence? Often in media representation, the reality of death is replaced with a simulated version and the ‘materiality’ of death is often lost in the construction of the event. Whilst death is certainly visible in media narratives about a person’s demise, its aesthetic representation arguably offers a displacement - the reality of the dead body remains ‘invisible’.

If as Foltyn suggests, contemporary culture thrives on the spectacle of the ‘real’, and our forensic investigative pleasures have whetted an appetite for all aspects of death relating to celebrities, how far does this translate into the construction of aesthetic images of dead stars within media examples? In his analysis of the representation of

the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Žižek (2002) comments on the “derealisation of the horror” noting the absence of “dismembered bodies, no blood, no desperate faces of dying people” (p13). He reflects on 21st century Western society’s embracing of a reality that’s “deprived of its substance, of the hard resistant kernel of the Real” (p11). It was evident that some images of the event were simply too real to be acknowledged fully within a visual domain and this notion can also be applied to media representations of celebrity death. There is evidence to suggest that the “kernel of the real” is notably absent when death is documented in the public, and that the media embraces a process of technological taxidermy when the famous die. This will be explored specifically in case studies relating to George Best and Princess Diana’s media coverage, both of whom have continued to be embalmed within fixed images and connotations relating to their celebrity identity.

In assessing the aesthetic representation of death, Sobchack claims there is a filmic process whereby “the essentially unrepresentable event can be viewed, contained...and opened up to a scrutiny that is culturally sanctioned” (cited in Petley, 2005, p184). The embalming procedures that accompany the aesthetic preparation of the corpse offer a means to examine the concept of “a culturally sanctioned” spectacle of the dead, one that is apparent in many media representations of death. The embalming tradition acts as a preservation process that seeks to restore the body, albeit temporarily, to its contained ‘wholeness’. According to Howarth, death represents “dysfunction and disorder” (p186) and is characterised by its disintegration and polluting elements. Hallam suggests that the dead body “is no longer a secure, bounded body” (cited in Howarth, 2007, p186) recalling Kristeva’s

abject body that “has lost its form and integrity...it disturbs identity, system, order” (cited in Creed, 1993, p8). If death threatens identity that is somatically bound, then the embalming process can restore recognisable individual characteristics to the corpse by erasing abject connotations. Howarth (2007) describes this process as “humanizing” the corpse “transforming the body from a defiling object to a representation of its former self” (p187).

Aries (1976) describes the embalming tradition as a “certain refusal to accept death” (p99) and an integral concept in society’s willingness to confront the dead body in a wake for example. The concept of embalming is a restoration of a lifelike visage in a similar tradition to that of the taxidermist. According to Aries it is a way of replacing the face of the dead with the illusion of the living “in reality they are not visiting a dead person...but an almost living one who thanks to embalming, is still present” (p102). This suggests a psychological acceptance of death only when the dead appear lifelike. Howarth (2007) notes the trauma of morticians failing to recreate the ‘authentic’ living face of the deceased when relatives visit. When one desires to see the deceased, it is essential to be able to “read signs of the self on the body” (p187). The face in particular is considered to be the primary site of signification (Deleuze, Guattari, 1987) and Elias describes the face as a “signalling board” (cited in Howson, 2004, p29) encouraging recognition. The embalming process reiterates the illusion of individuality, restoring familiar features of the self and the recognisable ‘living’ face of the corpse assumes a comfortable antidote to the alternative ‘disrupted’ features of death. There is a correlation therefore between the process of embalming and the

desire to restore the individual's recognisable characteristics - in this case, the celebrity persona.

Embalming is a reminder that death is only visible, according to Shilling (1993) when "it is in accord with a socially acceptable image" (p189). O'Neill (2008) identifies the characteristics of the "iconic corpse" generated by the embalming process, noting the cadaver's "stable identity...face carefully composed...appears timeless" (p174-5). This is particularly relevant in media representations of dead celebrities. When the famous die, whether in their youthful prime or at the end of their natural life cycle, media coverage will primarily preserve their identities through a technological embalming of their recognisable faces, acquiring a "timeless" fixed identity posthumously. In the process, the persona acquires 'extraordinary' connotations as death permits an erasing of the mortal body and its human frailties. The following case studies will investigate issues relating to the construction of technological taxidermy in images relating to celebrity death.

George Best and the erasing of the deteriorating body

Stars who do not die young are condemned to having the glare of the media document the process of outliving their youthful image. A slow, gradual move towards death in the spotlight, highlights the spectacle of death/dying. It is a spectacle because it is gradual and polarised as audiences remain fascinated at who they *were* and how they *used* to look/be. The 'spectacle' of the 1960s/70s Manchester United player George Best's death was initially that of the dying Best. British newspapers documented his

imminent death on Friday November 25th 2005 before he died on Saturday November 26th. Therefore the British public were all waiting at his deathbed for him to finally die (recalling the same fate of the Pope months previously). In Best's case, the public had been doing this for the last few years as his physical deterioration and liver operation were meticulously documented by the media, and his mortality hovered every time the cameras captured him.

This was particularly evident in his permission given to the News of The World to capture him on his deathbed. This was published on the Sunday prior to his death at Best's request. The Sun repeated the image on Friday 25th November as the hospital announced that Best was in the final stages of the game. The image was accompanied with the heading "the tragic final hours of football legend....the last picture" (p3). Whilst the news item was granted the front page with an opening sentence, "Best lay on the brink of death", (p1) a decision was made to keep the face of Best on the "brink of death" off the front cover. It would have made sense to anchor this fact with the relevant corresponding photograph that proved the point, but instead, the entire front page is devoted to the frozen, static performance picture of Best in his Man Utd strip about to kick the ball (not the bucket).

This picture is anchored by a Best quote about being "the greatest footballer in the world" and his observation that this is the "ultimate salute to my life" (p1). The Sun clearly felt that in documenting the imminent end of his life, their front page should travel into the past. His career pinnacle and youthful visage were prioritised as a

‘salute’ to his life. The preservation of the glory days and his embalmed beauty and talent (he’s displaying this by being located with the ball) are necessary in order to evoke admiration for what made him a star rather than prioritising the deteriorating body on his deathbed. The present is erased in favour of the past. This procedure suggests that whilst there is clearly a displacement from the ontological body when a famous media figure dies, there is also a process of displacement in the representation of the death.

Foltyn (2008) laments the halcyon past when “the camera did not linger over images of the dead” suggesting that if the cadaver was recreated in fictional 1970s dramas, “it was whole” (p164). Arguably, this is precisely what occurred in coverage of George Best. He encouraged a close-up on the visible face of death that was far less comforting than his youthful somatic ‘wholeness’ and yet it was the latter that was prioritised when documenting his demise. The process of the camera ‘moving away’ was clearly evident with a resurrection of the “timeless” trope of the footballer in his prime. In this respect, O’Neill’s (2008) account of the “remastering” (p179) of the living is apparent when Best returns to the football pitch on newspaper front covers. The mourning fans were therefore able to replicate typical grieving responses to the embalmed corpse –they were able to “re-call...re-invoke the soul that is departed and to re-member (or re-assemble) it”. Media representations recycle celebrities in death by returning to the living incarnation in photographs and moving images and in doing so, like the embalmed corpse as discussed by O’Neill, the media nurtures “ a defiant repudiation of the reality of death” (p178)

Journalist Oliver Holt, writing in *The Mirror*, captures the concept of stars who fail to die at the peak of their fame/persona, by asking the reader to “try not to remember him as the ravaged man, the man destroyed by his fame, gaunt and haunted by alcoholism”. (p2) This confirms how media representations select appropriate angles in order to generate preferred readings – all of the accompanying photos anchor this sentiment by presenting a youthful Best in his teens. This coverage captures the dichotomy between the special and ordinary by relocating Best as a dream-inspirer, an idol to be adored, and his inability to retain such a role by failing to be mummified and preserved in the guise that an untimely death would have secured.

It is clear that Best possessed two star identities that were juxtaposed within media coverage. The *Telegraph* maintains that “his genius offered a footballing immortality. His weakness would kill him” (p3) whilst Gordon Burn at the *Guardian* felt that Best was “living always with one foot in oblivion and the other in immortality” (p8). However, whilst both ‘faces’ of Best have previously attracted media attention (a fascination with celebrities losing the plot), his death has allowed the previous star image to supersede the face of the vulnerable human. Best’s youth became the primary focus of posthumous media coverage and cultural consciousness. A *Radio Times* magazine cover featured a similar vision of the star, four years after his death. As news coverage of his death attempted to ‘restore’ star quality by prioritising the youthful visage of Best on their front covers, so the preservation of a fixed iconic image of the star is perpetuated in Best’s media afterlife. It is only in death that Best

can prevent making the headlines for further human frailties, and his media persona now rests on an 'embalmed' youthful face that signifies talent and 'extraordinariness'. It is this process of preserving celebrity identities within an idealised form, often erasing negative associations in posthumous media coverage and accentuating aesthetic connotations of youth and beauty that is the essence of technological taxidermy. It suggests a selection process within media coverage that reconfigures the dead within tropes that evoke an ethereal, immortal quality, regardless of whether the celebrity died in the later stages of their media careers or at the peak of their youthful prime. The concept of taxidermy represented in George Best's death is also apparent within coverage of Princess Diana's death, whose persona has also been reassessed posthumously beyond mortal frailties and into the realm of the extraordinary.

The Mausoleum of the Ritz : Displacing Diana's Corpse

Since Diana's fatal car crash in Paris in September 1997, the final images of her dying face caught by the paparazzi, remain shrouded in a veil of ethical privacy. The ensuing result has been the media fixating on her final moments prior to her getting into the car. The undisclosed post-accident images have not merely been removed from the many narratives (the reporting of the death in 1997, the Stevens report in 2005/6, the inquest in 2007/8) that prolonged this event, but have been obsessively replaced with her 'healthy' living visage. This has comprised of repetitive footage of her emerging from the hotel that evening.

Juxtaposing the screengrab of Diana walking through the revolving doors of the Ritz with the emotive ‘stand-in’ for her demise in the form of the destroyed car in which she was travelling, is a reminder of how the spectacle of death within media coverage involves skirting around the reality of death itself. Death’s face can only be visible in a surrogate form. Media representations of the death of celebrities hover between fuelling a morbid fascination to learn as much as possible regarding facts and circumstances, but without actually presenting the reality of death’s visage. All coverage of the accident erases the image of Diana’s actual injured body recalling Davis (2004) claims that “to see people and things in their process of material disintegration *as an image* creates uneasiness within the spectator” (p80).

In October 2007, ten years after her death, CCTV images of her in the hotel elevator featured in front cover headline stories. The newsworthy element can only be the opportunity to see the whole, healthy, beautiful face in a new context, touched by the poignancy of hindsight – the smiling princess unaware of her imminent fate. As she’s captured within the glare of the artificial light, this recalls Barthes(1993) account of Garbo’s face “descended from a heaven where all things are formed and perfected in the clearest light” (p57). Barthes’ recollections of the shrouding of her own face as the youthful appearance deteriorated, “the essence was not to be degraded...not to have any reality except that of its perfection” is pertinent to the Diana preservation process. By returning time after time to Diana’s final ‘unbroken’ features so Barthes’ concept of the “perfect and ephemeral” (p56) face remains ingrained in British consciousness. Diana’s tragic final features are “deified” (p57) by a refusal to make explicit the mortality emblazoned on her youthful face.

Davis (2004) compares the media coverage of Diana and Mother Teresa's deaths that occurred only days apart. She notes that the faces of both 'saints' (one most certainly media constructed) were treated in contrasting ways – Teresa's aged, less glamorous visage on display in death, whilst Diana's "youthful beauty" (p76) was preserved by not disclosing the dead face. The controversy surrounding the visibility of Diana's dying face in Channel 4's documentary 'Diana: The Witnesses in the Tunnel' highlighted the need to foreground the familiar recognisable face of the living Diana whilst the possibility of the unrecognisable dying face remained undisclosed. Moral issues re: intrusion, respect, 'consider Prince William and Harry's feelings' become an effective shield concealing the face of death.

Davis (2004) maintains that "keeping alive the memory of Diana's living face" (p77) is the key to preserving the martyred persona of Diana. It is her youth and conventional notions of female beauty that construct the connotation of innocence that Davis suggests is essential to the image of "goodness and saintliness". However, Bronfen (1992)'s work could suggest wider implications beyond the need to construct a martyred persona of an individual. She suggests that "if any discussion of death involves masking the inevitability of human decomposition, it does so by having recourse to beauty. We invest in images of wholeness, purity and the immaculate owing to our fear of dissolution and decay" (p62)

This would suggest that shrouding the dying face of Diana is endemic of Western attitudes towards death and the dying – that we are terrified of confronting our own mortality. Bronfen (1992) suggests “the idea of beauty’s perfection is so compelling because it disproves the idea of disintegration, fragmentation” (p62). Ironically this would have been unlikely to have occurred on witnessing the French photographer’s images of Diana in the car. The British news reporters who had access to these prior to the news of her death, have described her enduring radiance “everyone in the car looks horrific...she looks beautiful. Her face is unmarked” (cited in Wilson, 1999, p43). Despite the moral outrage at Channel 4 revealing the seemingly unrecognisable visage of the ‘English rose’, we are reminded that even the actual photos of her dying do not reveal a disorientating confrontation with death’s powers of destruction. Unlike the mangled car, Diana’s face remained recognisable in its ‘wholeness’. Connotations of perfection are reiterated.

Like the previous George Best example, media coverage of Diana’s death suggests it is not possible to witness the actual face of death without a technological botox that preserves a star’s ‘wholeness’ and reconfigures the recognisable identity within tropes of the star – as - extraordinary. Ellis (1982) suggests that there are simultaneous connotations of the ordinary and extraordinary within star personas - in the case of Best and Diana for example, ‘ordinariness’ was revealed in the highlighting of personal struggles and vulnerability during their lifetime. Whilst death is a reminder of the mortal self, the process of technological taxidermy encourages an erasing of these qualities, thereby diminishing any ‘ordinariness’ in favour of highlighting the

extraordinary. This is possible only by denying death's presence within celebrity coverage. If the whole face of a youthful feminine beauty must be embalmed in the mausoleum of the Ritz' revolving doors, what issues arise when the aesthetic deterioration of the perfect star features are actually put on display? Is it possible to witness the face of a familiar dead star captured without displacement? What implications could this have in the relationship between recognisable faces, stardom and the mortal self?

Overexposing the celebrity face in death: A response to Monroe postmortem

Christian Blau's (2003) 'OverExposed' diptych is a scathing commentary on media celebrity that accentuates the symbiotic relationship between stardom and death. By juxtaposing an early 40s passport photo of Norma Jean Baker with an image of her corpse postmortem, Blau is reminding us of pre and post-glamour stages of fame. The consequences of over-exposure within the media spotlight (a 36 year old corpse) are accentuated by the presence of Norma Jean's image prior to her Hollywood makeover and constructed pin-up appeal. Hence the image is located within an ambience of authenticity, purity and naivety as the viewer recalls how commodified her features would become shortly after this picture was taken (the first stages included the blonde hair colour and some facial reconstruction). The over-exposure of the photographer's lens is also addressed as Norma Jean's image would no longer be reliant on passport booths in order to construct an image portfolio. The postmortem photograph suggests that the photographer's lens has drained her life away constantly feeding parasitically

off her glamorous features until she can no longer observe its presence. The black and white ‘deteriorating’ images are an antidote to the thousands of glossy magazine photographs of her that were endlessly circulated both in her lifetime and since her death. There is a sense that Blau is highlighting an untarnished quality of Norma Jean, before (and after) the obligatory ‘touching up’ of her face that the media demands of its stars.

At the heart of Blau’s piece therefore is the absence of those images that are familiar to media industries and audiences alike, of the figure that became (rather than born) Marilyn Monroe. Blau’s juxtaposition highlights the ‘before and after’ incarnations of Marilyn-the-star and the choice of images are far less recognisable than those of Monroe’s career high-points. This work is interesting precisely because it refuses to offer familiar, aesthetically attractive photos of the glamorous beauty that are pleasurable to view. Assisted by the low production values, we struggle to recognise Marilyn Monroe, no doubt Blau’s intention as his juxtaposition suggests that she’s very much absent from this work. In death, the pre-stardom ‘ordinary’ Norma Jean has returned precisely because we fail to recognise a face that is no longer aesthetically pleasing. Gone are the iconic identifiers that we recognise as essential components of her star persona – the red pouting lips, diamond earrings, come-to-bed eyes. These images are therefore divorced from associations with Hollywood manipulation and stardom, instead offering connotations of the ‘real’ and mortal self.

By objectifying Monroe’s body postmortem, offering her corpse-as-spectacle, Blau has exposed the moral taboos inherent in the panic that ensued at Diana’s deathly

visage witnessed by the paparazzi's aggressive lens in Paris in September 1997. The sight of Monroe's face in death, elicits discomfort or perhaps disorientation precisely because her mortality is on full-view. It is this confrontation with death's face that is so uncomfortable recalling Gibson's (2001) assertion that the "close-up calls into question a binary structure of proximity and distance to death" (p310). A photo of Monroe on her deathbed amidst rose petals, or in a casket with cosmetic embalming looking 'at peace' (recalling Elvis, James Brown), would arguably be a far more satisfactory image to contemplate. After all, her beauty and therefore recognisable features would be preserved denying the reality of death. Bronfen (1992) suggests that it is a "cult of the beautiful dead... a subjective fascination with idealised images of the deceased in such a way that permanently embalmed bodies and stable images displace and replace impermanent materiality" (p87)

Through the erasing of existing photos of an injured Diana as she nears death, so her beauty is idealised and preserved. It is this displacement of the real face of death that is absent in Blau's piece. Instead he has erased the aesthetically beautiful Monroe in favour of her corpse postmortem, accentuating her mortality and facial deterioration, a natural consequence of the autopsy. George Best's deteriorating visage and physical decay was less shocking because it was continually documented in media coverage over a period of some time. Best destroyed his own aesthetic beauty and unique talent through his addiction to alcohol. Monroe's untimely death at the height of her youthful beauty, like Diana, offers a denial of her natural ageing and physical deterioration. To witness the unpreserved, non-embalmed features in this photograph is unsettling. The autopsy knife has fractured her recognisable beauty. When the

postmortem photograph was first published in the biography 'Goddess' (Summers, 1987) it was accompanied by Summers' reassurance that, "before the procedure, say those present, the lifeless Marilyn remained beautiful" (p385)

In this photograph we confront her as human flesh rather than immortal icon who has transcended the body. Blau has replaced one of the most recognisable faces of the 20th century with a unrecognisable image of her and the viewer is confronted with uneasiness, a concept that Davis (2004) claims is the essence of the unrecognisable face on screen, "forcing us as spectators to recognise the full gravity of death's powers" (p2) Unlike Diana's youthful radiance that has been restored in media coverage by denying photos of her in the car, Blau has 'over-exposed' the face of death, a face that divulges "absolute otherness" (p2). The unrecognisable 'otherness' of death could not have been achieved with the recognisable face of Monroe. The natural destruction of her idealised beauty reveals the mortal body in the process of deterioration, as the face of death has replaced her familiar features. The protective shroud obscuring the reality of death has been exposed to the photographic lens, failing to restore the face 'as it was'. In the process, the lack of a technological taxidermy in this example has reduced Monroe to the realms of the mortal - death's face has disrupted the constructed beauty of her media image and she has become unrecognisable as the face of Marilyn Monroe.

Whilst the fragmented cadaver of a star is exposed in an artwork that hangs in a gallery, rather than in a newspaper, it is possible nevertheless, to locate a sense of a deteriorating face-in-death in a more public media format. The poster/DVD sleeve

publicising the award-winning film, *The Queen* (Frears, 2005) produces this effect. If Blau's work 'overexposed' death's aesthetic features directly, the film's promotional image offers a confrontation with Diana's deteriorating face, albeit in a more palatable representation. Unlike the media's continued displacement onto the living body of Diana since her demise, this incarnation makes visible signifiers of death that are embedded within her face.

Fragmented Faces (1): Confronting Diana's spectral disembodiment after all?

The marketing photograph for the film *The Queen*, (used on the film poster and DVD cover) is a prime example of the spectres of death that are associated with celebrity identity. The image offers a disembodied face of the princess and consequently, a reminder of her incomplete body in death. By positioning her fragmented, smiling face behind the figure of the Queen (who is addressing the camera and consequently the spectator), Diana's image connotes a ghost-like visage haunting Elizabeth. There is also a clear distinction between the real Diana who was once alive, and her indexical image, the celebrity identity whose image was constructed within media representations. This is evident in the decision to position the ghostly spectre within a picture frame hanging on a wall behind the Queen. It is quite evident that Diana is placed in a separate space to that of the living.

The princess is embalmed within the photograph, larger than life, hovering confidently behind the figure of the Queen. Her effigy recalls Kear's (1999) notion

that “in the liminal realm of the still living dead, Diana has been transformed into an altogether ‘Other’ Diana [which] enabled her to occupy an intermediary space” (p172). The “intermediary space” between life/death, presence/absence that is located within the sea of photographs that accompanied media coverage of her death and subsequent mourning rituals, is all the more redolent in the film poster. Her ‘still-living dead’ identity is established by bleaching the colour of the photograph (its not quite black and white), and all the more apparent when contrasted with Helen Mirren’s rosier complexion as the ‘living’ queen. Diana assumes a ghostly demeanour. Contrasting with the figure of the Queen who is framed ‘outside’ the diegesis of the photograph, Diana is visually frozen in blue-like tones, clearly in another ‘world’ to that of the Queen, evoking death’s presence.

By emphasising Diana’s presence through an indexical photograph, the poster accentuates the connection between media representation, stardom and the spectre of death. Diana’s colourless face recalls Barthes (2000) photographic punctum, the “that has been” (p 117) is clearly illustrated. She is a visible presence, but only through an indexical reminder that she once existed. She is therefore located within the past, albeit a ‘then’ that will become a posthumous ‘now’ and ‘future’. The chosen image of Diana within the picture frame evokes not only a clear ‘not living’ identity but also connotes a spectral face that is incomplete.

We are not only confronted with a spectral figure possibly haunting the protagonist, but also witnessing a larger-than-life incomplete face hovering in the afterlife. Despite the unacceptable face of Diana –in-death , the shroud has finally been uncovered and

reveals a face lacking a comforting embalmed serenity. Whilst this is not a confrontation with the “otherness” (Davis, 2004) of the face of death, it is nevertheless the face of Diana interwoven with tropes of death. She has not lost her recognisable visage but the spectral presence has been integrated into the aesthetic representation.

This image offers an alternative, less saccharine vision of the princess - a visual antidote to the perpetual footage of her last moments captured in the revolving doors of the Ritz hotel. Whilst real footage of her deceased face has been censored from public view, this image has been placed under the media surgeon’s knife and clearly evokes a postmortem identity. The ‘incomplete’ face hovering liminally denies the fetishised wholeness that restores life and beauty akin to the embalming process.

The concept of an ‘incomplete’ face that erases a “secure, bounded body” (Hallam, cited in Howarth, 2007, p186) becomes a pertinent trope for the presence of death. The notion of the face concealing death can therefore be developed to consider how the recognisable face that is aesthetically incomplete (albeit symbolically in this example through framing and editing) can encourage a spectral identity. This is also notable in coverage of reality television celebrity Jade Goody’s death.

Fragmented Faces (2) Exposing Jade Goody in death

From the moment Jade Goody received the news of her terminal cancer, in the presence of television cameras (Salter, 2008), newspapers, magazines and programmes devoted consistent editorial time and space to documenting the physical deterioration of the celebrity in her final months. Anxieties about death were polarised in Jade's story, the camera captured every development in the narrative with forensic probing that had characterised her life. The public spectacle of her dying encouraged reflections on media reporting of 'real' death. Writing in *The Independent*, Hari (2009) for example, motivated by the Goody coverage commented on social attitudes towards images of death.

The construction of numerous narratives relating to her last weeks was at the heart of media coverage. These featured her wedding preparations and husband-to-be's jail sentence, in addition to emotional responses to her imminent death and children's welfare. The 'raw emotion' that had become synonymous with Jade Goody's media persona was at its most prominent in accounts of her condition. The woman who Driscoll and Dowling described as lacking a "filter" (p16) regarding her public displays of emotion, had naturally continued exposing her inner turmoil and fear of death in the presence of the camera. This generated a morbid fascination amidst audiences recalling Foltyn's (2008) work, but also distaste at the public presence of a traditionally private domain. A sense of uneasiness for example was documented in *The Sunday Times*, "pictures of her in distress have been difficult to look at" (Driscoll, Dowling, 2009, p16).

Images accompanying the numerous plot twists and turns of her cancer battle focussed on her facial features expressing pain, tears and open displays of affection with her children. Newspaper and magazine front covers anchored her predicament with photographs that served as a continuing reminder of her somatic deterioration. Props illustrating medical treatments alleviating her symptoms became important signifiers of her terminal condition. These were accompanied by the ultimate recognisable motif for cancer treatment – the loss of hair.

Whilst there was a lack of visible change in her face and body, no significant weight-loss for example that could compromise her recognisable identity, the aesthetic confrontation with death was illustrated primarily in the motif of her bald head. It has become the most prominent trope for her death – a visual coding of her condition and the essence of her evolving media persona.

Like George Best, Jade Goody's death on March 22nd 2009 was anticipated by the British public and press, becoming a source of spectacle waiting for the imminent conclusion to the story. Unlike Best's death coverage however, Goody's death did not result in a consistent restoration of her recognisable identity prior to her illness. British newspapers and subsequent reporting of Best's life and death have privileged his recognisable persona before the ontological deterioration of his alcohol-ridden later years. The Daily Mail, The Daily Star and The Daily Express were amongst the few front covers reporting on Goody's death that returned to images of her with hair before the cancer struck. The Sun, The Daily Mirror and OK magazine, amongst others, all continued to display Goody's 'death face', when reporting her fate. Unlike

Best and Diana, there was limited evidence of an aesthetic displacement and preservation of Goody's previous media identity. The process of technological taxidermy that accompanies the majority of celebrity death enables the star's living incarnation to be highlighted in order to accentuate their significance when alive. It is possible to argue that Jade Goody's reality television celebrity generated a fame that did not rest on her 'extraordinariness' (like Best and Diana) but rather as 'one of us' and this has influenced the aesthetic representation of her death. Max Clifford noted that Goody became "world famous" (cited in Driscoll, Dowling, 2009, p16) as a result of her terminal condition and it would seem that her posthumous significance lies in her public embracing of her own death. It is fitting therefore that the physical features that connoted her death, the face that began to resemble that of a skull in the absence of her hair, have remained in posthumous coverage of Goody.

Unlike other representations of celebrity death that restores the recognisable face and recreates an aesthetic wholeness, Goody has therefore remained familiar in her incompleteness, fossilised within the visual motifs signifying her somatic decay. Photographs of her without hair do not permit an aesthetic disavowal of death as was apparent in posthumous images of Best and Diana for example. It would seem that the trope of the incomplete face signifying death's presence that was evoked in The Queen DVD cover (albeit a reconstruction of an existing photograph) is also applicable to Goody. Rather than the desire to erase death in order to spotlight extraordinary lifetime achievements as is the case when many famous figures die, Goody's death is the reason for her significance and celebrity legacy. Her death has provided her with a star persona beyond that of an 'ordinary' reality television figure

whose behaviour was considerably vilified during her celebrity career. It is not surprising therefore that the process of technological taxidermy has reconfigured her persona within the signifiers of death rather than embalming her within her pre-cancer face. Her celebrity persona is at its most recognisable in relation to her death. Arguably, her extraordinariness is located within her death and she is now famous for having confronted death so publicly.

Conclusion: preserving recognisable faces

This paper has challenged the premise of ‘revealing all’ within celebrity culture when the famous die. Whilst deaths of the famous are documented in intense detail within media coverage, there are nevertheless areas that remain undisclosed after all. Newspaper coverage of George Best and Princess Diana presented similarities in the desire to restore both figures to their familiar living incarnations and in the process erasing not only the images capturing their death but also diminishing those areas of their lives that were less ‘saintly’. The result is an embalming of their identities within associations of the ‘extraordinary’ star beyond the limits of the mortal figure. In order for this technological taxidermy to occur, the restoration process requires a displacement from an authentic presentation of death through an erasing of signifiers of somatic deterioration. Representations of celebrity death primarily adopt a fetishistic discourse (Freud, 1927) offering a disavowal of somatic fragmentation, a restoration of ‘wholeness’ and a comforting illusion of a complete somatic form.

An analysis of Blau's photomontage was included to address the possibility of an aesthetic confrontation with the unrecognisable face of the famous celebrity in death. Blau's work erases the immortal connotations of Marilyn Monroe by privileging the mortal, somatic deterioration of the cadaver. This diminishes the star's recognisability and in the process, her immortal star persona. Despite assumptions of a 21st century obsessed with corpse-porn (Foltyn, 2008), it is notable how rare images of this nature are within mainstream culture. Blau's piece is located within an art gallery, whilst the more comfortable 'desired' body of the star continues to dominate visual culture.

However, despite arguing for the prevalence of technological taxidermy in visual representations of celebrity death, this paper has also considered possible alternatives to this hypothesis. The familiar face of Diana on the promotional material for the film "The Queen" suggests that an ontological incompleteness can offer a recognisable trope signifying death's presence. Far from the desire to embalm Diana's living incarnation that predominates posthumous media coverage, this poster erases the suggestion of technological taxidermy. The trope of the fragmented face that can evoke death's aesthetic presence was also considered in relation to coverage of Jade Goody's death. Her 'incomplete' ontological identity has remained in many posthumous images of the celebrity. There is a possibility therefore that unlike many other famous faces, Goody's will remain technologically embalmed and preserved within a visual signifier of death. This is continuing to prove the exception however, particularly in recent Farrah Fawcett and Michael Jackson coverage that have occurred since Goody's death. Whilst there are far more familiar images associated

with Michael Jackson's face during his lifetime than in Fawcett's case, a similar situation has applied. His many faces are nevertheless frequently repeated posthumously in an attempt to restore his extraordinariness and erase the mortal complexities of his off-stage identity. It is evident therefore that whilst there are some examples that disprove the aesthetic displacement of death's features in the representation of celebrity death, more often than not, a restoration of the living face at its most aesthetically pleasing is apparent.

The process of technological taxidermy permits the visibility of the deceased star within visual culture but only by foregrounding their recognisable 'lifelike' image. This process enables the reconfiguration of the star persona by erasing associations of the dead body. Through this visual taxidermy, the star is able to transcend the mortal self and become resurrected in a media afterlife, forever preserved within the realms of the 'extraordinary' immortal icon.

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