No Mere Mortal? Re-materialising Michael Jackson in death

In the introduction to the ‘Celebrity Studies’ journal forum on Michael Jackson, Bennett notes that death provides an opportunity to ‘pause and reflect’ (2010, p231) on the meanings within a celebrity image. This paper examines the media procedure of ‘pausing’ and ‘reflecting’ on Jackson through an analysis of British newspaper coverage in the days following his death on June 25th 2009. Recalling the notion that the reporting of the death of a celebrity is ‘context-specific’ determined by factors such as ‘the manner in which they died and the biography that precedes their death’ (Redmond, Holmes, 2010, p132), an investigation into newspaper coverage highlights prevailing preoccupations with particular features of Jackson’s identity whilst alive, with reflections on recurring tropes that emerge throughout the reporting. This study also addresses the implications of an untimely death on Jackson’s media image that develops the analysis beyond the process of revisiting and reassessing Jackson into that of reconstruction and the reassembling of his celebrity identity in the immediate wake of his death. This paper therefore seeks to further the debate on approaches to Jackson’s death that initially emerged in the ‘Celebrity Studies’ forum, and offer, what the editors term ‘a new set of entry points for exploring his cultural significance’ (Redmond, Holmes, 2010, p133) that will continue to emerge within an academic context now that Jackson has died.

Keywords: Michael Jackson; stardom; death; identity; embodiment

The death of a famous figure offers an opportunity for the media to play a significant role in a memorialising process that reassess the life of the star by highlighting features that have contributed to the image over time. This procedure generates a reinterpretation through reflection highlighting predominant features pertaining to the star persona that will encapsulate the star’s media presence in death. This paper will deconstruct British newspaper coverage in the initial period of Michael Jackson’s death on June 25th 2009, concentrating primarily on the reporting and editorial features arising between Friday 26th and Sunday 28th June 2009, in order to investigate the embryonic stages of remembering Jackson and possible impacts of these approaches on posthumous incarnations of his image.

In keeping with Dyer’s (1979) suggestion that a star image is generated within a variety of media texts, beyond the medium of music in Jackson’s case, his untimely death offers an opportunity to reassess his star image using newspaper coverage as a platform that articulates specific preoccupations with his image. An analysis of newspaper coverage of his death is a reminder of a persona that not only moved beyond his music when alive, but often completely overshadowed the medium that initially generated his fame. In this respect, Jackson’s off-stage/screen identity
highlighted the nineties (and noughties) popular culture preoccupations with stars-as- 
celebrities, achieving media coverage for a lifestyle rather than musical career.
(Geraghty, 2000). Whilst the death of a famous figure provides a revisiting of key 
features that will construct a posthumous media incarnation, this study also seeks to 
investigate the implications of Jackson's death on his media identity. Death not only 
evokes a probing of the past (the life prior to the death) but also generates a 
meaning in itself. This paper therefore highlights the potential meanings inherent in 
Jackson’s star image as a direct result of his untimely demise.

In response to studies on online accounts of Jackson’s death (Garde-Hansen, 2010; 
McCurdy, 2010), that considered the process of news dissemination via social 
networking sites, this paper considers the characteristics of death coverage when the 
news arrived within the domain of mainstream newspapers in Britain. An 
investigation into traditional print-based news outlets offers the opportunity to 
consider approaches to Jackson’s media persona in a variety of editorial features 
beyond the factual reporting of his death. Whereas Garde-Hansen’s (2010) research 
outlines individual “disconnected responses” (2010, p234) within personal blogging 
processes, this paper highlights the potential for newspapers to form collective 
responses as British broadsheets and tabloids offered consistent accounts of 
prevailing attitudes to Jackson prior to his death. Specific examples were included for 
analysis because they featured a more permanent consolidation of Jackson’s 
persona in the inclusion of collector’s ‘Souvenir Supplements’ that form the basis of 
this investigation.

In the immediate period following Jackson’s death, British newspaper coverage can 
be divided into different sections, each one providing a particular approach that is 
useful in determining Jackson’s familiar persona, and providing opportunities for 
reflection on approaches to Jackson’s embodiment. Broadsheet and tabloid 
coverage include the factual documenting of the circumstances of the death, 
focusing on the ‘breaking news’ aspect. Accompanying this approach are editorials in 
which journalists and cultural commentators reflect on issues relating to Jackson’s 
persona during his lifetime, providing a summation of the characteristics synonymous 
with his identity. Finally, many provide souvenir supplements in the form of pull-out 
sections that construct a memorial highlighting noteworthy ingredients in the potential 
development of Jackson’s posthumous star image. It is in the form of these
‘souvenirs’ that offer a permanent record of remembrance, that it’s possible to investigate the implications of death upon Jackson’s star persona. These additional supplements are significant because they embalm specific features of the star within these pages and subsequently reconfigure Jackson’s media identity from perceptions provided elsewhere in each newspaper.

The form of Jackson’s death, cardiac failure at the age of 50, accentuates a significant trope that has been an integral feature within his media persona throughout his career and one that is reiterated in the reporting of his death and subsequent editorial features that reflect on his media identity. An untimely death as a result of his body collapsing foregrounds the trope of a vulnerable corporeality that dominates this study, a preoccupation that had already surfaced in media coverage in the months prior to his death. Jackson was already attracting attention within the British Press as his mammoth 50 date concerts scheduled for August 2009 at London’s 02 venue were fast approaching. The reporting of the rehearsal schedule had focused on Jackson’s potentially vulnerable body as the amount of dates had caused speculation on his fitness levels and the need for the body to be trained to the physical demands of a 50 date tour (especially as he was a singer who subjected the body to demanding choreography). There was already scepticism about the stability of his body therefore that reiterated preoccupations that had become synonymous with a celebrity whose somatic form was a source of debate and frequent media hostility.

Within the need to find an explanation for Jackson’s premature death at the age of 50, news reporting succeeded in affirming the trope of the vulnerable body in relation to Jackson’s persona. Recurring images of his physical deterioration were presented with descriptions of the singer as a ‘physical wreck’ (Adams, 2009, p4), ‘frail…slipping away for so long’ (Thomas, Clements, Kisiel, 2009, p5), ‘on the edge’ (Cummins, 2009, p4) possessing a ‘bewildered stare’ (Adams, 2009, p4). It was apparent that Jackson’s body was even more vulnerable than had been understood when alive. News coverage concentrated on the singer’s ‘Deadly Daily Drugs cocktail’ (Parker, Kennedy, 2009, p1) reiterated by images of him in his final months looking forlorn and anxious. The Sun newspaper ran a double-page feature explaining his cardiac arrest as a result of stress, drug abuse and anorexia. Factual information about his physical stresses exacerbated by prescription painkillers were
framed within a notion of inevitability. News items outlining explanations for his death were interwoven with reflections on his deteriorating health during rehearsals for his London dates. Stories frequently reminded readers that Jackson’s body had been unstable for some time. As the Daily Mail remarked, “he had often been photographed in a wheelchair or using a walking stick” (Thomas, Clements, Kisiel, 2009, p5).

The spectacle of the unstable physical form when alive can be viewed as being authenticated in death, a seemingly ‘natural’ consequence of Jackson’s behaviour when alive. Whilst his actual death was unexpected, a quality that naturally contributed to its newsworthiness (Hearsum, Inglis, 2010), news reporting remained focussed on the notion of inevitability. Despite the sensationalist homicide narrative devices adopted in the initial reporting (that have since been exacerbated with the trial of Jackson’s doctor in October 2011), news reporting remained preoccupied with images and descriptions of the star’s vulnerable body, continuing the forensic style voyeuristic probing that had been evident during his lifetime. Commenting in The Observer, music journalist Paul Morley highlighted the inevitability of Jackson’s demise, claiming, ‘everything had been destined to lead to this untimely, shady death’ (Morley, 2009, p28). An argument surrounding this apparent inevitability rests on Jackson’s self-destruction manifested in the abuse of his body, far beyond being motivated by an over-zealous penchant for prescription drugs. The form of his death has exacerbated the perception of a ‘problematic’ embodiment that was the essence of his identity prior to his death. An untimely death has therefore legitimised perceptions of Jackson’s ‘body tampering’ and surgical excesses as negative - both literally and ideologically ‘unhealthy’. There is no doubt that Jackson’s corporeality has assumed centre-stage in the wake of his death. The trope of vulnerable embodiment in the form of his demise (and seemingly inevitability of his death in the months prior to this) addressed the preoccupation and fascination with the spectacle of his body and it is this notion that lies at the heart of editorial features that reflect upon the star. His death has resurrected media preoccupations with his body modifications and newspaper coverage is embedded with debates on his contribution to contemporary discourses on identity.

In newspaper editorials that reflect on the qualities that encapsulate Jackson’s media persona, his body modifications and subsequent identity issues are primarily
foregrounded with an emphasis upon abject embodiment. These news sections focus far less on Jackson’s musical career, the star-as-performer (Geraghty, 2000) and highlight instead his ‘off-stage’ behaviour. It is notable also how the lifestyle indiscretions that had attracted so much attention in previous years (his parenting skills and child abuse allegations for example) do not assume a central position within these articles. Journalists remain preoccupied primarily with discussions on his somatic changes and discourses on cultural identity dominate these editorial features.

‘Don’t wanna see your face, you’d better disappear’: Michael Jackson’s body matters

Within visual culture, stars reflect and construct socio-cultural preoccupations and ideologies (Dyer, 1979, 1986) and often these are encapsulated within star bodies, “the medium through which dominant ideological messages…are transmitted (Holmes, Redmond, 2006, p124). The notion of embodiment is central to discourses on representation within stardom and celebrity and is the site of debates on the nature of the star-as-extraordinary (Weber, 1968; Alberoni, 1972; Barthes 1972; Dyer, 1979; Ellis 1992). Holmes and Redmond (2006) introduce the ‘Fame Body’ section of their Reader with Barthes’ (1972) seminal study of Garbo’s face in its ethereal embodiment. Within academic discourses of stardom and celebrity, the concept of extraordinary embodiment (initially and primarily conceived as a cinematic domain) is often manifested in a somatic form that inscribes ideologies of perfection upon the body in order to construct a figure beyond mortal signifiers. Whether through lighting techniques, mise-en-scene or familiar airbrushing processes of celebrity photography, star bodies that assume an image of idealised perfection within visual culture are illustrated in devices that erase the material essence of the body (recall the Hollywood photography of Sinclair-Bell, Steichen, Hurrell for example).

The emphasis on Jackson’s vulnerable corporeality within reporting of his death offers a contrast to these ‘classic’ representations of the star body with the trope of material ‘matter’ positioned centrally within preoccupations with his image. Jackson’s star persona has frequently foregrounded issues concerning perceptions of embodiment within the domain of Stardom and Celebrity culture. His media image is
synonymous with somatic spectacle that foregrounds motifs of transformation, liminal identities and hybrid forms (Yuan, 1996; Johnson, 1993; Lynch, 2001; Vigo, 2010; Coman, 2011). Music videos for Thriller (1983), Smooth Criminal (1988), Black and White (1981) and Scream (1995) and memorable live performances of the Moonwalk (Koolijman, 2006) for example, investigate the boundaries of embodiment. Of course, these recurring motifs in his work are naturally exacerbated by his literal somatic transformations, and death coverage encapsulates this fascination. Amidst the factual documents of his last hours, speculation of his death and circumstances arising, the newspaper coverage seizes on what is arguably one of the predominant characteristics of Jackson’s star persona beyond his musicianship, his evolving appearance made possible through numerous surgical procedures.

The British tabloids and broadsheets include photographic montages of his evolving image over time, anchored by outlines of the exact surgical interventions that accompany each new identity (The Sunday Times, The Daily Mirror, 2009). Accompanying a visual document of his chameleon-like development, is the reiteration that “his ever-changing face and body was as much talked about as his music” (Thompson, 2009, p12). Assertions of ‘body dysmorphic disorder’ (The Sun, The Daily Mirror, Daily Express, 2009) are included in reflections and news coverage’s preoccupation of this feature of his persona is consistent with media coverage prior to his death when it was clear that Jackson’s somatic (and behavioural) transgressions had completely overshadowed coverage of his musical endeavours.

Photographic montages of his evolving appearance inevitably locate Jackson’s surgeries within a racial discourse as it is clearly apparent how his skin has been modified over time, assuming a lighter tone with disfigured facial features that were deemed to be of Caucasian physiognomy. It is documented that his ‘skin…grew gradually paler through the eighties, sparking stories that he was ashamed of his black colouring’ (Phillips, Harvey, 2009, p9). It is evident that his surgical interventions were interpreted as a denial of his biological and cultural identity as an African American. Younge reiterates a prevailing critical consensus about his surgeries suggesting that black communities observed ‘the degradation of his physiognomy’ with a ‘mixture of disdain and disbelief’ (Younge, 2009, p3)
Jackson’s evolving appearance discussions within coverage of his death focus critically on his apparent desire to transcend ‘origins’, ‘barely recognisable as the African American boy’ (Phillips, Harvey, The Sun p8) and ‘the surgery had the effect of erasing his Afro-American appearance’ (Singh, Daily Telegraph, p4). Academic accounts of Jackson’s surgical transformations have also often been preoccupied with framing his body modifications within a racial discourse. (Tate, 1987; Mercer, 1994; Awkward, 1995; Gubar, 1997, Davis, 2003; Fischer, 2011). His skin-whitening has always assumed the spotlight with notable attention to the narrowing of his nose that has often been interpreted, citing Davis, as ‘racial passing” (2003). This notion was revisited during death coverage, with a predominant assessment of his surgical interventions as an illustration of racial betrayal. Despite the references to Jackson as an advocate of black liberation within a music industry context (references to MTV crossover accolades for example), his cosmetic surgeries are viewed as ‘letting the side down’ and diminishing his stature as an icon of black cultural identity.

Playwright Kwame Kwei-Armagh describes his transformations as ‘a huge slap in the face for the black community…the Frankenstein’s monster that white America created, a manifestation of all the pressures and subliminal images that had been placed on us’ (Kwei-Armagh, 2009, p5). Within the context of Obama’s presidency, Diana Evans condemns Jackson as a ‘cipher from another era, when black people might still go to absurd lengths to erase themselves’ (Evans, 2009, p6). Politician Oona King reflects on him as ‘a black man in search of whiteness’ (King, 2009, p6). In her column in The Independent, Churchwell suggests ‘his self-mutilation seemed as pure an incarnation of internalised racism as we are likely to see again’ (Churchwell, 2009, p33).

Within initial reflections on his death, there seems little doubt that Jackson’s surgical procedures were interwoven within a racial ideology, with frequent questioning of the singer’s motives in the notable whitening of his skin. However, The Guardian suggests a less dogmatic perspective by hinting at the complexities of Jackson’s racial transgressions, suggesting ‘he was born black but he did not die white. Instead, he took on the characteristics of a transracial experiment…if ever there was a candidate to tick the box “other” on the racial categories of forms, it was Jackson’ (Younge, 2009, p3).
The concept of ‘otherness’ in relation to Jackson’s body modifications has been investigated in Mercer’s work on the star. Whilst he has addressed Jackson’s surgeries in relation to racial identity (1986, 1994), his earlier work on meanings inherent in the video for Thriller, interprets ‘otherness’ substantially within the realms of gender reconfiguration. He argues that Jackson’s facial transformations (both literally through surgery and within the video’s parodic horror narrative) advertise the singer’s desire to transcend stereotypical masculinity and instead assume a more feminine, possibly androgynous identity. This is addressed in death coverage, we are reminded that ‘the lighter he became, the more androgynous’ (Evans, 2009, p6), ‘making him look like close pal Elizabeth Taylor’ (Phillips, Harvey, 2009, p9), ‘neither male nor female’ (Morton, 2009, p2). Davis (2003) suggests that ‘his surgeries seem to be at least as much about creating a feminine, asexual…appearance as they are about becoming white’ (Davis, 2003, p82. His identity has notably become far less masculine through surgery, prompting Churchwell to assert that his ‘masculinity seemed permanently in crisis’ (Churchwell, 2009, p33).

Davis (2003) offers the possibility of a broader perspective in which to consider his somatic transformations, by suggesting that his surgeries be viewed, as is the case with all cosmetic enhancements, as an ‘intervention in identity’(Davis, 2003, p74) that ‘makes one wonder whether he isn’t attempting to transcend the material body altogether’ (ibid, p82). His surgeries have nurtured a persona that is marked by the fluidity of a somatic form that moves beyond normative identity configurations. Jackson’s somatic changes, particularly from the mid 80s onwards, offered the spectacle of the body as a work-in-progress. In this respect, the singer complies with Sobchack’s definition of the morph ‘less about being than about ‘becoming” (Sobchack, 2000, pxii).

These alterations have naturally preoccupied academics who have consistently viewed his metamorphosis as indicative of the postmodern condition. Mercer (1984) introduces the notion of Jackson as the quintessential postmodern text when he suggests that his surgeries have enabled a construction of a star persona far beyond the realms of the authentic. The transgressing of traditional signifiers of race, gender and the essence of the corporeal have been documented in academic studies with frequent assessment of Jackson’s body as assuming posthuman qualities (Tate, 1987; Johnson, 1993; Graham-Smith, 2008; Yuan 1996). This perception is a
reminder that the tropes of the automated, cyborgian identity that Jackson had favoured in his music videos can be interpreted as literal manifestations through surgical procedures, perceived as ‘a William Gibson-ish work of science fiction: harbinger of a transracial tomorrow where genetic deconstruction has become the norm’ (Tate, 1987). However, unlike the academic perspective that interprets Jackson as a somatic maverick, the mainstream media specifically locate his identity constructions within the realm of the abject.

Cosmetic procedures that questioned traditional biological identity markers such as race and gender contributed to consistent negative framing of his body within media reporting. Frequently whilst alive, Jackson’s shape-shifting was represented akin to a traditional freakshow (Yuan, 1996) in the light of his somatic transgressions. The spectacle of embodiment that was ‘in-between’ familiar categorisation (Ferreday, 2010; Vigo, 2010), contributes to death coverage’ consensus that Jackson ‘ruined’ rather than enhanced his face and body through surgery. Jackson substituted the ‘natural’ beauty of his youth with a face that bore no traces of his previous features - ‘surgery…so ill judged it literally carved away the face we loved’ (Parsons, 2009, p2) “victim of some cruel surgical prank” (Younge, 2009, p3); ‘freakshow…surgically brutalised face’ (Cairns, 2009, p4); ‘certainly not attractive’ (Morton, 2009, p2); ‘a beautiful boy murdered by the man Jacko became’ (Moore, 2009, p31).

Jackson’s body modifications encouraged debates on ideologies of race, gender and constructions of beauty within contemporary culture and we are reminded in death, that these identity reconfigurations foreground issues relating to corporeality and the material essence of the body. Far from embracing the posthuman, it can be suggested that Jackson’s somatic experimentations literally pushed the limits of the body to a final point of collapse as his cardiac arrest has re-inscribed his mortal form. Indeed, his addiction to painkillers that eventually caused his cardiac arrest is attributed to the need to manage pain caused by far too many surgical procedures (Parker, Kennedy, 2009). The trope of compromised corporeality, evoking images of a disintegrating body that had been gradually losing its ‘form’ was prevalent in media coverage of his life and reiterated in death. The reporting of his surgical developments frequently concentrated on the dissolution of the previously recognisable face, and generated the spectacle of a lack of corporeal integrity. We are reminded of the “ashen brow that needed to be held together with sticking
plaster” (Adams, 2009, p5); his “crumbling skin” (Hattenstone, 2009, p6); whilst “bits of him were falling off” (Moore, 2009, p31). An identity that morphed frequently beyond recognition of its previous form and that transgressed racial and gendered signifiers, was also attracting attention from the perception that Jackson’s incoherent identity was literally unstable. Hence, over time and in death coverage, the media seized upon the spectacle of a body literally losing its unity and collapsing in front of the cameras. Eminem’s promotional video for ‘Just Lose it’ (2004) for example, ridicules Jackson’s corporeal instability as his impersonation of Jackson features the singer frequently reassembling his face as his nose keeps falling off. In 2007, The Daily Mirror ran a cover story about Jackson spotted with a face covered in plasters with the headline “Elasto Jacko” (Cummins, 2007, p1).

Coverage of his death has reiterated how fundamental Jackson’s liminal corporeality is to his star persona. Shildrick suggests that a ‘lack of fixed form and definition’ (2002, p54) encourages responses of anxiety and subsequent hostility because it ‘threatens to expose the vulnerability at the heart of the ideal model of the self’ (ibid). An ‘uncontained’ body like Jackson’s that appeared to be gradually collapsing is frequently framed within the trope of the abject (Kristeva, 1982) in coverage of his death. An abject body challenges the assumption of a unified coherent self. Not only was Jackson’s body continually reconfiguring itself with its variety of facial transformations that were bordering on the grotesque, it also appeared to be in the process of disintegrating completely, ‘worrying signs that his face could not withstand the alterations …nose appeared to be crumbling…bottom of his left ear was missing’ (Singh, 2009, p4) a concept that is frequently attributed to ideological constructions of monstrous embodiment. The focus on unstable corporeality is a reminder of contradictory perceptions of the spectacle of Jackson’s physical form when alive— the once extraordinary body performing the Moonwalk had been devoured post surgery, and the desire to observe the body in motion had subsequently been replaced with a revulsion at an abject form that should remain hidden, ‘his nakedness was literally unthinkable, unconjurable, unconjecturable’ (Adair, 2009, p6).

It is therefore within the trope of physical disintegration that the media have interwoven the ideology of the freakshow and framed Jackson’s transformations within discourses of monstrosity. Studies that investigate the monstrous form, whether from a literary or media-orientated perspective frequently assert the
relationship between cultural representations of the monster and the notion of the body as a ‘leaky vessel’ (Shildrick, 1997). Halberstam (1995) identifies liminal identity as integral to literary accounts of monstrosity, reminding us that Shelley’s Dr Frankenstein created a monster that suffered from a lack of a coherent, stable somatic form. The monster is ‘always in danger of breaking down into its constitutive parts…[with a] propensity to deconstruct at any time’ (Halberstam, 1995, pp36-37). Motifs of corporeal ‘collapse’ and somatic deterioration within literary representations of the ‘monstrous other’ are recalled in media coverage of Jackson’s physical transformations. He is described as ‘looking like Frankenstein’s monster’ (Parsons, 2009, p10) with ‘flesh visibly shrinking’ (Ayres, 2009, p12); ‘a ghoulish freakshow’ (Singh, 2009, p4), ‘the dissolving man behind the mask’ (Morley, 2009, p28).

It is the trope of liminal embodiment – a corporeal form that cannot be hegemonically categorised within traditional binaries that encourages a hostile response and subsequent labelling of ‘the freak’. Shildrick notes that the process of transgressing standard identity classifications is synonymous with ideological concerns, ‘the disordered body is not merely an affront to form, but casts doubt on the moral constitution of the subject’ (Shildrick, 2002, p32). This notion was readily apparent in tabloid newspaper constructions of Jackson’s body when alive as the spectacle of his aesthetic appearance was often interwoven with a questioning of the singer’s dubious sanity (hence the media- inscribed term ‘Wacko Jacko’ that highlighted perceptions of a correlation between the star’s unorthodox lifestyle, behaviour and somatic transformations).

Jackson’s body modifications are frequently addressed and reflected upon by journalists in the immediate wake of his death. It seems impossible to recall the singer’s persona whilst alive without highlighting the implications and judgments regarding his somatic transgressions. His surgical interventions have accentuated the materiality of the body and we are reminded of the central role that corporeality plays in identity construction and social categorising. The selected British newspapers within this case study are consistently preoccupied with Jackson’s embodiment that is continually perceived as abhorrent. Journalists invite readers to position themselves in opposition to this transgressive figure, recalling Bakhtin’s (1984) account of the spectacle of unruly, hybrid somatic forms.
It is possible to view the media’s representation of Jackson’s embodiment within this context, with frequent examples of parodic exaggeration, derision and unease that position him within the realms of Bakhtinian perceptions of the grotesque body. Jackson’s death not only offers a revisiting of this trope but also a potential reconfiguration of his identity. If Jackson’s corporeal form is located within ideologies of abjection, then death and the subsequent dematerialising of his body potentially provides a release from this classification. Newspaper coverage provides a space for an identity reconfiguration, developing on articles and news reports that have accentuated Jackson’s transgressions whilst alive, by including sections devoted entirely to shifting the emphasis towards his musical contribution and legacy. Souvenir supplements and pull-out sections in these newspapers remodel Jackson by assessing his career with a respectful awe-induced mode of address, that encourages a process of reconstructing a posthumous identity for the star.

‘all this confusion, you know it makes me wanna scream: Michael Jackson’s death matters

Mercer has suggested that during his lifetime, Jackson’s star image ‘demands, yet defies, decoding’ (Mercer, 1994, p35) and his untimely death has offered the opportunity to reflect on the implications of his ontological demise on the process of ‘defying’ the categorising of his persona. It is evident that the trope of transgressive embodiment dominated his star image when alive and has continued to be at the heart of reflections in coverage of his death. In an analysis of media coverage, it is important to consider what Jackson’s death has signified. This paper is suggesting that the apparent unease and ideological reservations about Jackson’s behaviour and somatic transformations have been alleviated now that he is dead. His death has offered an opportunity not only to reflect on his celebrity whilst alive, but also to restore any ambiguities arising from his transgressions. Jackson’s liminal identity constructions that have been aligned with monstrosity and freakery are diminished in death. His ontological demise has generated a move towards the ‘fixing’ of identity categories, whether located within ideological reflections of embodiment or discourses relating to star definitions. In essence, death has encouraged a reassembling of Jackson’s star persona that veers towards a more coherent, comprehensible and clearly-defined identity as musician and performer. As Hearsum
and Inglis (2010) have suggested, the emphasis on any “misdemeanour” is juxtaposed with reminders of “achievement” in an image that straddles that of ‘popular musician and celebrity’ (Hearsum, Inglis, 2010, p239)

Adapting Baudrillard’s (1994) definitions of the simulacra, Taffoletti’s work on posthuman identity notes that ‘origins have no place’ (Taffoletti, 2007, p3), noting that posthuman constructions, ‘create the potential to configure the subject outside of temporal narratives of evolution and progress’ (ibid, p5). Whilst media coverage has frequently located Jackson as lacking any aesthetic relationship to his youthful appearance, offering a critical stance on his apparent desire to transcend his past, Jackson’s death offers an opportunity for restoration of his ‘origins’ both in terms of embodiment and as singer-songwriter and performer. This is clearly apparent in newspaper supplement sections that sit alongside news reports and reflections of his life that construct a contrasting image to that of the grotesque figure.

His death has encouraged a media revision of the persona by returning to the original source of his fame. Jackson’s death has encouraged the media to shift attention from the preoccupation of his celebrity behaviour to reassess precisely what had generated the rise to stardom and fame. This tribute process naturally involves highlighting his career accolades rather than lifestyle, and confirms the definition of “the star-as-performer” (Geraghty, 2000). In re-assigning Jackson’s musical achievements, the media are restoring the glories of the past to Jackson’s persona. In death, his identity transgressions are diminished and he returns to the role of admired songwriter. By focusing on these qualities in tribute supplements only days after his death, the media are containing Jackson within these more acceptable star associations, thereby diminishing the more threatening aspects that had consumed the media prior to his demise.

Rather than Jackson’s performative race and gender identities assuming centre-stage, his body has been restored to its original role as dancer and singer. The extraordinary shape-shifting physique that generated the ‘Wacko Jacko’ classification, has been replaced by an emphasis on the extraordinary talent that inspired the mantle of ‘the king of pop’. He is no longer a ‘fugitive from identity’ (Halberstam, 1995), but rather a famous figure with recognisably stable signifiers in the form of an extraordinary talent as a performer. Journalist Greg Tate’s
observations on the death encapsulate the media restoration of his persona that an untimely death has unleashed, ‘the fortunate blessing of his departure is that we can now all go back to loving him as we first found him, without shame, despair or complication’ (Tate, 2009).

The Guardian souvenir supplement illustrates the media’s restoration process by shifting the emphasis from Jackson’s somatic transgressions and dubious behaviour. His perceived negative ‘otherness’, as exemplified by his body modifications is supplanted by more positive connotations as his musical talent and showmanship assume the spotlight. His ‘otherness’ is positioned in relation to traditional characteristics of a star, one who is ‘set apart from ordinary men’ encapsulating ‘exceptional qualities’ (Weber, 1968 cited in Dyer, 1992, p35). Jackson is remembered in the press as a figure ‘blessed with an almost superhuman aura, he was his own unique creation’ (Robinson, 2009). Robinson’s analysis of Jackson’s creativity is reiterated in choreographer Akram Khan’s recollections of Jackson’s inspirational contribution to dance (Khan, 2009). Frequently his music and performances are attributed to a talent that is beyond rational comprehension, ‘like a light or a star in the sky…very far away’ (ibid, p2) and it’s not surprising that the Moonwalk performance is frequently referenced within these supplements. As its title suggests, this seminal dance-move encapsulates the trope of an extraordinary embodiment that is literally ‘out of this world’. Jackson’s persona is being asserted within familiar star discourses, recalling definitions of those whose stardom rests on an extraordinariness manifested in charisma, unexplainable talent and achievements within their field, recalling Gamson’s definition ‘greatness is built in, it is who you are’ (Gamson, 1992 in Redmond, Holmes, 2007, p147)

When reflecting on Jackson-as-performer, he is clearly celebrated rather than vilified for his ‘difference’. Journalists attempt to describe the indescribable, seeking words that can encapsulate what made Jackson’s songwriting successes and dancing abilities superior to others working in the creative industries, frequently attributing a ‘natural’ talent to the star. The Observer special issue sees a correlation between Jackson’s songwriting, vocal performances and his ‘otherworldliness’ (O’Hagan, 2009, p2), suggesting that his ‘genius’ distinguishes him. The ‘extraordinary’ connotations of the idealised star are thereby reinforced. Having listed Jackson’s aesthetic monstrosity, Moore suggests that the musical performances relieve
anxieties about his persona. His music is viewed as a hallowed space that permits the listener to seek refuge from Jackson’s negative qualities (Moore, 2009). It would seem therefore that death has enabled Jackson to be re-framed within the tropes of talent, admiration and awe that shroud the more ‘unnatural’ qualities of his embodiment. Whilst his somatic ambiguities have evoked such hostility in other sections of the newspapers, Jackson’s body is finally reasserted as ethereal in these souvenir supplements, within the context of his voice, dance abilities and musical achievements.

The desire to provide a chasm between his musicianship and ‘off-stage’ behaviour is a recurring feature of tribute pages of the British press in the immediate wake of his death. The Sunday Times calls for a reflection on Jackson’s musical talents ‘not what he became’ (Cairns, 2009, p4), noting a clear discrepancy between his music, ‘three or four minutes of pop perfection’ and his unsettling behaviour beyond his musical output. In this respect, death performs a redemptive function as Jackson will potentially, be ‘saved by his songs’ (ibid). A similar process has also been evident in academic responses to his death. Editors of a special edition of Popular Music Studies (2011) devoted to Jackson, identify a need to return to his work in death. Previous multidisciplinary preoccupations with Jackson’s image as a cultural construct have resulted in ‘the relegation of his musical artistry to ancillary status’ (Roberts, Wilkins Catanese, 2011, p1). Therefore the journal concentrates on his music as the ‘primary vehicle’ (ibid) from which all reflection emerges. This is also echoed in the call for papers for a special edition of the Journal for Popular Music and Society, identifying a “need for rigorous scholarship into Jackson’s creative output, with specific emphasis on musical sound”. (Popular Music and Society, 2009)

It is clear that Jackson’s death has motivated a desire to foreground his musical identity and his ‘meritorious conduct’ (Alberoni, 1972, in Redmond, Holmes, 2007,p72) assumes the spotlight, marking a return to the glory days prior to the media’s preoccupations with identity transgressions.

This process of reconfiguring Jackson within discourses of a talented performer that restores previous ambiguities relating to his persona, progresses to a reassertion of corporeal integrity in posthumous reflections. The identity that had morphed beyond recognisable origins is reconfigured in death as Jackson’s original ‘natural’ physiognomy adorned newspaper supplements. A pre-surgery visage of his youth
dominated The Times, The Guardian and The Observer for example and in the process, possible racial ambiguities of later years are erased. His identity as a black performer with crossover global appeal is finally restored. The Guardian supplement for example considers his inspirational qualities from the perspective of black British entertainers, whilst The Observer interviews London teenagers on his cultural legacy. His death has encouraged a representation of Jackson that re-addresses the balance that had previously emphasised his racial ambiguities. The perception that his cosmetic surgeries signified a betrayal of his origins begins to lose its pallor in articles and photographs that foreground his significance to black teenagers from each decade since the seventies. Consequently, death has encouraged a restoration of Jackson’s origins as a black musician. Many of the papers featured in the Journal of Popular Music Studies sought to restore academic analysis of his music output, and identified his musical legacy in relation to a coherent African-American classification, assessing the significance of his contribution as a black artist within popular music (Roberts, 2011; Chin, 2011; Clay, 2011; Fischer, 2011). Whilst his death has encouraged a reassessment of racial complexities within Jackson’s persona when alive, the body that was a reminder of such confusions has been reconfigured in its absence, thereby restoring the mantle of a culturally significant black musician.

Under the headline ‘Pure, undiluted soul’ (with its references to the racially inscribed music genre), The Daily Mirror’s tribute pages note that ‘the weirdness buried the memory of those dance moves. All that will change now’ (Parsons, 2009, p2). Parsons’ article is a reminder that the media embalms a star persona in death. (Davies, 2010). The Mirror supplement’s final page is devoted to a photograph of a Jackson 5-era Michael, accompanied by the caption ‘can you feel it’ that anchors Parsons’ final paragraph celebrating the return of the ‘angelic voice…when he was young and beautiful’ (ibid, p10). Death’s contribution to the reconfiguration of a star persona is reiterated, ‘now that he is gone, the grotesque aspects of his life seem to fade away’ (ibid), and those ‘grotesque aspects’ take the form of his somatic transgressions, lifestyle and behaviour - all of which can safely be erased now that his material form has diminished. In this respect, newspaper coverage has offered the spectacle of Jackson’s transgressive embodiment in order to reconstruct his identity within the realms of a ‘classical body’ (Bakhtin, 1984) synonymous with traditional constructions of stardom.
‘Wanna be Startin' Something’: Re-materialising Michael Jackson

Analysis of British newspaper coverage in the immediate wake of Jackson’s death has illustrated how Jackson’s star persona is inextricably linked with discourses on embodiment. Perceptions of his somatic identity are interwoven throughout sections that factually report on the singer’s cardiac arrest and reflections on his life and musical career, and these are frequently framed within dual interpretations of extraordinariness. When coverage is focused primarily on Jackson’s identity beyond his musical output, extraordinariness is synonymous with ‘otherness’ and located within discourses of monstrosity, freakishness and abjection. However, when focusing on Jackson’s musical contributions incorporating aural and visual performances, newspaper coverage redefines extraordinariness in the utilising of traditional qualities attributed to stardom, framing perceptions of him as an enduring talent. He is remembered as an inspirational heroic figure whose body, through song and dance performance, exhibits qualities that distances him from the rest of us. Jackson’s embodiment continues to remain at the heart of these reflections, contributing to the perceptions of him as a distinctive individual. This is notable when his songwriting endeavours are rarely distinguished from his somatic performance of them (vocal delivery and dancing skills are frequently alluded to).

This paper is suggesting that British newspaper coverage acts as an effective summation of the construction of Jackson’s star persona when alive whilst also signalling the development of his posthumous media image. The need to re-inscribe extraordinariness within traditional characteristics of stardom is endemic of the construction of star personas in death. The inclusion of souvenir supplements in the majority of British newspapers is a reminder of the process of ‘technological taxidermy’ (Davies, 2010) that forms a restoration process that cleanses Jackson of previous ambiguities and complexities and embalms him within far more palatable, recognisable star associations. The problematising of Jackson’s racial identity is addressed within reflections and then subsequently restored to a more stable perception through reinstating his origins as a significant black musician and performer.
The central motif of an unstable somatic identity that was frequently located within perceptions of monstrosity is also restored in death. The absence of material embodiment that signifies death has enabled the reconfiguration of Jackson within the realm of the extraordinary contributor to popular music and culture. Death has literally erased the somatic form that had foregrounded the complexities of identity construction and subsequently the source of abject connotations. The material essence of Jackson’s body had proved simultaneously fascinating and abhorrent and had dominated his media persona during his lifetime and overshadowed his musical career in later years. It is in death that the preoccupation with his transgressive materiality can finally diminish and a reconstruction process begins. In the literal erasing of this problematic source, death disciplines the unruly body through a process of containment and the restoration of a ‘natural’ embodiment that can no longer destabilise hegemonic identity constructions.

Jackson’s image is in the process of being cosmetically enhanced and modified once again. In the days following his death, British newspaper coverage has reassembled Jackson’s troubling embodiment and has presented the spectacle of suturing, remodelling and re-materialising the star. Newspapers in this instance, reiterate prevailing issues on socio-cultural responses to the aesthetic visibility of death within visual culture (Davies 2010), recalling Bronfen and Goodwin’s (1993) observation that ‘mourning rituals and representations of death seek strategies to stabilise the body…transforming it into a monument, an enduring stone’ (1993, p14).


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