

## Chapter 6

# The immortalisation of celebrities

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### Introduction

What is so attractive about the idea of being famous? Leaving aside the obvious material benefits that tend to accompany worldly fame, the condition of celebrity brings with it a level of responsibility that can drive an individual to suicide, as in the case of Nirvana singer Kurt Cobain. Celebrities have a responsibility to their various audiences, to their families and friends, to the governance of the self, to moral and ideological public standards, that at times seems overwhelming. Being famous without being rich would seem a highly challenging occupation, a social role not to be lightly undertaken. Yet history teems with examples of people who seem content with posthumous glory. Fame for fame alone seems reward enough.

In my book *Illusions of Immortality* (Giles, 2000) I suggested that the psychological roots of fame lie in the ‘illusion’ that is produced by the cultural replication of images, names and other phenomena pertaining to the celebrated individual. This is an illusion of immortality: its compulsion arises from the biological imperative to reproduce. Through media, celebrities replicate themselves to a bewildering degree. Thousands of images – still and moving – circulate. Words are spoken and written by and about the celebrity and reproduced in dizzying quantities. Dying tomorrow, they have left a trace in the world that can persist for centuries. Of course, in the digital age, we can all do this to some extent; hence the concept of ‘microcelebrity’ now popular in media and communication studies (Senft, 2008). But this is simply the contemporary manifestation of a centuries-long tradition.

The ‘ethereal’ immortality, immortality-through-other-people’s-memory, remains astonishingly steady in its form over centuries. It undergoes quantitative changes only, consisting mostly in multiplying the numbers of available designs, marks and brands of private vehicles – as political leaders, generals, inventors and artists are being joined and crowded by footballers, pop-singers, ‘TV personalities’, serial killers and other celebrities. The novelty, if any, is the promise (thus far untested)

of merging a one-off experience of instant (for on-the-spot consumption) immortality with the hope for its eternal duration: the (transient) state of ‘being a celebrity’ is an exercise (I repeat: yet untested) in such merger.

(Zygmunt Bauman in interview with Michael Hviid Jacobsen, in Jacobsen, 2011: 390).

If, then, the possibility of symbolic immortality is one of the fundamental driving forces behind individuals’ desire for fame, celebrity may well be regarded as a *strategy* for achieving that goal (Bauman, 1992). Through writing, visual representation on coins, banknotes, statues and portraits, and naming of public places and buildings, celebrated individuals throughout history have long been granted posterity for future generations. The invention of recording techniques, from the camera and the phonograph through to digitalisation, and their circulation through increasingly ubiquitous communication media, has brought about even more ways of preserving the public memory of specific individuals, with or without the recognition of statutory bodies.

In this chapter I am going to discuss the techniques and technologies that have evolved through history for bestowing immortality on individuals, and examine these in the light of the ever more crowded world of contemporary celebrity.

It is important at this stage to say a little about the concept of celebrity, since it is a far from unambiguous term. I believe it is essential to differentiate fame from celebrity by treating the former as a social process and the latter as a cultural phenomenon (Giles, 2000). One can become famous in a small community, such as a school, but it takes a mass medium to bring about the conditions necessary for celebrity. Even then, some find uncomfortable the label ‘celebrity’ applied to historically famous individuals such as writers and artists, and even to many famous individuals in contemporary society whose fame appears ‘merited’, or whose social standing (such as world leaders) guarantees them fame without needing the machinery of publicity associated with reality TV stars and other Barnum-like PR creations.

I think it is fundamentally misguided to try and distinguish some elevated stratum of famous individuals from a vulgar body of publicity-hungry attention-seekers. While Alice Marwick and danah boyd (2011) might describe celebrity as a series of practices, it must be conceded that the media have the last word on the matter. Practice celebrity all you like, but

only the media can make it happen, and they can make it happen to anyone, regardless of the amount of practice they put in. An award-winning scientist, author, musician or academic can be treated as a celebrity in what Chris Rojek (2012: 12) has called the ‘washing machine’ of contemporary culture. Celebrity, ultimately, is defined by its representation in the ‘discursive regime’ of media (Turner, 2004).

But we are still not quite finished with definitions, because yet another constraint sees celebrity as an essentially modern phenomenon, defined by certain kinds of media – notably the film camera (Schickel, 1985). The Hollywood framework for understanding celebrity has dominated much of the academic literature in the field of celebrity studies, but it is increasingly challenged by alternative models: James Bennett (2011) has outlined the very different conditions under which television produced its own celebrity system, while researchers of digital culture have to find ways of explaining how the ‘microcelebrities’ of online technologies like YouTube are now emerging as *bona fide* celebrities through building massive followings on multiple platforms. Meanwhile, historians of literary and musical culture have examined how the practices and representations of nineteenth century media constituted celebrity for the likes of Byron and Rossini (Mole, 2007; 2012).

Ultimately, if we think of media in Marshall McLuhan’s (1964) terms as ‘extensions of [*sic*] man’, there is no need to specify some arbitrary cut-off point for the birth of celebrity culture. We can see celebrity as emerging gradually over time thanks to the evolution of ever-sophisticated and ubiquitous technologies. The thread that links PewDiePie, Marilyn Monroe, Mary Pickford and Byron can therefore be stretched as far as back as any medium that has the capability of representing and then replicating the trace of an individual.

Before examining the technologies of immortality in more detail, I would like to present two exclusionary criteria. The first is that, as Zygmunt Bauman (1992) has pointed out, immortality is not concerned with death and dying: it is about wishing death away. Therefore, tombstones, shrines, anniversaries and similar objects and practices explicitly linked to the passing of an individual are not elements of the strategy for immortality. Second, the practice of quasi-religious ‘worship’ of celebrities documented by Erika Doss (1999) and others is excluded because it similarly involves an acknowledgement that the person no longer exists. There are much better ways of keeping Elvis alive than making a ‘pilgrimage’ to Graceland on the anniversary of his death.

Biologically, of course, posterity is granted by the survival of an individual's genes in the forms of descendants. But our offspring are only ever partial replications, and whatever unseen forces drive us to procreate, the production of children does not seem to deter individuals from continuing to seek fame, or to slow down its maintenance once established. Childless or not, the desire to remain alive in some form is a powerful force through history. In this next section I am going to examine some of the ways that we have devised for cheating death.

## **Technologies of immortality**

### Visual representation

The art of sculpture constituted the earliest way of preserving the visual image of an individual. Leo Braudy, in his classic work on the history of fame (Braudy, 1997: 32), nominates Alexander the Great as the "first famous person", not least because of the images celebrating his deeds: in addition to various writings, he was one of the first individuals to be depicted on coins, and the bronze statue by Lysippos, depicting Alexander with tousled hair and parted lips, came to serve as a much-mimicked template for portraiture right through to Hollywood. It certainly inspired the proliferation of visual images of famous Romans in the centuries that followed.

While in the Western world, the depiction of individuals largely died out following the collapse of Rome, the Moche civilisation of Ancient Peru developed its own tradition of honouring specific people by modelling them in the form of ceramic vessels. These portraits achieved sufficient accuracy not only that the individuals (mostly high-status males) would be recognisable but so that they captured aspects of their personality (Donnan, 2004). Not only were leaders and warriors modelled but people famous for other reasons, such as wearing an exceptionally long beard (Benson, 2004). In either case the motive for portraying individuals seems to have stemmed from the desire to honour their lives and preserve their memory for future generations.

Portraiture in the form of painting did not fully emerge in the West until the 16<sup>th</sup> century, when it became acceptable for artists to glorify secular subjects: as Leo Braudy

(1997: 267) puts it, ‘faces were appearing everywhere’. While at first it was largely monarchs who were honoured in this way, the fashion for portraiture then spread to anyone with sufficient money to commission an artist. As in Ancient Peru, physiognomic accuracy became increasingly important as portraits were believed to represent the ‘inner life’ of the subject as much as the outward appearance (Woodall, 1997). In preserving more than merely the physical self, realistic images were seen to immortalise personal identity in an era increasingly concerned with the glory of the public individual.

If the goal of portraiture is to make the individual seem alive in body and spirit, oil, bronze or marble are not the best materials for absolute verisimilitude. The Romans knew that the way to capture the exact details of the face was to place a wax cast over its features, but it was not until the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when wax was principally used to reproduce anatomical features for medical purposes, that Marie Tussaud developed her method for lifelike portrayal of famous figures. Her permanent exhibition in London, complete with models of Voltaire, Franklin and the pre-revolutionary French royals at the dinner table, has since expanded into a global industry. Branches of Madame Tussauds<sup>1</sup> can now be found everywhere from Tokyo to Las Vegas, each depicting a blend of local and global, historical and contemporary figures that is continually updated according to visitors’ requests.

The illusion of mortality intrinsic to Tussauds wax models is encapsulated in the Merlin Entertainment Group’s publicity for the attraction. ‘Who do you want to meet?’ the visitor is asked on arriving at the homepage of [www.madametussauds.com](http://www.madametussauds.com). Early visitors were simply grateful of the opportunity to vent their spleen at unpopular politicians, but today our familiarity with photographic representation means that we are more discerning. Nevertheless, wax still has the potential to create an impression of life: there is a long tradition of celebrities posing as their wax figures and confusing the public (Arnold Schwarzenegger and One Direction are some of the most recent stars to have startled Tussauds visitors in this manner).

In a parallel development to the intimacy of social media, as well as the increased individualism of the age, the waxworks have gradually emerged from the tableaux that

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<sup>1</sup> The possessive apostrophe was dropped, followed by the honorific ‘Madame’, once the museum was bought by Merlin Entertainments.

characterised the original museum, to be placed singly in positions that enable the public, as the marketing goes, to ‘rub shoulders with our stars’. Literally, in some cases: the London branch keeps a spare Amy Winehouse figure in the storeroom so that her trademark tattoos, worn away from constant handling, can be retouched (Barkham, 2011). Taking a selfie with your favourite celebrity is now an intrinsic feature of the Tussauds experience.

The playful juxtaposition of celebrities and their wax doppelgangers is a clear reminder that death is not a necessary precursor for immortalisation. This stands in contrast to the death mask, which, whatever its creators might have believed at the time, does not immortalise its subject. It is worth noting that Marie Tussaud’s original death masks were used, not to celebrate the lives of Louis XVI and Robespierre but, mounted on pikes, to threaten the counter-revolutionaries at the height of the Reign of Terror with a reminder of the potential fate that lay in store for them.

### Impersonation

Statues and waxworks immortalise their subjects by capturing their likeness in a single snapshot. The illusion of animation, however, requires more than a frozen moment. One way of preserving the living, breathing subject is to reincarnate him or her as a performance, so that the moves, the looks and the voice take up residence in another human body. Impersonators have been employed since the early days of Hollywood for commercial gain, and in popular music, ‘tribute acts’ have become a quick way of absorbing the glory from successful artists. Some celebrities, notably Elvis Presley and Marilyn Monroe, and increasingly Michael Jackson, have become so frequently represented that the activity has become an industry in itself: there are regular US conventions solely devoted to Elvis impersonation, and it is estimated that there are 3000 professional Elvis impersonators in the US alone (Aho, 2005). With Elvis remaining such a visible presence in contemporary culture, it is perhaps not surprising that many conspiracy theorists have claimed he is not really dead.

Like visual representation, impersonation does not begin with the death of the subject. Charlie Chaplin was immortalised at the first peak of his fame, in the 1910s, at a time when movie houses across the US were clamouring for more screentime from the star. Billy West, later to become famous in his own right, began his career as a Chaplin impersonator to satisfy box office demand, and fake Chaplins sprung up throughout the film industry, even in as

unlikely places as China and Japan (Sloan, 2015). The impersonators soon began to attract fans of their own, some admirers claiming that they were better than the original: at one point, a Billy West fan accused Chaplin of trying too hard to imitate his imitator. There is a long-standing claim that Chaplin once entered, and failed to win, a Chaplin lookalike contest: the same claim has been made by (and on behalf of) other highly-impersonated celebrities<sup>2</sup> (Mejia, 2015).

To lose your own lookalike competition might seem to be failure on an absurd scale, but it speaks volumes about the art of impersonation. Arguably the most popular subjects for imitation are those stars whose essence can be boiled down to a set of visual signifiers. The ‘little tramp’ hat, cane, moustache and waddle can easily transform any performer into Chaplin. In this way the basic iconography is established, and the impersonators then take their cues from other impersonators as much as the individual themselves (Ferris, 2011). It is perhaps for this reason that Elvis ‘interpreters’ include lesbian drag kings, evangelists and skydivers, as well as representatives of many different ethnic groups, and nationalities from Norway to Japan (Cowan, 2010). ‘Only a few key elements are needed to establish the required connection to Elvis’, writes Marko Aho (2005:250): ‘sideburns, jumpsuit, sunglasses – that’s it’. Cultural commentators have often been baffled by the preference for Elvis impersonators to model his late, bloated, Vegas image rather than the far cooler figure cut during the 1950s, but the former collection of signifiers is more replicable, enabling a vast range of people to ‘play Elvis’, including an increasing number of females (Brittan, 2006).

But the imitation game is not, ultimately, what immortalises figures like Elvis and Chaplin. Latterday Las Vegas promoters do not shell out upwards of \$200 for a ten minute lookalike contest: Elvis imitators earn their crust because people want *to see Elvis*. He inhabits his interpreters to the point where they *become* Elvis, at least for a willing audience. This, like other visual forms of immortalisation, has nothing to do with death: the Dolly Parton impersonator interviewed by Kerry Ferris (2011) is addressed as ‘Dolly’ by all the members of the nightclub where she performs, even when out of costume. In this sense she

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<sup>2</sup> The Chaplin story has been difficult to verify, some arguing it is an urban myth stemming from 1920s gossip columns. The same kind of story circulates, unsurprisingly, about Elvis. But Dolly Parton has confessed on camera to her own experience of the phenomenon (<http://abcnews.go.com/Entertainment/dolly-parton-gay-rumors-losing-drag-queen-alike/story?id=17812138>)



becomes a conduit for the star. Whether or not the impersonator experiences a loss of self in the process, for all around her she has effectively become a proxy. As far as the star herself is concerned, the immortalisation process begins the moment she has been granted life in another human shell.

### Recording

Up to now I have been discussing mainly the process of immortalising other people, but in the last 150 years technology has given us the option of directly immortalising ourselves, thereby seizing control over the whole process. Although much the same argument could be made for the written word (some, such as Elizabeth Eisenstein, 1968, argued that celebrity began with the printing press), the physical trace left by the voice – whether on vinyl, magnetic tape, or digital files – creates a sense of presence that engenders a feeling that the artist is somehow in the room with us when we listen to a recording. Phonography, argued Douglas Kahn (1999:9), ‘wrenched the voice from the throat and out of time’, presenting the listener with part of the singer’s body, rather like the lipstick on a star’s cigarette butt coveted by an ardent fan.

Once again, the issue of whether the recorded artist is dead or alive is irrelevant. Once they have left behind that semi-physical trace on record, they have effectively become immortal. Indeed, the early popularity of the phonograph lay predominantly in its ability to bring back the dead, although the mortal condition of the vocalist is largely a matter of audience interpretation, as fans of both Elvis and US rapper Tupac Shakur have cited recordings as evidence that the supposedly dead star is still alive (Sterne, 2005).

Once again, a contrast should be drawn between the practices of immortalisation and those technologies that commemorate the dead individual. Among the latter are ‘posthumous duets’ whereby the voice of a living artist (either recorded or live) is laid over the recorded voice of a dead one to create the illusion of the two individuals performing side by side (Brunt, 2015). This technique has been used to reunite legendary stars with their offspring (e.g. Nat King Cole and daughter Natalie) or to create unlikely collaborations (Roy Orbison with Westlife). These latter hybrids in particular have been the subject of much criticism on the grounds that they are inauthentic and even unethical, though, as Joli Jensen (2005) points out, even living artists have little control over their media representation. One exception to



this rule might be soul singer James Brown, who, in later years, used samples of his early recordings to try and rejuvenate his flagging career (Jones, 2009).

An alternative argument is that, once immortalised on record (audibly or visually), the star themselves *may as well be dead*. As John Frow (1997: 205-6) has put it: '[the] absence of the recorded star, their presence as recording, is the reason why the worship of stars is a cult of the dead'. Once a recording achieves worldwide fame, it represents the artist to such an extent that their actual bodily self becomes almost secondary to its floating double. As a result, popular artists become haunted by their early successes: since these no longer represent the contemporary self, they find themselves trapped in a timewarp, fans interacting with a former (and possibly imperfect) version. Of course, the only way to combat this is to continually produce new recordings. It is notably that very few stars from the era of recorded music have ever wholly withdrawn from the recording process, no matter how low their profile has sunk during their lifetime.

### Naming practices

One of the highest civic honours is to have a street or public building named after you. Of all immortalisation strategies this is perhaps the most effective, since it breaks the dependency of the individual on the immediate context of their fame and allows them to permeate other fields of human activity. Sir Alex Ferguson has a bronze statue immediately outside Old Trafford, Manchester United's football stadium, and a stand within the ground named after him, but it may be Sir Alex Ferguson Way that is his most enduring legacy. However, the naming of public places is entirely in the hands of statutory authorities and is subject, more than any of the technologies listed so far, to the ideologies and whims of legitimating bodies (not to mention the fluctuating fortunes of the famous).

Few could argue with naming streets after civil rights hero Martin Luther King: there are 900 of them in the United States. But other figures have provoked debate or outright embarrassment to the authorities that immortalised them. When the British celebrity presenter and charity fundraiser Jimmy Savile died in 2011, it was not altogether surprising that Scarborough Council should honour a local hero by naming a clifftop path after him. Mere weeks after unveiling the road sign on Savile's View, however, a criminal investigation had opened into hundreds of sexual abuse claims against him, and public pressure forced its

prompt removal. Soon after, having initially held out in the hope of the accusations coming to nothing, a conference centre in Leeds had to spend £50,000 renaming Savile Hall.

As with the other technologies of immortalisation, having a street or building named after you does not require your death. Indeed the most reliable way of ensuring your immortality is to achieve such a position of authority while alive that you can instigate the naming process yourself. Tyrannical dictatorship is a perfect opportunity, and it is no surprise that despotic leaders have wasted little time in immortalising themselves wherever possible, naming streets, airports, and even entire cities after them – especially in recently-conquered territories. Dozens of cities, urban districts, and streets in the former Soviet Union were renamed after Josef Stalin in the 1920s and 30s, and still others in Soviet-controlled Eastern Europe in the post-war period. The process of renaming German streets and squares after Adolf Hitler in the mid-1930s took even less time. If you can't authorise it yourself, then buy it: a Birmingham mosque bore the name of Saddam Hussein for 15 years to honour the Iraqi leader's £2 million financial donation that enabled it to be built in the first place (BBC, 2003).

This is not a long-term strategy, however: as soon as the dictator dies, or loses power, the process of re-naming gets underway all over again. Almost everywhere named after Stalin was famously 'deStalinised' in the early 1960s. The East German town of Stalinstadt, created in the early 1950s around a giant steel works, only bore his name for a mere eight years before being conveniently merged with neighbouring Schönfließ to form Eisenhüttenstadt in 1961. Two of the only places to survive deStalinisation were, oddly, streets in the South-East of England. Stalin Close in Colchester and Stalin Avenue in Chatham were both named by post-war planners to celebrate the Allied war leaders' success, with Roosevelt and Churchill honoured nearby. Residents of the Colchester cul-de-sac voted 'overwhelmingly' against a name change suggested by the local newspaper (Brading, 2009), while the people of Chatham regard their street as an inescapable 'part of history' (Kent Online, 2008).

The one exception to the immortalisation of place names is the 'blue plaque' tradition currently practised by English Heritage, a charitable institution that manages hundreds of historic buildings and sites in Britain. Since 1866, the characteristic plaques have been attached to London buildings to celebrate former residents – but only if those individuals have been dead for 20 years and are deemed sufficiently 'eminent' (Brierley, 2000).

## **Reasons for immortalisation**

The rush to eradicate the memory of undesirable individuals such as Savile and Stalin only serves to underline the brittle nature of reputation and the limits to unbridled self-promotion. Death relinquishes all control over the manipulation of the public persona, with only the interest of the bereaved friends and relatives to sustain the immortalisation process. At any stage, however, the motives for immortalising an individual will depend on the significance of that individual for the goals and values of others. This is where celebrity can be reduced simply to its usefulness as a promotional tool.

P. David Marshall (1997) has written of the ‘cipher’ status of celebrity, whereby the individuals themselves are essentially interchangeable. A good example of this can be seen in Mihai Coman’s (2011) study of a Michael Jackson concert that took place in Bucharest in 1992, a few years after the downfall of the Ceaușescu regime. Jackson’s visit was framed by the Romanian press as a quasi-religious event, with crowds following him as he was driven from the airport to visit an orphanage and then on to the National Stadium as if on a pilgrimage. The concert itself was presented as a mystical experience: one reporter claimed that ‘100,000 people lived...moments of happiness and ecstasy that many had not thought they would ever experience’ (ibid., p. 283).

Coman argues that Jackson’s visit was an opportunity for the Romanian media to satisfy ‘a desperate quest for a ‘prophetic’ voice announcing the promised future’ (ibid., 286), thereby filling a ‘semantic void’ with religious significance. With the collapse of communism, the decision to visit Bucharest made by a global American superstar represented the country’s entrance into a new, more hopeful era. When Jackson returned to Romania four years later, despite exciting the same fervour among audiences, there was nothing like the same degree of mystical and religious imagery in the press coverage. His saintliness was no longer necessary.

In the remainder of this section I will discuss a number of different sets of motives for immortalising figures, dead and alive, whether to satisfy nationalistic, economic or sentimental purposes.

### Ideological or nationalistic purposes

In the Sepik river culture of New Guinea, houses are protected by ancestral figures that represent important figures from the clan's history, often dating from many previous generations. Legends abound of these totemic wooden figures 'coming to life' and defending the clan when attacked by warriors from rival clans. One such celebrated figure, Minjemtimi, is currently housed in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Minjemtimi was said to have come to life during a battle but, despite putting up a good fight, was stolen by the rival clan and preserved in a men's ceremonial house until 'collected' by anthropologists. Since then he has served a similar function in an American museum, although it is not recorded how vigorously he resisted this most recent transfer (Kjellgren, 2014).

Much like Minjemtimi, celebrities and other ancestral figures in recent history are kept alive – at least symbolically – so that they may continue to serve a role in promoting, and possibly defending, the nation. In a famous TV football commentary, Norwegian broadcaster Børge Lillelien celebrated a 1981 victory by his compatriots against England by reeling off a list of historical figures from Lord Nelson to boxer Henry Cooper, 'Lady Diana' and prime minister 'Maggie Thatcher'. At that moment, the defeated nation was represented not by eleven hapless footballers but by a roll-call of famous individuals.

James Caughey (1985) has argued that the role that celebrities occupy in contemporary society reflects that of gods and spirits (and ancestral figures) in earlier societies. We keep alive such figures because they provide important reference points for society, either as a "primary basis" for socialization (mention a famous celebrity to a stranger at a bus stop and you may strike up a conversation), or as important cultural knowledge. As Caughey notes, US psychiatrists may estimate a patient's sanity by asking them to list the last four presidents. Whether or not this is a good method for judging mental health status, it reveals the importance of public figures for cultural assimilation.

Today, Johann Sebastian Bach is normally thought of as a towering presence in music history: the Godfather of Western classical music, the source from whence springs some of the greatest achievements in the history of Western art. Bach is immortal in the sense that he speaks to us through his music in so many different places: the radio, the Web, the concert hall. Every day his music is broadcast to our homes. Compendiums of Western music carry his portrait and glorify his work. Tourists visit his (alleged) birthplace in Eisenach, the church in which he was baptised, and sundry other locations connected to his life.

In the decades following Bach's death, however, his music became rather unfashionable, largely ignored apart from a few keyboard pieces which were used for technical exercises. Even his influence on subsequent composers, such as Mozart and Beethoven, has been exaggerated (Boyd, 2000). It was not until he was championed some years later by composers discovering his work, that he re-entered the repertoire at all. Most notable was a performance of the St Matthew Passion conducted by a young Felix Mendelssohn in 1829, described by Peter Mercer-Taylor (2004) as 'an event of epoch-making significance in the revitalisation of Bach's reputation'. The concert had a profound impact on writers such as Goethe as well as other contemporary composers, who gradually began to install Bach as a major figure in music history: by 1900 over 200 books had been written about him, an exceptional figure for the period.

But Bach's revival was not just a matter of serendipity. As Malcolm Boyd (2000:242) says, it was 'a focal point for a re-awakening of German national pride'. German society needed heroes after the humiliation of the Napoleonic wars, and the religious content of the Passion and other choral works tapped into a contemporary surge in Protestantism. Bach had become *useful*. Furthermore, what the Leipzig audience got was not pure unadulterated Bach but Romanticised Bach: Mendelssohn actually rewrote large parts of the oratorio, scaling it down considerably for staging purposes and adapting vocal parts to suit available soloists, giving it a contemporary flavour quite distinct from its Baroque roots (Ashley, 2005). Similar revitalisation has been described by Joli Jensen (2005) in relation to Patsy Cline and other posthumously celebrated popular artists. In each case the original is updated to suit the values of contemporary society.

Which figures are immortalised, and which ones forgotten is essentially a moral issue. Kurt Cobain lives on for fans of rock music in the form of his recordings, Nirvana tribute bands, videos and a small memorial park in his birthplace of Aberdeen, Washington State. He could have had a nearby bridge renamed in his honour, Young Street Bridge, named after Alexander Young, a local pioneer. Cobain apparently dossed underneath it when at a low ebb. But the city council voted unanimously against it on the grounds that it would encourage suicide – presumably by diving off it, although Cobain's own life was taken with a shotgun in his home. 'We don't need to strip another part of our history away', said a local museum director by way of explanation (Michaels, 2011).

Time will no doubt tell whether Aberdeen wishes to keep alive a legendary rock star or a 19<sup>th</sup> century settler. Like Bach in the late 1700s, maybe Cobain is awaiting a rediscovery by subsequent generations at some point when his memory will be useful to Washington State. Heinrich Heine, 19<sup>th</sup> century German poet, had to wait over a century before his native city, Düsseldorf, was able to resurrect him by giving his name to the local university. After his death in 1856, memorials were suppressed, largely due to anti-semitism: one statue, the Lorelei Fountain, finally ended up in the Bronx<sup>3</sup>; another in a park in Toulon, Southern France. But after World War 2 Germans were finally able to honour a new generation of heroes: Heine's time had come.

### Economic purposes

Celebrities and other public figures are immortalised because they are financially profitable. Business magazine Forbes has been publishing an annual list of the top-earning dead celebrities for several years now. Since his death in 2009, Michael Jackson has been hard to topple from the number one slot, raking in annual nine-figure sum profits. Only for a year was he dethroned from this position, by actress Elizabeth Taylor, who stands fifth in the 2015 list. You may wonder which films Taylor is profiting from at the box office: in fact, her posthumous income derives from a range of perfumes (notably White Diamonds), which continues to out-sell rival celebrity fragrances.

Endorsing a product is another way that living celebrities can impose their name and image upon cultural products and further the process of self-replication. It helps to be discreet about what products you choose to be associated with, of course: as Neil Alperstein (1991) found in a study of celebrity endorsement, inappropriate products can alienate fans who detect commercial opportunism. The endorsement of dead celebrities is, of course, even easier to procure: in 2015 the fourth top-earner was Bob Marley – not just from the proceeds of recordings, but because his name is attached to a drinks company (Marley Beverages) and an eco-friendly hi-fi company (House of Marley). Fourth top-earning dead celebrity in 2015,

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<sup>3</sup> The fate of the Lorelei Fountain underlines emphatically the symbolic power of statuary: for various reasons, including racism and moral piety, it was bumped from pillar to post, being initially rejected by his home town of Dusseldorf, then transported to New York, where it was repeatedly vandalised after being erected in the Bronx district. After years of neglect it was finally restored and moved a few blocks away in 1999 (Gray, 2007).

there is no better example of how societies exploit their ancestral figures to meet contemporary economic requirements. As Dave Thompson (2001: 159) wrote over a decade ago, Marley's radical, anti-capitalist legacy has been converted stealthily into 'smiling benevolence, a shining sun, a waving palm tree...the machine has utterly emasculated [him]'.

It is precisely for this reason that celebrities become economically more viable once they have died. Nowhere is this clearer than in the tourism industry, where significant locations in a star's history, largely anonymous during their lifetime, become visitor attractions with entrance fees and merchandise stores within years of their death. Freddie Mercury fans can travel to the Stone City in Zanzibar to visit his childhood home, eat in Mercury's restaurant and buy Mercury-related souvenirs, or they can visit the studio in Montreux which has been turned into a Queen museum (with a renowned statue of Mercury nearby). Fans of Omar Sharif can visit his holiday home in Las Palmas. But there are no tourist trails for living film legends such as Robert De Niro or Brigitte Bardot. The one exception to this rule may be US presidents: Bill Clinton's childhood home in Arkansas is already open for business.

### Sentimental reasons

Of course, the most appealing aspect of immortality is to preserve the life of a loved one. Ultimately the early enthusiasts of the phonograph saw this as the primary function of recording technology (Sterne, 2005): likewise the early video cameras were largely promoted for making home movies, to capture 'memories'. The erection of a statue or monument is seen as recognition of an individual life, and like the disembodied voice, the image represents the person in perpetuity. When a statue was unveiled to the singer Amy Winehouse in Camden, North London, it was regarded by sculptor and family as the continuation as a part of her unique being: designed to resemble her precisely, the sculpture was described by her father Mitch as "like stopping her in a beautiful moment in time" (BBC, 2014). Artist Scott Eaton claimed that the statue was intended to capture her "attitude and strength, but also give subtle hints of insecurity...the hand on the hip, the grabbing of her skirt, the turned-in foot – these are all small elements that contribute to the personality of the piece."

The Winehouse statue was claimed to be unusual because the local council agreed to waive its formal ruling that a figure had to be dead for 20 years before a statue could be



erected (typically in the UK, the timespan is anything between 10 and 20 years). Presumably this rule is intended to prevent short-term celebrities from being honoured, since Westminster council allowed statues of Nelson Mandela and Ronald Reagan to appear within 10 years of their deaths. Likewise, permission is rarely refused for club requests for local footballing heroes to be put on a plinth in front of grounds throughout Britain while the players are still in perfect condition (Thierry Henry, Dennis Bergkamp and Tony Adams all adorn the surroundings of Arsenal's Emirates stadium).

One of the stranger examples of a statue erected out of sentimental reasons was the decision of Fulham Football Club's then owner Mohammed Al-Fayed to honour his friend Michael Jackson alongside the club's hero Johnny Haynes. Fulham fans objected immediately to the proposal, claiming that Jackson was 'controversial' and had 'no links with Fulham Football club' beyond once attending a match as the owner's guest (Ronay, 2011). Echoing the Winehouse parents' sentiments, Al-Fayed clearly saw the statue as embodying Jackson himself, saying "I hope that Fulham fans will appreciate seeing the finest performer in the world in and among them". Even Jackson fans objected, though this was more to do with the Fulham fans' reaction than the statue itself (although others have questioned its aesthetic qualities). Less than three years later, it was removed to the National Football Museum.

Even more unusual, although not entirely unconnected with its touristic potential, is the appearance of footballer David Beckham as a golden altar statue in the style of a *garuda* (guardian demon) at Wat Pariwas Buddhist temple in Bangkok. The intention of the sculptor, Beckham fan Thongruang Haemhod, is clear: he aimed "to keep the memory of the football star alive for the next thousand years" (BBC, 2000).

### Celebrity, immortality and social media

With modern media technology, the opportunities for symbolic immortality have exploded to the point where social media potentially immortalises us all. However the simple reproduction of imagery is not, by itself, sufficient for all users of social networks, as is clear from the efforts many users make to accumulate as many followers as possible, thus generating ever more reproduction. The advent of social media simply raises the bar: connecting to large numbers of people outside one's immediate social network seems to be as

insatiable a desire as ever. As Kearl (2010: 59-60) has written, ‘an immortalist *zeitgeist* now permeates American civic and popular cultures’, particularly in digital culture, where ‘one’s images, behaviours, words, beliefs, and accomplishments exist indefinitely in this new electronic world’.

As through history, we have strived to eliminate the line between mortal and immortal by preserving individuals’ visual appearance, by impersonating their bodies and recycling their names, so in the digital era the practice of ‘microcelebrity’ allows us to establish our own immortality by cultivating our own small patch of cyberspace. Unlike recorded voices, these allotments can be regularly tended and maintained so that they represent the most recent version of the self, so after death we are survived by a permanent trace that shows us as we would best like to be remembered. Whatever happens to those digital allotments in the future, we can rest assured that human ingenuity will always throw up some new way of representing and reproducing, and thereby immortalising, the individual.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have tried to extend the thesis advanced in my 2000 work, *Illusions of Immortality*, that the psychological core of fame and celebrity is the ‘illusion’ that one has replicated oneself through being represented, potentially massively and multiply, in contemporary media. This illusion transcends any material benefits accruing to the famous, so that in some cases individuals can crave posthumous fame by leaving a body of work to be ‘discovered’ by future generations. Although the desire to fame drives sometimes extreme behaviours, ultimately celebrity is a condition which is bestowed on individuals through media representation. While we can expend much effort striving for celebrity, we can never guarantee its success.

Much of the chapter discusses technologies for achieving this symbolic immortality, from ancient representations in manufactured objects to modern-day digital culture. Immortality can be bestowed on an individual the moment part of their person – a recognisable representation of their face, a name on a street or building, or a recording of their voice – is released into material culture through some form of communication medium. Alternatively the person may be housed in another human body, in the form of impersonation. Either way, the experience for the honoured individual is that of replication.

This is an Accepted Manuscript of a book chapter published by Routledge in Postmortal Society, Towards a Sociology of Immortality on 10/04/17, available online:

<http://www.routledge.com/Postmortal-Society-Towards-a-Sociology-of-Immortality/Jacobsen/p/book/9781472485588>

Throughout, I have tried to separate the practice of bestowing immortality from the posthumous celebration of a life. Death is not by any means a precondition for immortalisation, even if many of its most explicit artefacts (statues, for example) are only brought into existence after death. Indeed, the immortalisation of celebrities is best understood as something that happens to the living, because, while we might finally settle for being ‘discovered’ by future generations, it will always remain the second choice.

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