

‘Grave Robbing’ or ‘Career Comeback’? On the Digital Resurrection of Dead Screen Stars

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When blonde American screen star, Jean Harlow, suddenly fell ill and died of uremic poisoning during the filming of *Saratoga* in 1937, Metro-Goldwyn Mayer felt it would be prudent to shelve the film, as 10% of her scenes remained unshot. However, fan petitions and newspaper polls demanded *Saratoga*’s completion and release. Audiences wanted, in their mourning or morbid curiosity, to have one final glimpse of the star before she disappeared forever from their screens. In this time before TV re-runs, festival retrospectives, VHS and DVD, audiences must have genuinely felt that this would be the last they ever saw of Harlow’s luminosity in motion. The studio soon relented and the film was completed using the labour of three women to simulate the actress’s continuing screen presence: a body-double, a voice-double, and a bit-player, Mary Dees, who was shot mainly from behind or from a distance, her face obscured by big hats and binoculars.

By many accounts the resulting comedy is a disquieting text whose surface morbid viewers scour for signs of Harlow’s impending death. In one contemporaneous and melancholic review for *The New York Times*, Frank S. Nugent expresses his inability to see the film as “just a film.” Knowledge of Harlow’s death continually intrudes upon his enjoyment of the narrative and characters as, watching her flounce across the screen, he cannot help but realize that “this image is an insubstantial shadow” (1937a, 16). Returning to the film in his column a few days later he states that the film gave him “the shivers” and that “death and comedy don’t mix” (Nugent, 1937b: 139).

Now, seven decades later, a screen-star’s films can continue to circulate and find re-release in new media forms decades after their death. The ubiquity of “classic movies” on TV, and Cary Grant and Audrey Hepburn DVD box sets, encourages an affectionate regard, rather than unease, for the films and the ghostly beauty of their images. As Susan Felleman writes: “The flesh of Bette Davis and Greta Garbo has gone to earth, yet their beautiful traces haunt our movie screens and fly as signals out into the universe” (1992: 191). Changing modes of consumption and cultural reception have stimulated a turn in film studies toward a focus on the animate/inanimate, lively/deathly nature of cinema. In her recent book, *Death 24x a Second*, Laura Mulvey meditates on the ability of cinema to resurrect the living past performances of those now dead. She states:

To see the star on the screen in the retrospectives that follow his or her death is also to see the cinema’s uncertain relation to life and death. Just as the cinema animates its still frames, so it brings back to life, in perfect fossil form, anyone it has ever recorded, from great star to fleeting extra (2006: 18).

Evidently, over the years a cultural framework has developed in which the film image of a dead star has come to be valued through a perceived indexical connection to its originating source: the biographical body of that star as they gestured and spoke in a past moment before the camera.

Over the past decade or so, though, we have seen the emergence of computer animation technologies that, in the words of Harvard Professor in intellectual property law, Joseph J. Beard, now enable animators “to put fresh dialogue into the mouth of the deceased performer and to bring new physical activity to the actor.” The consequence of which he says are, that, “the images of the late actor will no longer be frozen in time” (1993: 1).

It is well-known that when Oliver Reed died during the filming of Ridley Scott's *Gladiator* (2001), the film's creators decided not to recast and re-shoot his part but to instead complete the film via the use of judicious editing and the digital rendering and animation of a few frames of a digital Reed. Similar practices, which ensure that an actor's final performance reaches the screen, pre-date digital technology by many decades, as we saw in the case of Jean Harlow. Though arguably more aesthetically seamless, computer generated imagery (CGI) merely shifts this same process of film-role completion into post-production. Beyond this economically useful function, though, there is also interest in or attempts to reanimate images of dead stars for roles in new films. As Beard notes, such practices "may bestow an additional measure of immortality to performers" beyond that promised by recording (1993: 194).

Digitally repurposing or reanimating images of dead screen actors is referred to by animators, journalists in the entertainment and technology press, and the English-speaking public as "resurrection" – a word with miraculous, mundane and sinister connotations. It can mean variously to "bring back to life", "raise the dead" or simply "bring back into use". It also refers to the historical and rather unsavoury practice of exhuming corpses for use in medical dissection. All of these connotations emerge at various moments in the promotion and reception of digital resurrections – both in response to actual instances and in speculative writing about their potential use. My aim here is to examine some of the ambivalent discourses that circulate around these figures in order to develop some preliminary thoughts on what the nature and cultural implications of what this "additional measure of immortality" might be.

As we might expect, living screen actors are pretty resistant to the idea of digital resurrection, as their labour market is competitive enough without having to jostle with the dead for roles. In 1998 the President of the Screen Actor's Guild, Richard Masur, disparaged the practice as "casting from Forest Lawn" in reference to the famous cemetery in Glendale California where many American screen stars are interred, and he joined others who have labeled it "exploitative and perverse" (1998: online). It is not merely those with an economic self-interest who express repugnance or unease toward the process though. There are signs that audiences are ambivalent too.

In 2002 the BBC News Talking Point web forum sought opinion from readers with the question, "what film stars would you like to see resurrected?" garnering 12 pages of responses. Few writers expressed a positive view of the topic, believing that the practice of "putting words into the mouths of the dead" is "sick", "exploitative", "grave robbing" or "playing god" (2002: online). These anxieties seem to be largely underpinned by a perception of the vulnerability of the dead to exploitation, namely, that their posthumous star image may be used in new contexts to which they would not have consented while alive, such as pornography. There are fundamental assumptions about the symbolic treatment of the dead that digital resurrection seems to transgress, almost as if it were the very corpse of the screen star that was being re-animated, and not merely their image.

The responses that most interest me here though are those that evidence a nostalgic wistfulness for classic long dead movie stars and what they have come to represent, while speaking of the impossibility of their resurrection. Many comments expressed a desire to see stars like Cary Grant and Audrey Hepburn return to displace the parade of "forgettable faces" of the present mediascape. However this yearning for the return of classic icons is tempered by a conviction that their digital resurrection would be, not only "disrespectful" and "creepy," but would "no longer *be* them" (emphasis mine). One writer opines that a digital resurrection of a classic screen star might have the *appearance* of the actor, but would be "a vestige of who they were, indeed ghostly". Another stresses that such an image would be no more than "a pale shadow of someone who used to be a great actor". Such comments reveal the extent to which the film image of the dead star has come to be seen as a means of retrieving something of the person themselves: not just how they once appeared, but also something of their agency and intentionality in producing a performance for the camera. There is evidence, though, of a negotiation over the meaning of digital resurrection, for not everyone expresses this same level of disquiet and resistance.

The *New York Times Magazine* special issue on technologies of the near future featured an article on digital resurrection in which Austin Bunn casually speculated that "Death may no longer mark the conclusion of a star's career, just a pause before rebooting" (Bunn, 2000: online). Likewise, American entertainment and technology journalists Karen Kaplan and Megan Turner have likened the digital resurrection of dead stars to the "come back," being little different to the resuscitation of a dead or flagging career, such as John Travolta's celebrated reappearance in Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* (1994) after years of career decline (Kaplan, 1999; Turner, 1999).

There are connections here with Zygmunt Bauman's argument that in the age of recording media things no longer live and then die. Instead they appear and disappear, with the possibility of appearing again. Disappearance, like death, is another mode of "ceasing to be," but its difference from death lies in its potential reversal (1992: 175). Bauman's linking of death to disappearance (from the centre of media visibility) suggests that once a star's value is on the wane, and they disappear from the public gaze, they are as if dead to us. While, like Mulvey

he argues that media technologies remove the sting of death's finality, the emphasis here shifts from a wistful valuation of the cinema for what it can help us retrieve from the past, to how images from the past might be *reactivated in the present*. Filmed images of once living stars tend to retain their sense of pastness, and produce a contemplative viewing distance. The impulse beneath digitally re-animated stars, though, is one that aims to eliminate this temporal distance, to bring the dead and the past back to a semblance of 'life' in the present. Unlike some of the commentators on the BBC website forum then, for Bunn, Kaplan and Turner, the star's biographical body, agency and intentionality are seen as less important than the continuing capacity of their iconography to command public attention – an attention seen here as predicated on contemporary re-mobilisation of iconography.

Increasingly, as Leo Braudy argues at the end of his book *The Frenzy of Renown*, due to the continual media production of newness "everything of note must happen in the present" (1986: 604). Bunn, Kaplan and Turner propose that digital resurrection might allow star images to be "media active" regardless of whether the person is dead or alive. In this view, consideration of the "flesh and bones" performing body and the person of the actor recedes: it is merely a starting point, a template, as the star-image takes on a life of its own with a chance to return to public attention, to the current centre of screen visibility, or the media temporal zone called "Now."

Admittedly, certain perspectives on digital resurrection of dead actors perhaps depend on the context of the writer, and the audience for which they are writing. Bunn, Kaplan and Turner are, after all, journalists speculating with a certain glibness on technological developments in entertainment media and Bunn's article aims specifically to whet his reader's appetite for the future. However, framing the digital re-animation of a dead star as a 'come-back' conceives of the star as merely a set of recognizable traits: a face, a voice; a set repertoire of gestures and tics that can be simulated; an image, hefting semiotic weight that can be remobilized in new contexts. It posits that the star is knowable, a frozen icon, and discounts the importance of the star's performance, their potential with each role to surprise us, to consciously or unconsciously reveal or demonstrate something more of themselves whether due to the demands of a different director, a different kind of role, or those of their private life.

The re-animated star-as-icon is, clearly, the only way that digital resurrections can function: the performing body of the star is dead, leaving behind only an array of images, stories and meanings to which they themselves can no longer contribute. Interestingly, this process of the dead star reduced to their image is fore-grounded in a recent online promotional clip which seems deliberately designed to unsettle the viewer. I wish to conclude with a brief examination of this text, and its suggested implications.

In the month prior to the release of Bryan Singer's *Superman Returns* (2006), a brief QuickTime video promotion circulated rapidly on the internet, linked through blogs, emails, and entertainment and technology news websites. Titled "Marlon Brando reprises his role as Jor-El in *Superman Returns*...with a little help from Rhythm and Hues", and variously labeled "creepy" and "cool", the video promoted less the film itself than the process of digitally re-animating footage of the dead actor, originally filmed in 1978. Brando's brief role as Superman's father Jor-El in the actual film might pass unremarked if not for this clip that seeks to draw our attention to the amount of invisible money, labour and technology required to bring a dead actor "back to life".¹

There are practical economic reasons why Brando was posthumously re-animated for this role. His fee of \$3.7 million US for the original film *Superman* (Richard Donner, 1978) was considered exorbitant for ten minutes screen time. In death, a little more value is squeezed from his image by the cobbling together of snatches of unused footage and audio track, with computer-generated imagery filling in the gaps. What troubles me, though, is less the re-animation itself than the rhetoric of the clip which show Brando's own movements being stilled before technology is shown 'taking over' to bring him back to a semblance of life.

The clip does not merely document but *dramatises* a process through which Marlon Brando "actor" becomes Marlon Brando "image". We see his transformation from animate (speaking to the camera, his head tilted on one side emanating an air of affectionate regard and regret) to inanimate: his will and agency stilled and overtaken by unseen hands, which produce from this footage an eyeless Brando mask, rotating in computer space. He is no longer an *actor* with the agency and intentionality that such a word implies. He is now an image that is *acted upon* by the animators at Rhythm and Hues.

The images are accompanied by a soundtrack, not of an animator or director narrating the process, but of an insistent clinical rhythm with intermittent stern yet triumphant waves of sound suggestive of enormous automated processes being set in motion. The only voice we hear is Brando's on loop speaking the words "you do not remember me" (a double address from the past that speaks both in the role of the dead character to his son, and as dead star to the viewer). The intention would appear to be to impress us with what can now be achieved with technology and at the same time to "creep us out". The rhetoric of this clip announces that digital reanimation promises a kind of reconfiguration of posthumous screen performance and the dead star's image.

During his film-acting career Brando's performances were subject to processing in the editing suite, they were fragmented, chopped and made to seem whole again by unseen hands and minds. However, regardless of whether or not we perceive in the films themselves Brando's oft-cited charisma, physical presence and instinct for making a scene or character seem real, his performances have come to be surrounded by popular, cinephilic discourse emphasizing his willfulness, bizarre on-set behaviour, and use of method techniques (Feeney, 2006: 11-12). In his final years Brando became a recluse, very unwell due to morbid obesity, but still recurrently in the media due to various scandals involving his children. He still creaked out the odd film (such as Frank Oz's *The Score*, 2001) and, even though his physicality had deteriorated, he still commanded some kind of public fascination in part due to memory of his past roles and the stories that swirled around him concerning his private life and bizarre behaviour on the set. His performance of Terry Malloy in *On the Waterfront* (Elia Kazan, 1954) has fascinated film scholars such as James Naremore (1988) and Virginia Wright Wexman (2004).

The famous sequence from that film in which he plays with Eva Marie Saint's glove, mumbles, and appears to depart from the exact syntax of the script, has been described by Virginia Wright Wexman as appealing because actor and character seem to coincide at this point in a crucial way:

[T]he star against a traditional cinema of overly scripted performances can thus be read as an analogue to that of Terry Malloy the character against the traditional pattern of masculine behaviour...each seeks to define his identity in opposition to rigid, empty systems of authority (134).

In death, as underscored by the promotional clip for *Superman Returns*, Brando has lost his agency, his will, and his capacity for independent action, which, as Graeme Turner reminds us, is one of those things that makes stars in general so attractive to audiences (2004, 34-5). If stars speak to us in different ways of individuality or of what it means to be human in a particular cultural moment (Dyer, 1979; Marshall, 1997), what does it mean for a star like Brando (who is addressed as 'his animal self' in the introduction to a recent Taschen 'movie icons' book dedicated to him) to become, in death, a high-tech puppet, put back to work in the narrative cinema; the central spoke in the wheel of the audio-visual entertainment economy?

For some historical perspective, it is worth returning briefly here to an earlier dead star, Jean Harlow and the way her filmed image was characterized seven decades ago after her death by another *New York Times* columnist Douglas Churchill:

Chemistry and mechanics had transmuted flesh and blood into a force; a calcium light projected through a strip composed of gun-cotton, camphor and silver salts, accompanied by electric vibrations from a sound track, had converted a personality into an institution (1937: 66).

In the event of the star's death the technologies that mediate their image and keep it in our presence seem more apparent somehow – especially when those technologies seem wondrous, inexplicable and new. The sense that we have of the star as filling out, or deepening the image seems to evaporate in our knowledge that they no longer number among the living. But we have seen how, due to a number of shifts in technology, culture, and reception practices, over the decades the filmed image of dead stars, once so strange, technological and institutional, have come to be domesticated, beautiful, melancholy. We now believe that film images allow us to retrieve something of the sense of the person. We still see the technology that makes it possible, but we also like to think that we see something of the star themselves traced in shadow and light.

Will new dominant discourses of screen stardom develop to accommodate digital likenesses? Why we may not read these images as 'performance' in the traditional sense, as semiotically rich forms of animation they may *re-animate* our sense of the star-image. As we grew to love indexical images of dead stars, we may, through changing modes of media consumption and discursive shifts, grow also to love dead stars as animate icons. Perhaps it may be that the two modes of star image will mingle in hybrid texts that further complicate our notions of screen performance, time, collective memory, mortality and immortality.

Notes

¹ The Brando resurrection video is freely available on youtube and other sites by searching “Brando + Superman Returns”.

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