# 'Casting From Forest Lawn Cemetery': Re-Animating Dead Screen Stars

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In Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's late nineteenth century novel, *Tomorrow's Eve*, a fictionalized Thomas Edison unveils an astonishing technology: a precursor to cinema, which projects the singing and dancing image of a woman who has been dead for several years. "Her death mattered very little; I can make her come into our presence as if nothing had ever happened to her," Edison declares.[1] This literary moment is emblematic of how the advent of audio and visual recording media in the late nineteenth century were thought to constitute a triumph over death.

In the twenty-first century, the recorded images and sounds of the singing and performing dead are now unremarkable: my local supermarket sells Marilyn Monroe classic movies on DVD, next to the dishwasher detergent and air-freshener. During the 1990s, however, with the rise of what Lev Manovich has called a computer-driven "remix culture,"[2] footage of dead stars and celebrities such as Fred Astaire, Lucille Ball, and John Wayne began to be repurposed via editing or compositing for advertising and guest appearances in films and TV shows. It is now also possible to bestow performance footage or digital likenesses of celebrity personas with new gestures and expressions that they themselves did not generate before the camera while alive. I call such images here, "re-animations."

For scholars, the main import of such images has been for intellectual property law.[3] However, more general speculation and commentary in the English-speaking entertainment and technology press, blogs, and viewer responses on Youtube, suggest ambivalence and concerns that go beyond the legal.

For instance, in January 2007, American popcorn king Orville Redenbacher, who died in 1995, was re-animated to appear in a ten second television spot.[4] A clay model was made of his head from video references, scanned and animated, composited or grafted onto footage of an actor's body, while an impersonator provided his voice. The public face of his own brand, he was known for his popcorn advertisement in the 1970s and 80s. This new advertisement, developed by Digital Domain for the agency Crispin, Porter & Bogusky, was a homage featuring Redenbacher ostentatiously listening to an MP3 player and microwaving popcorn while live action workers in a kitchen gaped at him, apparently startled that he had returned from the grave. The result was widely assessed as "terrifying," "gruesome" and "creepy": the head bobbles strangely on the body, the eyes are dulled and unseeing behind his spectacles, and the mouth movements are slightly out of synch.

Examining both the re-animation and the nature of the responses to it, it seems clear that three main problems led to its non-acceptance. The aesthetics of the animation were aiming at live action realism but missed, entering that uncertain space between life and death, the Uncanny. The intended audience for the advertisement knows he is dead. He is sharing the same space in the frame as the living but it is not as if he is living again — he is presented as a miraculous resurrection. Together, these three factors render Redenbacher abject, the living dead among the living, even though his image in death is being used as it was in life.

With dead actors' and screen stars' images, however, problems of aesthetics, viewer knowledge and ontology tend to be compounded by additional ethical concerns about the symbolic treatment of the dead, as well as popular understandings of the labour of screen acting and performance. Advertising campaigns of the 1990s that repurposed screen performances of Fred Astaire and John Wayne to sell vacuum cleaners and beer, respectively, were criticized in the American media for exploiting the dead and cheapening the artistry on which their careers and the devotion of their audiences were built.[5]

The producers of *The Sopranos* have also drawn fire for using digital compositing to give actress Nancy Marchand a final scene for her character, Livia, after Marchand died of cancer between shooting season 3 and 4 of the television series. Old footage of the actress's talking head was grafted onto a body double to create

a final conversation with Livia's son Tony, played by James Gandolfini. Marchand's head spoke lines edited from previous performances, giving a bizarre Frankensteinian effect of a figure cobbled together from body parts. Moreover, the use of old lines taken out of dramatic context made Marchand sound "like one of those dolls that repeats one of several alternating phrases each time you pull the cord in her back."[6] Even apart from the troubling aesthetics and the poor execution, the process itself was seen as devaluing the late actress's agency and intentionality: two things which are often centred in screen-acting discourse, and figure strongly in journalistic writing about cinema and interviews with actors.[7]

Contrast this, then with the re-animation of Marlon Brando, two years after his death to reprise his role as Superman's father, Jor-El, in Bryan Singer's *Superman Returns* (2006). Brando originally appeared in this role in the 1978 *Superman*. In that film, Jor El dies when his planet of Krypton is destroyed, but not before he places his infant son into a spacecraft headed for Earth, along with some recordings of himself embedded in crystals. For the remainder of the film, and for his part in *Superman Returns* then, Marlon Brando appears as a recording of a being who is already dead, a figure that does not share the same time and space as the living. While in the 1978 film Brando's head appeared solarised and superimposed over the ice cave set, in the 2006 film, the image of his head appears integrated into the world of the film. It is refracted and reflected through layers of ice that slightly distort it, serving to mask any aesthetic problems. Aesthetically and ontologically, then, the re-animation succeeds.

Moreover, the process of Brando's re-animation was used as one of the primary promotional features for the film in a short clip created by FX house Rhythm and Hues.[8] It demonstrates how the re-animation was built from original footage of Brando as Jor El from 1978; how his mouth was animated to match phonemes spoken on audio-tape, how the 2-D image was wrapped around a 3-D model; and how skin textures and lighting were adjusted to sell the re-animation. The visual rhetoric of the clip firmly positions Brando as image-property rather than actor, as the image moves back and forth between animate and inanimate states. We become aware, somewhat disconcertingly, that the man who filled out the image is gone.

The relationship between Brando-actor, and Brando-image-property is also discussed by the director Bryan

Singer in an interview. He acknowledges the power and nostalgia of Brando's image, hoping it transfers semiotic weight from Richard Donner's 1978 *Superman* to his own film. In deference to the late actor's artistic status, he speaks of him as the "great actor" who shares screen space in this film with "an Oscar winner of another generation," Kevin Spacey. But Singer also reminds us that Brando sold his image for use in the *The Godfather* computer game: evoking a person who was artistically lauded but who also exploited the commercial value of his image and was not precious about its use.[9]

Taken together, is this film and its promotional extratexts early signs of a negotiation of the aesthetic, ontological, ethical and definitional problems with the cultural reception of digital re-animations of the dead? New image technologies or techniques that first appear disturbing, may go through a process of shifts, negotiations and reframings to become domesticated. Media producers who want to solicit acceptance of their re-animations will have to think beyond legal frameworks, to an awareness of the sensibilities of audiences, and the aesthetic, ontological and discursive dimensions of such images.

1   Villiers de l'sle-Adam. 1886/2001. *Tomorrow's Eve*. Trans. R.M. Adam. Urbana, Chicago, London: University of Illinois Press, p. 116.

2   Manovich, Lev. 2006. "After Effects or Velvet Revolution in Modern Culture. Part 1." Spring, http://www.manovich.net/. Viewed 20 May 2007.

3   Beard, Joseph J. 2001. "Bones, Clones and Twilight Zones: Protecting the Digital Personae of the Quick, the Dead and the Imaginary." In *Berkeley Technology Law Journal* 16. Berkeley: University of California, p. 70.

4   http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fcn4p213Zg8 viewed 29 April 2008.

5   James, Caryn. 1998. "Raising the Dead for Guest Appearances." In New York Times, *Living Arts Pages*, 14 May 1998: 6, 10; Ron Magid. "Dead-Talent Agency." In *Wired* 7 (1), January 1999.

6   Kantor, Jodi. 2001. "Livia Let Die: Let Her Rest in One Piece." In *Slate,* 2 March. http://www.slate.com/id/101783/ viewed 3 June 2007.

7   Drake, Philip. 2006. "Reconceptualizing Screen Performance." In *Journal of Film and Video* 58 (1-2). Urbana: University of Illinois Press, p. 85.

8   http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-K_x-HE_ya8 viewed 29 April 2008.

9   Carroll, Larry. 2006. "'Superman' Director Bryan Singer Relates to Outcast Hero" (interview with Bryan Singer), MTV News, May 25 2006, p. 3. http://www.mtv.com/movies/news/articles/1532463/05242006/story.jhtml viewed 10 February 2008.