



## On Nostalgia, Dead Celebrities, and the Cinematic Experience

by Caitlin Graham

I recently invited a few childhood friends over to stay the night. It wasn't meant to be a *traditional* slumber party; I don't think any of us is sprightly enough these days for "Light as a feather, stiff as a board," and I'm pretty sure we all threw out our Ouija boards years ago (although, as we all know, that doesn't preclude them finding their way back into our closets).

We simply planned on watching a few movies, having a few drinks, and bitching about our respective jobs. I did have a *pièce de résistance* cooked up for the evening, and once it came to fruition, I realized that I'd brought a bit of the occult to the table anyway, albeit unintentionally.

A couple of weeks before the gathering, I'd asked my friends to bring their old diaries with them—chronicles of high school, junior high, and even elementary school—so that we could take turns reading them aloud. The main goal was entertainment, of course; there's nothing funnier than reading the profound woes of a ten-year-old girl in her own voice. But something strange and unexpected happened as we were bringing our former selves back to life. I felt something much more complex than just amusement. There was a sense of both reunion and loss, as I was simultaneously transported back to those years and reminded that I could never experience them again. Throughout each entry, both mine and those of my friends, I felt alternately torn between reliving an emotion and revising the memory of it. The exact *thing* that happened inside me when I had my first kiss can't be recaptured. Even as I tried to revive that moment through the very words it spawned, it was still somehow different simply by virtue of the fact that that girl who was once me no longer *was*. But how can an experience change if it's already happened?

I admit that I thrive off of this odd, paradoxical feeling and actively seek it wherever I can. In all fairness, I am a creature of habit who fears change and has a serious problem letting things go, so I spend a hell of a lot more time looking back than looking around, let alone looking ahead—but I know I'm not the only one who does this. There is no scarcity of web sites dedicated to reliving the past, especially in the realm of pop culture and mass media. We have Perpetual Kid, Retro Junk, and the Nostalgia Critic, who devotes video segments to reliving and reevaluating his childhood favorites, from horror films to cereal mascots. I am a frequenter of sites like these, and if popular shows like "I Love the 80s" are any indication, I'm quickly becoming the rule rather than the exception.

Is it generational? Is it the accessibility of all these childhood relics that sustains our craving to revisit them over and over? Does my brain work like a VCR because I'm a child of VHS?

Laura Mulvey seems to think so. In her most recent book, *Death 24x a Second*, she poses a number of theories on media technology and how it has changed the way we view both films and the world, the most central of which is that we now essentially *own* time (23). While films were originally intended as whole, preserved, uninterrupted experiences, they are now

understood to be infinitely pliable. We now quite literally own our favorite movies and can replay, reorder, and even recut them however we please. With our remotes in hand, we all have the potential to be what Mulvey calls *possessive spectators*; we can own a scene or even just a small moment from a film and replay it to the point of fetishization.

Perhaps our mass movement toward the nostalgic is a natural extension of this. Our desire to watch a scene over and over bleeds into our personal lives, and we start to fetishize our own memories. Every few years (or if you're me, every few days), we'll replay a scene from our own lives across the projection screens of our minds and reevaluate it, much the way we would a favorite scene from an old film or a popular song we loved as a child. The exact composition of the moment never changes, but we do, and so the moment changes for us. Film watching is a particularly nostalgic act, as it also provides us with this uncanny ability to access a finished moment in time once and then any subsequent number of times throughout our lives. Just as my first kiss, originally a moment of sexual excitement, became something quite innocent, a love scene from a film first seen when we were younger may be transformed over time from something highly arousing to something totally tame.

Now that we can actually change a film's temporal composition with home editing software, the way we consume films has come to truly resemble the way we preserve memories, and vice versa. Fan video making, a practice once limited to zealous subcultures of fandom, has become more commonplace amongst average filmgoers. Moments, scenes, and even entire films can be re-edited to emphasize relationships between certain characters or to give a peripheral character more weight. Additional music can be laid over a scene to enhance or alter its emotional intention. Fans create new versions of a film or TV episode that are often meant to emulate the way they remember the original text, and those of us who prefer to keep our versions in our heads may still be affected by them whether we like it or not. It is almost impossible to not stumble upon these creative interpretations if we look up a favorite show or movie online, as they dominate sites like YouTube. (You can't do a search on *Back to the Future* without yielding "Brokeback to the Future.") These fan videos inevitably change the way we see the original text, and they all eventually coalesce to create a complex, collective memory of it.

In a way, this phenomenon can be applied to people as well. Our celebrities' personal lives are treated as texts, and more often than not, they *are* somewhat fictional, a series of stories bent and embellished so that they only marginally resemble the truth. When a star dies, he or she can be considered a completed text, or at least a completed image or series of images. Posthumous interpretations of their persona can and do change the connotations of their image, sometimes permanently; for example, one can argue that more modern impersonations of Marilyn Monroe have come to trump the star's actual performances.

Sometimes the death itself, especially if it is unexpected or "before the star's time," can instantly change the meaning of their image or the work they've done. Over the past few years, we've unfortunately had a plethora of examples of how this works. Watching *The Dark Knight* only months after Heath Ledger's premature death transformed the entire film into a bizarre elegy. From the moment the opening credits began, the audience sat staring at the screen with both rapt attention and trepidation, waiting for the actor's first appearance. When finally, after a succession of fake-out Jokers, Ledger pulled off his clown mask to reveal his painted, nearly unrecognizable face, a rush of joy rippled through the theater. It was as if the actor had been brought back to life, and even though he played the villain, we couldn't help but be enchanted by

him. His Joker was a merciless sociopath, but we were all on his side, literally applauding every act of cruelty. Like Monroe, his posthumous image became one of a martyr, retroactively injecting an element of sympathy into his character.

More ardent fan practices like artwork and fiction writing provide a more concentrated example of this kind of star rebirth and revision. Just as fans render fictional characters in ways that go beyond the supposedly enclosed worlds in which they were first invented, they will create images of celebrities that go beyond the scope of their lives. Fan writers make a particularly obvious attempt at keeping celebrities alive and evolving by conceiving “alternate universes” in which, by some miracle, the star never really died. Their stories can have a profound effect on other fans, offering fictional scenes so believable or powerful that they often become part of a fan base’s collective memory of a star. It is in the depths of fandom that the star becomes truly immortal, a character without boundaries or an original author.

The night that Michael Jackson died was positively preternatural. As I walked to the train station to head home, almost every car that passed me had its windows rolled down and was blasting “Thriller,” “Billie Jean,” or “Beat It.” I felt as if I’d been magically transported to 1983, when really I was taking part in some sort of spontaneous communal séance. For a few short minutes, some of us brought Michael and our childhoods back to life, while also acknowledging that both were irretrievable. It was a feast for my morbid fascination with the past. And even though it felt deeply introspective, it wasn’t personal. Like the diary readings, it was a shared experience, or rather a convergence of experiences, of all our memories of Michael and of his music in our lives.

Many fear that technology is inundating us with information to such a degree that it’s becoming impossible for us to really connect with one other. But in some ways, technology is facilitating a more collective consciousness. The way we share our stories, both fictional and personal, is becoming a complex multimedia version of an ancient oral tradition. We revisit and retell them over and over again, so that they evolve, interact, and, finally, come together to create a tapestry of impressions that is addictive and ever-changing.

## **SOURCES**

1. Jenkins, Henry. “Afterword: The Future of Fandom.” *Fandom: Identities and communities in a mediated world*. New York: New York University Press, 2007. 357-364.
2. Mulvey, Laura. *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image*. London: Reaktion, 2006.